

UNFORGETTABLE NIGHTS SERIES • BOOK 1

*She thought all she wanted
was a one night stand.
But what could a
second night hurt?*

One Night *with* Stranger

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR
LINDA STEINBERG

One Night with a Stranger

Copyright © 2015 by Linda Steinberg

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, redistributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, print, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of Author.

ONE NIGHT WITH A STRANGER

Chapter one

“How about that hottie at the end of the bar? If this were *my* one-night stand, he’s the guy I’d pick.”

Lisa Randall followed her best friend’s gaze. Courtney had good taste. The man swiveling on a black leather stool had dusky brown eyes, the enticing shadow of beard along his hard-planed cheek, and broad shoulders that narrowed to slim hips. But... “I didn’t say I was going to do it. Just considering it.”

“Well consider fast, Girlfriend, before someone else scoops him up.” Courtney licked her lips. “Possibly me.”

“What about Jared?”

Courtney shrugged. “What about him?”

Lisa rolled her eyes. Since they’d moved to L.A. from Texas, Court had been involved in four relationships--five if you counted the guy they’d met driving out here and stayed with for a couple of weeks until they’d gotten settled. Fun-for-the-moment guys, but not husband material. Courtney wasn’t looking for long-term.

But Lisa was. And in the last two years all she’d met were Mr. Wrongs.

“Well?” Courtney nudged her shoulder.

Lisa slid toward the edge of the booth for a better view. “I’m thinking.”

“Stalling, you mean.”

Her heart hammered with the same intensity as when she’d had to sing a solo for fifth grade graduation. “What if he isn’t interested?”

Courtney sipped her pina colada. “Only one way to find out.”

This was crazy. But sometimes, after a bad breakup, it was good to ‘cleanse the palate,’ right? At the thought of partaking of that delicious specimen of maleness, Lisa’s mouth watered.

You deserve this. She swung her legs over the side of the bench. And at that moment, Mr. Hotter-than-Midland-in-August stopped swiveling and met her gaze.

Holy macaroni. His eyes were pools a woman could drown in. Though they remained fixed on her face, his intense gaze had the effect of slowly, painstakingly undressing her.

It was not an unpleasant feeling.

“Go time,” Courtney whispered.

Limbs that felt like somebody else's legs propelled Lisa from her seat and toward the bar. She felt as if she were moving in slow motion but maybe that was just the way she'd remember it afterward. *Don't trip*, she warned her high heeled sandals. *Remember to breathe.*

Up close, the man had a killer smile. Not a fake grin, although how would she know if he were sincere or not? She strode confidently toward his barstool as if she did this kind of thing every day of her life. "Hi."

Great opening, Lisa. You couldn't think of something, anything more original?

"Hey," he said. His voice was deep and yet mellow, smooth as sanded glass. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Okay, so he wasn't any more polished at this than she was. But she'd come this far, she'd look like a fool if she backed off now. "Sure. Dirty martini, please." She sat on the stool next to his.

He ordered the cocktail and another scotch for himself. "I'm Matt."

"Lisa."

"Nice to meet you, Lisa."

He didn't ask if she came here often. Or say that her eyes reminded him of the stars, or that she looked good in her black rhinestone-studded jump suit that Courtney had convinced her to buy. He just sipped his drink as if he had all the time in the world. And there was no need to make small talk, was there? They both knew why she'd come to sit next to him. At least he'd offered her a drink first. Because there was no way she could do this sober.

As she sipped the liquid courage, Lisa stole glances at her companion. He didn't look nervous. Probably he was used to women coming on to him. Maybe she was the second or third this week.

Does it matter? The cold vodka slid down her throat in a brain freeze. She winced.

"Put your hand over your mouth and blow into it," Matt advised.

She did as he suggested and the pain stopped. "Thanks."

"No problem."

She drank her martini at a slower speed, knowing what draining the bottom signaled. Matt downed his scotch but seemed in no hurry, content to let this thing evolve according to Lisa's comfort.

At last she pushed her empty glass aside, trying to quiet the pounding of her heart. "Thanks for the drink."

He nodded. Then wiped away a droplet of sweat from his upper lip. "Want

to get some air?”

She slid off the stool and followed him to the door. Her eyes searched for Courtney but her vision was a little bleary.

“My truck’s just over there,” he said, pointing to a dark colored pickup. “We can drive down to the beach.”

Sanity fought its way past the blur of surging primal emotions. “I don’t think so, Matt.” She’d just picked up a guy in a bar. What if he was a serial killer? She tried for a light tone and a silly grin. “My mother always told me not to accept a ride from a stranger.”

He couldn’t deny he was exactly that. “Fair enough,” he said. “We can just take a walk down the block.”

They set out, but before they’d made it to the corner, the humidity and the mosquitoes attacked Lisa with a vengeance. She reversed direction. “Does your truck have air-conditioning?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t we just sit inside and listen to the radio or something?”

The ‘or something’ seemed to pique his interest. He opened the passenger door and helped her step up, then slid his well shaped butt into the driver’s seat and turned on the engine and the air.”You want to pick the radio station?”

Lisa could have cared less whether they listened to classical music or gangsta rap. She just wanted something to drown out her pounding heart, and her heavy breathing. She reached for the tails of Matt’s shirt but he’d already grabbed it and yanked it over his head. Lisa peeled herself out of her jumpsuit and climbed onto his lap in her bra and panties. His *bare* lap.

The last vestiges of anything resembling rationality fled. As she clutched and pawed, ached and moaned, Lisa’s last discernible thought was wondering if the truck’s windows would fog up like in that love scene from *Titanic*.

Chapter Two

“He called.”

Lisa slid into the booth next to Courtney at their usual table in Rico’s Deli. Her stomach growled in anticipation of a BLT and fries, her regular order at the weekly Tuesday lunch with the BFFs.

