

Hidden Desires

Jessica Gatenby

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Hidden Desires is a sexy romance mystery novel by Jessica Gatenby. Right from the first scene, in which a cowgirl dominatrix seduces a client and then dies at his hands at the moment of climax, the writing is full of steam and passion. Writing sex scenes that don't sound absurd or too clinical is something that often trips up many veteran writers. Gatenby has no such problem.

Her story focuses on a young woman named Elandra Rosedale, who owns a school that teaches couples how to be better lovers. The school is located in a small city south of Washington D.C., where the chief of police looks the other way while the local madame plies her trade. The fact that he lumps Elandra and her intimacy instructors in the same business as the madame infuriates Gatenby's heroine, whose emotions turn on a dime whenever she is being questioned by hunky police detective, Kerith Reid.

The author relies too much on cliché dialogue and thin characterizations throughout the novel. The phrase "one of hell of a man" is used frequently. And Gatenby describes crowds that "part like the Red Sea" and lovers who are hit with jolts of passion.

There are too many unrealistic plot twists and situations with over-the-top scenes that stretch the reader's credulity. One is led to believe that Kerith's job is riding on finding the murderer while the police chief dotes on him like a son. Kerith interviews Elandra, beds her that night, strolls into the precinct late the next morning holding hands with his sultry suspect, and then roars out of the station with her for another session between the sheets. Not too many public servants would get away with that. In another unbelievable scene, Elandra, who has been victimized in the past, lets a strange man escort her from a bar to her car, not recognizing him as her former assailant until the last second, when she becomes a martial arts expert and escapes into the rain hobbling on her broken high heels.

As a mystery, *Hidden Desires* doesn't have a lot of intricate plotting to engage the reader. There are complicated back stories peppered with crooked politicians, evil twins, mob killings, and dead hookers with hearts of gold, but the plotting is contrived and characters have little depth.

This book will have more of an appeal to romance fans than to a mystery or romantic suspense reader, who will want more credible situations (especially police protocols), snappier dialogue, and characters with more nuance. Despite her ability to engage the reader with her spicy prose, Gatenby is less skilled in developing her characters and plot.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (April 5, 2011)

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