“Who called?” Courtney looked up from her Smartphone. “The guy from Saturday night?”

Lisa nodded. “Where’s Jessica?” Since they worked in the same Wilshire Boulevard office building, Courtney and Jess usually walked over together.

“She’s finishing up a deposition. Said she’d be here as soon as--”

“I’m here.” Fingers flying over her cell phone, her conservative gray suit jacket buttoned up despite the July heat, Jessica Pena slid into the other side of the booth. “What did I miss?”

A bell jingled. Lisa glanced toward the door. As did half a dozen male heads, turning in sequence as if choreographed. Tish must be arriving.

Dark sunglasses screening out the ogling stares, their friend meandered to the booth, her shapely hips swaying as if to a song only she could hear. Tish Varner took the seat next to Jessica, set her sunglasses on the table, and smiled her hello. “What are we talking about?”

“Lisa’s one night stand called.” Courtney flicked her menu toward Tish and filled her in.

“Lisa had a one night stand?” Tish’s crystal blue eyes widened in disbelief. “And he called back?”

Lisa tapped her nails against the salt shaker, as shocked and amazed as her friend. By both questions. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to work, is it?”

Jessica shrugged.

“Is he hot?” Tish asked, flipping her corn yellow hair off her neck.

“He’s...” Hot didn’t begin to cover it. That would only describe Matt’s body, by itself outstanding, and not the amazing way he’d used it to rock Lisa’s world. “He’s nice-looking,” she said before the memory colored her face with morning-after blush.

“When did he call?” This from Jessica.

“Yesterday. That is, he left a message.”

“Why haven’t you returned the call?” Tish’s mouth formed a perfect ‘O.’

“I don’t know what to say!” Lisa almost wailed. She hadn’t prepared herself for a callback. The spontaneous, out-of-her-comfort-zone experience had

been an exhilarating high, much as she imagined skydiving: a phenomenal rush but unlikely to happen twice in her lifetime. "I need advice."

Jessica, always one to spot gray clouds even when perched on a silver lining said, "Maybe you left something at his place, or he left something at yours, and he just wants it returned."

Like Lisa had left her panties wedged in the steering wheel? She glanced at Courtney. Her best friend since third grade was the only one who knew they hadn't made it to a proper bed, just fallen over each other in his truck like a couple of horny teenagers. "The message said he'd like to see me again."

"You go girl!" Tish raised a palm for a high five, but Lisa wasn't sure this warranted one. The earth had definitely moved with Matt Whatever-his-last-name-was, but she wasn't due any congratulations, she'd just gone with the flow. The flow of his magnificent body over hers like a tidal wave embracing the shore.

"What exactly did he say?" In attorney mode, Jessica took out her I-pad, presumably mining evidence to sue, countersue, or otherwise make this guy's life miserable for giving Lisa one of the best nights of her life.

"This is Matt. I'd like to see you again. Call me," Lisa recited from memory. Of course, Matt might not even be his real name. They'd agreed not to share last names, but he could have totally made up everything he'd told her.

Not that she remembered much conversation. She turned to her oldest friend. "So what should I tell the guy, Court?"

"Me?" Courtney's lips formed a coquettish pucker. "How should I know?"

Like you've never done a one-night stan? Her tempestuous red-haired friend had been involved in two that Lisa knew of, rationalizing them as 'super-short relationships that didn't go anywhere.' But Lisa had engaged in the night of almost-anonymous passion on purpose. A one-off to be enjoyed and forgotten. Except Matt, apparently, wasn't ready to forget it. A smile formed inside her lips. Actually, that was a great compliment.

"Don't look at me." Jessica held up her hands, palms forward. She and her boyfriend had been together since high school. Jessica maintained Josh had been her first and would be her last.

All eyes turned to Tish. The sleek blond yoga instructor/actress wannabe, every man's wet dream, got hit on by more guys in one week than Lisa had since puberty. Tish silently studied her fingernails. *No comment.*

"You can't leave me hanging here." Lisa turned back to Courtney. "You're the one who pushed me to do this."

“Hey, I just pointed out that having a little no-strings fun with the hottest guy in the bar could be a great cure for the Dirt Devil flu,” her wing woman backpedaled. “Come on, Lisa, you’ve been moping around like a turkey before Thanksgiving. I thought this might help get your mind off the BBU.”

The Bad Break Up had been frequent conversational fodder for the Tuesday lunches over the past three months, ever since Lisa had found Darryl the Dirt Devil in *her* bed with another woman.

“Not to mention a great cure for horniness.” Tish grinned.

Well yes, that too. Funny how your boyfriend wanting it seven days a week-- twice on Friday nights--seemed annoying and exasperating, until nobody wanted it from you at all. But Lisa’d had other reasons, not so comfortably shared, for putting her body on the meat market she’d always disdained.

First: Since freshman year of high school, she’d always had a steady boyfriend. When she and Courtney had moved to Los Angeles after college, she’d sort of expected the next guy she dated to be the permanent one, her Mr. Right. Instead, after more than a year alone, she’d stumbled onto Mr. Wrong.

Second: When Darryl moved in, romance had moved out. While she hadn’t expected soft music and candlelit dinners every night, neither had she anticipated dirty underwear on the floor, unwashed dishes left all over the apartment, and girlie magazines in the bedside table.

Which brought her to the third reason.

“You should have seen Lisa’s face,” Courtney recounted to Jessica and Tish, “when the Dirt Devil and his latest Blonde Boob Job sauntered over to our table.”

And there it was. The clusterfuck of those four dirty martinis and seeing Darryl and his new sex toy walk into the bar might very well have shoved her out of her seat and across the room.

“Still,” Jessica clucked, “to get it on with some guy you didn’t even know...”

Courtney leaped to Lisa’s defense. “If you’d seen this guy,” she said to There’s-Only-One-Man-For-Me Jessica, “even *you* might have been tempted to leap off that cliff.”

“Damned straight.” Lisa allowed herself to revel, just for a moment, in the memory of Matt’s perfect body and boundless passion. “If any woman has ever fantasized about a night with a sexy stranger, let me tell you, this guy was it.”

Her personal perfect storm. One fun filled, no holds barred, night of romance novel passion. And she hadn’t regretted a minute of it. Until the voice

mail.

Their regular waitress arrived with drinks, including the Diet coke Lisa hadn't been present to order. Cassie knew her customers well. "The usual?" she asked Lisa.

"Absolutely." Lisa mentally inhaled the aroma of bacon, looking forward to the simple, uncomplicated bliss of enjoying a sandwich whose sole mission is to give you pleasure and has no interest in ever interacting with you again.

After the orders had been taken and menus gathered and dispensed with Jessica asked, "Well, do you want to see him again?"

Lisa sipped at her soft drink, wondering what it would be like to make love to Matt without the companionship of all those dirty martinis. Surely no responsible, clear-headed experience could match the fervor and ecstasy of Saturday night. "No."

"Why not? If it was that good--"

"*Because* it was that good." At some point reality was bound to rear its ugly head and things could only go downhill from there.

Courtney's copper toned brow arched in a You're-acting-crazier-than-usual-today expression.

"Besides, he's a player," Lisa said, slightly irritated at having to explain the obvious. "He picked up a girl in a bar, as he's obviously done many times, and had sex with her--me--on the first date. Strike that: it wasn't a date. Just a hookup for the price of one martini." Definitely not the kind of guy for her Possibly Permanent list. "This was a fantastic roll in the hay, but that's all it was."

"But you *were* interested in him," Jessica pointed out. "At least enough for one night. There were two people in that bed, *n'est-pas*?" Ever since Jess had spent two weeks in France last summer, she'd been dropping French phrases like petals from a bridal bouquet.

Lisa shrugged. "That's just it. One night. It was only supposed to be one night."

Tish blinked. "So why did you give him your number if you didn't want to see him again?"

Temporary insanity? "I don't know. I guess...I just didn't think." She'd still been reeling from the best sex of her life and it hadn't occurred to her to say no.

"So, just don't call him back." Jessica said. "He'll get the idea and go away."

Simple as that. And of course, it was. Despite the sometimes-uplifting,

often-irritating *ping* announcing an incoming social connection, one was not compelled to respond to every email, voice mail and text message one received. What were the chances she'd ever run into Matt again anyway? She'd just ignore it. In fact, she'd already started forgetting him. And yet...

Images tumbled through her memory, of desperate groping that had almost impaled her on the gear shift, legs kicking the truck roof as Matt thrust deliciously again and again.

"Earth to Lisa." Courtney rapped her knuckles on the tabletop. "Hello?"

She took a deep breath. "Jess is right, it's a no-brainer."

"Voila." Jessica's smile took credit for the end-of-discussion statement.

But the turmoil in Lisa's stomach wasn't on board. Part of her had wanted to be talked into seeing this guy again, not out of it.

Cassie brought the BLT, cheeseburger for Jessica, chef salad for Tish--who was constantly watching her weight--and veggie burger for Courtney--with a large order of fries. Her best friend espoused organic, healthy food but when they'd roomed together, Lisa had often found potato chips and pretzels hidden in drawers, bookshelves, and even under beds. Lisa dove into her sandwich, punctuating each bite with a ketchup-dripping French fry.

Jessica wrapped her hands around a cheeseburger bun twice the size of her grip, took one bite, and then set it down as her phone warbled her Josh ringtone, Christina Perri's *A Thousand Years*. Her eyes brightened as she picked up and cooed "Hi, Sweetie."

Lisa wondered what it would be like to know at age fifteen who you wanted to spend the rest of your life with. Instead of marking time with age-appropriate boyfriends, waiting patiently for Mr. Right.

She crunched through her BLT, finished it off, and began drooling over the dessert menu. Surely one Chocolate Sin, shared by the four of them, wouldn't totally sabotage her diet.

She was about to call the waitress over when her cell rang. No ID but the number looked familiar. She clicked to answer. "Hello?"

"Hey, Lisa, this is Matt. Is this a bad time?"

Her stomach flip-flopped, and then contracted itself in an inane attempt to hold her abs in. "No-o-o."

She kicked Courtney under the table and gestured wildly, pointing to her phone. *It's him*, she mouthed.

Jessica, who had ended her phone call and resumed checking her work emails, looked up with interest.

“I was just having lunch with some friends,” Lisa said into the phone, letting Matt know she wasn’t sitting alone rehashing every moment of Saturday night. Well, at least she wasn’t alone. “Hold on a sec.”

Suddenly uneasy with three pairs of eyes staring at her, Lisa stood and moved away from the table to a quieter corner of the restaurant. “Ah, I have better reception now.” She paused, but Matt seemed to be waiting for her to speak. “I’m sorry I haven’t called you back, but things at work have been absolutely beyond crazy...” Thanks to an OCD boss who had her working overtime on top of overtime.

“It’s okay.” She pictured him doing a laid-back, no-problem wave and smiling that glittering half-grin that had shot its way into her bloodstream and caused her panties to fall off. “I know how it is. That editor’s still giving you fits, huh?”

She blinked. Had she told him about her job? And her frustration with Mr. Arnold’s unrealistic production demands to put out the first edition of a new online social magazine this Friday? Apparently Matt remembered a lot more about the evening than she did.

“I was wondering,” he said without waiting for a response, “if you can get away at a decent hour tonight, why don’t we meet up at the beach near the Santa Monica pier?”

“Well, I...um...”

“There’s a great breeze for kite flying, and we can watch the sunset.”

“I’m not sure if I...”

“I’m working from home today so I’m flexible. Why don’t you call me when you get off and we can go from there?”

Polite and persistent. He made it hard to say no. *It’s not the decision of a lifetime, Lisa.* Oh what the hell. At least she’d know what he’d be like without the four martinis. “Sure, why not?”

As she clicked off, a little wahoo! in her throat warred with the realization that she’d only extended a one-night stand into two. She shouldn’t waste any more of Matt’s time, nor hers. But it would probably be the courteous thing to meet in person and explain to him soberly that she hadn’t been in her right mind Saturday night and that she wasn’t the kind of girl he obviously thought she was.

“So?” the girls exclaimed with one breath when she returned to the table. “What did he say?”

Lisa scratched her head, wondering where this was all going. “He wants me to go fly a kite.”

Chapter Three

As soon as she saw Matt jogging through the sand to meet her, Lisa knew she'd made a mistake. He wore tight black biker shorts, Nikes without socks, and a chest without a shirt. The chest was definitely the most striking part of his apparel. Wide at the shoulders, tapering to a slim waist, unbelievably tan. Almost smooth, but with just enough dark straggly hair to make the view interesting. She vaguely remembered The Chest from scrambling in the dark, but with the late afternoon sunlight bouncing off it, it was truly a marvel to behold.

There was no kite in attendance.

"Hi." He smiled. Damn, she was already salivating at his body. That sexy grin threatened to drown her.

"Hi yourself." *Good return, Lisa.* With this kind of scintillating banter, he'd definitely be awed by her charm and finesse. Not. "No kite?" She attempted a warm smile.

"Not much wind after all. We go to Plan B. Come on."

And with that he turned and trotted back down the beach the way he'd come, apparently expecting Lisa to follow. She looked down at her cute white halter top from Target--showing a hint of cleavage but not too much, her short blue pleated skort that she'd paid way too much for at Nordstrom's, and her killer Manolo Blahnik sandals.

Probably not her wisest fashion choice. *What kind of idiot wears designer sandals to the beach?* A sensible woman would wear flip flops or dirty tennis shoes. But she hadn't been able to resist the way she looked in them. Sexier. More self-assured. Taller. And when he'd said the beach she'd assumed he meant the pier, or the nearby park. She hadn't really thought he'd meant The Beach.

Matt's retreating back was every bit as enticing as his front. He was already one marathon lap ahead of her when he turned to look behind him. "Coming?" He waited for her to catch up. "I thought you loved running on the beach."

Had she said that Saturday night? It was almost true. If 'running' meant 'walking' and 'on the beach' meant digging her toes into the dark wet sand and letting the tide wash over her feet.

"Lisa?"

Ruined shoes or scorched toes? Regretfully, she slipped off her sandals,

slung them over her shoulder, and plunged her bare feet into the hot, soft sand.

Ow! She'd never been a track runner, but with the incentive of picking up her feet fast and often to avoid third degree burns, she soon caught up with Mr. Hottie. He'd stopped by what looked like an old army blanket covered with soft pillows and a huge picnic basket. As soon as Lisa arrived, he plopped down in the center of it and leaned back on one of the pillows.

"Come on down."

Her feet were grateful to accept the invitation. She placed her sandals at the edge of the blanket and, taking the arm Matt extended, sat beside him, stretching her legs out next to his mile-long ones. He patted the space beside his bare chest expectantly, but Lisa remained upright. Although his body looked inviting--and delicious--she never ate dessert before her meal. "What's in the basket?"

He sat up and removed the cloth covering the goodies. "Champagne. Cheese. Crackers. Bologna."

She couldn't help laughing. "What, no caviar?"

He cocked his head. "Would you like caviar?" he asked in a tone that implied he'd gladly acquire some if she wished, even if it meant traveling to the ends of the earth.

"Actually, I prefer bologna."

"My kind of girl." He reached into the basket and popped open the champagne, which jumped joyously out of the bottle, fizzling over his bare chest. Caught staring at the bubbling liquid ambling around his nipples, Lisa quickly averted her eyes so he wouldn't guess she was imagining lapping it up with her tongue.

The cheese and crackers were a nice complement to the champagne, which tasted almost as good in her throat as it doubtlessly would have off his chest. "Sorry I forgot bread," Matt said. He held up a thin slice of bologna. "We could try folding this up real small over a cracker or..."

He dangled the meat over Lisa's mouth. And without thinking she opened, and let the bologna slide in all the way to his fingers. Then swallowed. The bologna. Reserving his fingers for a later treat.

They nibbled on cheese and crackers and washed it down with champagne, gazing out over the ocean. Majestic stripes of pink, gold and purple darted around intermittent clouds as if playing a game of hide and seek.

By the time they'd drunk down to the last third of the champagne bottle, the sun had lowered almost to the horizon. Matt lay back to watch it, and this

time Lisa joined him, pillowing her head in the crook of his arm. It would have been awesome to watch the sun set over the Pacific, but the bright glow had already mingled with sea and sky into a dusty rose strip of color, muffled by clouds. Had she missed it? Had the smog blotted out the last rays?

She looked toward the northwest. A bright orange circle was poised over the Santa Monica mountains. The helium ball, which minutes earlier seemed to have all the time in the world, was suddenly rushing to earth with the speed of a sky diver without a parachute.

“Five seconds,” Matt said.

Lisa tried to prop her eyelids open so as not to blink but of course she did, and when her eyes focused again the sun was gone. Just like that.

“Another day dies. Another night begins,” Matt said.

And almost as suddenly as that, the temperature dropped ten degrees. Families and couples began packing up pails and shovels, chairs and towels.

Lisa wrapped her arms around her bare shoulders, debating whether to stay or go. ‘Go’ being the prudent answer.

“Cold?” he asked.

And before she could say, *Yes, let’s go*, he’d reached into the cavernous, bottomless picnic basket and removed a green quilt coverlet imprinted with cartoon pictures of lions, leopards, and zebras.

“It’s the only extra blanket I had,” he said sheepishly. “My mom hates to throw away any childhood memories so she sent it when I first moved out here.”

Lisa giggled. The image seemed so out of place, so oddly juxtaposed with the half-naked, totally-sexy man who was now so close he could probably hear her heart pound. And yet, envisioning the child inside the man, the child who had snuggled every night under his jungle blanket, was somehow...endearing.

How old was he now?

Matt wrapped the twin-sized comforter around her shoulders, and tugged its edges to pull her closer. His lips met her mouth. Their bodies touched. Not skin to skin, exactly, but skin to *very* thin halter top with a shelf bra that did little to hide the stiffening of her nipples. She might have been embarrassed, were her tongue not so intent on exploring the crannies and crevices within his mouth, her hand not so intrigued by the smooth skin of his broad back.

Not that it mattered anyway, because within minutes Lisa’s halter top lay beside her on the army blanket, her breasts were pressed flat against Matt’s chest as he lay on his back, and her legs humped his thigh. She struggled for position, centering her center over his hard mound of testosterone.

The baby blanket slipped down to her waist, but she wasn't cold any more, and if there was anyone within viewing distance, she oddly enough didn't care. She had an itch that needed to be scratched, and Matt was both the cause and the relief. Somehow she found herself naked, as was he, and that bottomless picnic basket must have hidden a condom because Matt was slipping on protection, and she was following it down over his shaft. Yang connected with yin in a glorious profusion of satisfying emotions.

Then she was on her back, and he was pumping inside her. All Lisa's emotions became just one: frenetic frenzy. Finally she let go and welcomed the ecstasy, and then, with a satisfied groan, he did too. They lay there for a while in sated bliss. Long enough for Lisa to wonder: what do you call a one-night stand that becomes a two-night stand?

"Mmm," he said at last. "That was nice."

"Yes." She slid under the blanket. "It was." *Awkward*. Suddenly the embarrassment which had been distinctly absent minutes earlier assaulted her full force. The distant roar of a motorcycle, possibly a policeman patrolling the beach, grew louder. Lisa sat up and scrambled into her clothes. "I guess we should go."

"Yeah." Matt seemed equally discomfited. "It's getting late."

It wasn't even eight o'clock, and the caloric content of the bologna, cheese and crackers she'd ingested earlier had been pretty much obliterated by the vigorous activity they'd engaged in, but Matt didn't suggest they stop in at Bubba Gump's or any of the other restaurants that dotted the Santa Monica pier. Instead, he walked Lisa to her car, one hand holding hers, the other carrying the large wicker picnic basket.

"I've got to be at work early tomorrow," he said apologetically as he held open her car door and waited for her to start the engine.

"Yeah. Me too." And as she drove off, Lisa realized that she still had no idea what kind of work Matt did. Or his last name.

* * *

"Five dollars says the next person to come in that door is a female."

Matt Owens slapped his friend Brady on the shoulder and swiveled his barstool to face the entry of The Happy Clam. "You're on."

It was a good bet, statistically. On week nights this neighborhood watering hole catered mainly to blue collar guys stopping in for a quick one after work. Not many women hung out at the Clam on a Tuesday night.

But not ten seconds later, the door swung open and a dirty blond, pony-

tailed young woman strode in hauling a book bag over her shoulder. The cocktail waitress.

“Damn.” Matt checked his watch. He should have realized it was time for Lacey’s shift to start. Turning back to the bar, he slapped a five next to his friend’s empty beer glass. “Not my night.”

“It’s never your night, pal.” Brady palmed the bill.

Matt chuckled. His buddy made a decent living from his acting jobs, small roles in action movies and a few TV shows, but sometimes it seemed as though Brady took in more hard cash from Matt’s ill-fated bets.

The bartender brought a couple of fresh beers. “You two dumbasses would bet on how long it takes the minute hand to go around that wall clock,” he said dryly. “Don’t try it,” he added as Matt stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Brady always wins.”

“Not always, Henry.” Matt winked at the bartender and turned to face his friend, inhaling deeply to savor his announcement. “You owe me the big one, man.”

Brady raised a quizzical brow, took a sip of his beer, and then sputtered out a mouthful. “You’re not serious.”

“Serious as a preacher.” Matt grinned. “Pay up.”

Brady folded his arms. “When?”

“Saturday night.”

A disbelieving frown. “Where?”

“Right here, man. She and her red-headed girlfriend were sitting at that table right there in the corner.” He pointed.

“And I missed it?” Brady slapped a hand on the bar. “Of all the times...”

“You were otherwise engaged, as I recall.”

Brady had shown up early with yet another new woman in tow. He’d downed a couple of beers and then taken off, presumably for a night of mind-blowing debauchery. Matt stared at his buddy. Frankly, he didn’t know how the man did it. Brady was good-looking in a western hero kind of way but he wasn’t Channing Tatum-handsome. And his social skills left a lot to be desired. But his aloof manner seemed to attract women like ultra high frequency radar.

“So, how did it go?” Brady leaned an elbow on the bar and waited for details.

“Awesomely. She was primed and ready. We never made it farther than the back of my truck. It was just like you said. Strange is the way to go.”

“Video?” Brady glanced at Matt’s phone.

“Are you nuts, man? You think I should have stopped in the middle and starting filming, just to satisfy your prurient appetite?” It had all happened so fast, Matt had barely managed to pause long enough for a condom.

Brady took his wallet out of his pocket but didn’t open it. “If I’m going to fork over a hundred dollars, I need proof, man.”

Matt jerked his thumb toward the bar. “Henry was here that night. He can vouch.”

The bartender strode over with a rag and wiped up Brady’s place. “All I can tell you is that there were two nice-looking women drinking as if liquor was going to be rationed next week, and one of them got up from her table and took that stool you’re on now, Brady. Ten minutes later she was more on Matt’s stool than hers, and five minutes after that they left together.”

Brady shot Matt a disbelieving look. “You paid him to say that, right? Fifty for Henry, fifty for you and you still come out ahead. Not to mention breaking my winning streak of not losing a bet to you in two years.”

“Fifty?” Henry jostled Matt’s shoulder. “You only promised me twenty-five.”

Matt rolled his eyes. “It happened, Brady. The Stephanie curse is broken. I banged a woman I never met before in my life and I don’t even know her last name.”

Brady gave up a grudging smile and dug into his wallet. “Well, now the ice is broken.” He slapped a hundred into Matt’s hand and left a couple twenties on the bar. “How about we continue your streak? There are probably some hot babes rollerblading at the beach park tonight, just waiting for you to ooze your confident charm.”

The beach? Pleasant memories washed over him, reigniting his senses. *You can’t be nostalgic about something that happened an hour ago, Owens.*

He hadn’t planned to see Lisa again, certainly not this soon. Matt had considered Saturday night a fluke. Few of the women who hung out at the Happy Clam had ever even piqued his interest. But there’d been something about that woman at the corner table that night that had sent his libido into overdrive. She wasn’t dressed like a slut, like most of the barflies Brady was attracted to. No weird piercings, no tats showing. She’d looked like a damned ad executive, in fact. And a little uncomfortable in a bar setting.

Which should have been a warning if he’d been in his right mind. But when she’d slipped onto the bar stool next to his, the brains between his ears had gone soft, and the ones in his crotch, hard.

Mission accomplished, he'd thought an hour later when the deed was done and they lay panting and sweating in each other's arms. The curse was broken. He'd get Brady off his ass. And finally win a bet against him.

But he hadn't counted on those powerful urges to come roaring back hours after he'd thought he'd satisfied them.

He'd told himself he was overreacting to long months of comfortable celibacy. Falling back on his hazardous habit of taking things too fast, too soon.

But he'd had to see her again, just one more time. To prove to himself that she didn't have any special pull over him, that she was just a girl, a body, that he could distance himself from and forget as easily as Brady forgot his love-em-and-leave-ems.

And damn, just one hour after round two he wanted her again.

Brady knocked a fist playfully against his head. "Twenty bucks says you can't bag another babe tonight. I'll give you an hour to score, your choice of beach."

"I'll pass on that bet. I've...already been out on the beach tonight." He tried to hold back his grin without much success.

Brady narrowed his eyes. "Not with the girl from Saturday night."

Matt swallowed. "Well, yes." Shouldn't his buddy be happy for him? He'd broken the Stephanie curse and moved on with his life.

Brady shook his head. "You're hopeless, you know that? The bet was for one shot. Rocks loaded and launched. No emotions involved. I know you, Owens, better than you know yourself. You put your thing somewhere and your heart follows right after it. Read my lips, you're going to fall in love with this woman."

Sliding off the barstool, Brady snatched the hundred dollar bill from Matt's hand.

Chapter Four

With the new e-magazine of entertainment chatter, concert announcements, and cultural happenings throughout Southern California almost ready to launch on Friday, Lisa expected an easy day at work. She planned to meet Courtney for lunch to dish about the non-kite-flying date, maybe leave early this afternoon and get a mani-pedi.

But she'd barely poured her coffee and settled at her desk when Mr. Arnold, referred to behind his back as Mr. Anal, called her into his office.

"Nice job on the magazine, Lisa."

"Thank you sir." She let out her breath. "We just need that one photo Raj is getting, and of course, your final approval and--"

"About that." Her boss pursed his already thin lips. "The magazine's almost there but it needs...something."

It needed *something*? The So-cal Social was due to launch in less than forty-eight hours. They'd all been working their butts off for weeks. Checking facts. Rechecking. Coloring fluff with just the right paints. Formatting. And now Mr. Anal decided it needed... *something*?

Lisa swallowed and forced a smile. "What kind of something, sir?"

Benedict Arnold stroked his chin, which sprouted less than a dozen whiskers. Okay, his name was really Brandon Arnold but right now Benedict seemed like a better fit. "Some kind of hook," he said. "Something that will draw readers in week after week. Like a blog series."

A blog *series*?

"You're a good writer," he said. "You know what people your age like to read. Why don't you write an article, something that will be of interest to a lot of readers and make them want to write in and comment about their own experiences?"

What kind of article? She was about to ask but he'd already turned his back and taken to his chair, a signal that the meeting was over.

So much for lunch with Courtney and getting her nails done. For the rest of the morning Lisa stared at the blank Word document on her computer, waiting for inspiration to strike. *This is your chance*, she told herself. She'd taken this magazine job, which consisted mainly of organizing copy and kicking contributor's asses, as a stepping stone, hoping to someday get a chance to actually write. Now here it was and she couldn't think of an opening line better

than *It was a dark and stormy night*. Hell, she couldn't even think of a title. Or a subject.

She closed her eyes and mentally transported herself back to that beach blanket, the sound of the sea in her ears as Matt caressed her body, driving her senseless. Would she see him again? Should she? What was he doing now? Swinging a hammer at a construction site? Fiddling with his tie in a gray-walled stockbroker's office?

It had been her suggestion to limit sharing of personal information, the better to enjoy anonymous sex. But she couldn't help wanting to undress him mentally as well as physically. *Inquiring minds want to kn--*

Straightening, Lisa opened her eyes and blinked at the keyboard. Of course they did. Moved by some magical force, her fingers typed, *One Night with a Stranger*. Lunch forgotten, mani-pedi forgotten, the article practically wrote itself. Mr. Anal wanted input from readers? Hundreds, maybe thousands of people in the Los Angeles area had to have experienced one-night stands, and many were undoubtedly dying to share. Not just on Facebook and Twitter. In So-Cal Social e-magazine.

Eight edited pages later, she awoke from her trance to the sounds of chairs scraping across the uncarpeted floor and her colleagues signing off their computers. Lisa proofed the copy, printed it, and sprang up to catch Mr. Arnold before he left for the day.

He'd just snapped his briefcase shut but he lingered, his reading glasses perched on his nose, and read the whole article standing next to his desk. His eyes crinkled a few times, he smiled in several places, and actually laughed out loud--three times. "I knew you could do it," he said, handing it back. "You just need to end with a question. You know, ask the readers for feedback. Their own stories. Offer a prize to the best one."

A prize? Lisa wondered what prize the personally wealthy but professionally frugal boss of a start-up magazine was prepared to endow, but the thought went out of her mind with Mr. Arnold's next words.

"And give yourself a byline."

A byline? Woohoo!

Lisa sailed out of the office with her feet barely touching the ground. She was pulling out of the parking lot when she remembered she still hadn't talked with Courtney. Nor had her phone rung or beeped with a text message all day. Anxious to share her good news, she reached for it, but her I Phone wasn't in her purse's outside pocket. Careening down Santa Monica Boulevard with one hand

on the wheel, she shoved her whole arm into the depths of her oversized black tote, but the cell phone was nowhere to be found.

Had she left it on the charger this morning? No, she'd been so heady when she'd gotten back from the beach last night she didn't even remember to plug it in.

The beach! Lisa's heart flopped. The phone must have fallen out of her bag during their amorous gymnastics on the blanket. Damn! Her whole life was in that cell phone. Numbers, email addresses, appointments, notes.

Suddenly she felt naked. Her faithful, constant accessory was gone. How had people managed their lives before cell phones? What if she had a flat tire? Or needed to call for a pizza?

And Matt's number was in that cell phone. As was hers in his. How could he contact her? He didn't even know her last name. With almost four million people in Los Angeles, how likely was it that she'd just happen to bump into him sometime?

The question she'd posed to her BFFs yesterday had been definitively answered. Problem solved. She need no longer be concerned about accepting subsequent dates with a man she'd assumed would be only a one night stand.

Because she was never going to see Matt again.

She found a parking place only a half block from her apartment building, an occurrence which on some other day might have been cause for celebration. But the afternoon's euphoria had deflated like a popped balloon. Lisa felt empty inside, as if she'd lost her best friend.

Meaning her cell phone, of course. She'd known Matt less than a week, had only actually seen him twice, and knew next to nothing about him. How could she possibly pine for a man she'd only just met?

After squeezing her Honda into the parallel parking space, she slogged up the sidewalk. A man sat on the steps in front of her building, a gray hoodie blanketing his head. Lisa picked up the pace, her heart beating faster. "Matt?"

He stood and smiled at her. "Hey."

She barely nudged her heart back into its normal rhythm. "Why are you...how did you know where I...?"

He scooped a small rectangle from his jacket pocket and held it up. Her cell phone. "I found it in the picnic basket. It must have fallen out of your purse when we were..." His grin finished the rest of the sentence.

Thank goodness. Life was restored to normal. "But how did you know where I live?" She might have spouted a lot of information she didn't remember

that night in the bar, but she would have never told a strange man her address.

“Courtney.”

She raised a brow.

“You had twenty-three text messages from her in two days, so I figured she must be your best friend. When I called her from your phone, she was reluctant to give me any information, like maybe she thought I had kidnapped you or something, but when I told her my name was Matt, she was only too happy to tell me where you lived.”

God bless Courtney. Or God curse her. What if the caller had indeed been someone planning to rob Lisa, or worse?

Nope. Wing woman Courtney knew exactly who Matt was. And Matt knew-- Lisa’s face flamed with embarrassment. He’d read the text messages. What must he think of her now, to know all the details she’d blathered to her best friend?

Maybe he hadn’t read them.

“So you think I’m a hottie?” he said, following her up the steps.

He’d read them.

She grabbed the phone out of his hand. “Thank you for traveling out here to return this, Matt.” She unlocked the outer door of the apartment complex, cracked it open, and took a step inside. “I really appreciate--”

He held the door ajar with his arm. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

For some inane reason, her mother’s voice resonated in her head. “Don’t ever let a stranger in your apartment,” Mom had warned when Lisa left Texas for a new life in Tinseltown.

“Um...sure.” Despite the provocative title of her piece, Matt wasn’t exactly a stranger. She knew his body at least, very well. It was highly unlikely he planned to slit her throat and steal her worldly possessions.

With Matt following, she climbed the inside stairs to her apartment, unlocked her door, and dropped her purse on a barstool. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Got any beer?”

She breathed easier. If he were a man with sinister intentions, he wouldn’t pause to have a beer first. Lisa plugged in her phone and got two bottles from the fridge.

Matt pointed to her beloved, recently returned cell phone. “You had a missed call from Drew.”

“Thanks.” She handed him a beer.

“Your ex?”

He wasn’t supposed to be asking personal questions. The unspoken arrangement when involved in a first-name-only liaison was not to share information about one’s life, wasn’t it?

“Drew’s my brother.” She popped the tab on her beer and took a sip. “He’s in the military. Navy.” So much for not sharing personal information. But in case Matt *did* have sinister intentions, it wouldn’t hurt to let him know she had a protective older brother who could probably drop him with one punch. And in case they ever met, she wouldn’t want him to mistake Drew for the selfish, inconsiderate Dirt Devil.

And why would a two-night-stand ever have occasion to meet your brother?

She led Matt into the living room, where he promptly removed his shoes, grabbed the remote control, and made himself comfortable on the sofa. He rattled the almost-empty jar of peanuts on the coffee table. “Got any food?”

Food. Her rumbling stomach reminded her she’d never gone to lunch. “I’ve got some frozen Happy Health dinners.”

He grimaced. “How about I order us a pizza?. You like pepperoni?”

“Sure.”

“Sausage? Hamburger? Ham? Canadian bacon?”

“All my favorites.”

Matt grinned. “I knew we’d have a lot in common.” He reached into his jeans pocket for his phone and credit card and ordered the pizza, with double cheese, plus breadsticks and cheesy squares.

Definitely all her favorites. Courtney would have ordered a vegetarian pizza with salad for a side. Lisa was a meat and cheese girl.

At least Matt was paying for the pizza. Already an improvement over Darryl, who always emptied her refrigerator and never shelled out a dime for groceries. Still, it was just the first time Matt had come to her place and he already looked disarmingly comfortable.

Way too comfortable for just a hookup. Stretched out on her sofa, his taut tee shirt hiked to his navel, Matt looked like a permanent fixture in the personal space Lisa had worked desperately in the past few months to reclaim as her own. She was not going there again.

Looking up to see her staring at him, he straightened and made room for her to share the sofa. By the time the pizza arrived, they’d settled in to watch *An Officer and a Gentleman* on a classic television network.

“I think the old movies are the best, don’t you?” Cradling her shoulder, Matt nuzzled her ear lobe.

Way, way too comfortable. Pizza, beer, romantic movie, cuddling in front of the TV. Had he come here to settle in like an old married couple or for a booty call?

She ran her fingers along the inside of Matt’s thigh. *Booty call*, his body’s response confirmed. Cupping his prominent package through his jeans, she swirled her tongue into his ear, then swept it across his cheek to tease his lips.

His mouth opened to capture hers, then plundered its way inside. Heat flooded the pores of Lisa’s skin. Desire burned. She tore her mouth away to nibble his ear, and kiss the side of his neck. But she wanted her lips where her hand was.

Feverishly she slid off the sofa, knelt on the floor beside him, and unzipped his jeans. Matt groaned and leaned back. Gently she stroked him until his breath turned ragged, then she freed him from his underwear prison, and took him in her mouth.

God, he tasted better than wine. Savoring each sip, Lisa teased him higher and harder. Suddenly, with a feral moan, he sat up, grabbed her shoulders and lifted her, positioning her legs around his waist. Then, with another groan, he pushed to his feet and, hands braced against her bottom, carried her toward the bedroom.

Lisa clung to his neck, her legs flailing. “Matt this is crazy. I’m going to fall. Please put me down.”

“Yes, ma’am.” And he did, onto her rumpled queen size bed that she wished she’d made up that morning.

Within seconds, the jeans and underwear hanging off his hips had been discarded, his shirt following the same trajectory. He was beautifully naked, and Lisa struggled with the buttons on her blouse, eager to be in the same state.

Matt unbuttoned her gray slacks and tugged them down, then returned to finish her blouse buttons. His mouth dove onto her breast before she could even shrug her blouse off, moistening her bra and sending her nipples into upright mode.

“Wait,” she croaked. Praying that Dirt Devil Darryl hadn’t absconded with her entire condom supply, she rolled across the bed and grabbed a packet from her nightstand drawer. While Matt applied it, she slipped off her bra and kicked off her panties.

She was eager for him to be inside her, but he took his time. Nipping at her

breasts, licking each nipple until the other one cried out for attention. Massaging her stomach. Suckling her navel. Kissing her lower and lower, teasing, torturing. Lisa thrashed and moaned as if her body were on fire and only his could extinguish the flames. Sweat ringed her eyelids. She dug her fingers into his shoulders. "Please. Oh please."

When he entered her, slowly, her hips rose up to meet him. Matt held her steady and with gentle, then, forceful thrusts brought her to reverberating peaks of passion.

Heart pounding, breath softening, she buried her face in his chest and inhaled his comforting aroma. Matt threw his leg over hers. Not even trying to wriggle under the covers, Lisa relaxed in blissful exhaustion.

Don't get too comfortable. Just because they fit well together, and liked the same kind of pizza, and enjoyed fervent, frantic sex, was no reason to think of this as any more than it was, a one--make that a three-night stand. Any minute now he'd get up, dress and leave. Or at the very least, untangle his body and turn his back to the wall.

But when dawn nudged her eyelids open, the television was still blaring from the living room and Matt's arms were still locked around her. As fixed in her personal space as a separate person could get.

Chapter Five

Although the magazine hadn't gone live yet, Lisa's blog was already generating buzz among her colleagues. Everyone in the office seemed to have his or her own one-night-stand story, and several people volunteered to post theirs in upcoming editions.

And of course, everyone wanted to know if it was a true story and if so, the real identity of the man she'd named 'Shane.'

"What if he reads your blog?" Courtney asked over lunch at Panera's.

Lisa shrugged. "He doesn't seem the type to read a gossip mag. Anyway, I changed his name for the story."

"But *your* real name is in the byline."

"No problem, he doesn't know my last name."

"But he knows where you live."

"Thanks to you."

Courtney winced. "I hesitated to give him your home address," she said apologetically. "I hope I didn't create a stalker. But he seemed really nice on the phone..."

"He is nice. Or he has been so far."

"So far?"

Lisa broke off the crust of her club sandwich. "I don't expect this to last very long. Darryl was nice too, when we first started dating. But as soon as he got into my pants..."

"Darryl was always a selfish bastard. You didn't want to see it because...well, you'd never gone a year without a boyfriend before."

Was Courtney calling her desperate? "Every guy in L.A. is self-centered and superficial." Lisa narrowed her eyes at her friend. "Including the ones you've dated."

Courtney sighed. "I've learned to make peace with the southern California experience. Inseparable today, gone tomorrow. Back home in west Texas, friends were forever. Here, you can make plans with somebody in advance, but they'll still flake on you if something better comes up."

Lisa smiled. "That's why I'm glad you and I met in third grade." She held up her palm.

Courtney high-fived it. "Best friends forever."

Lisa shoved her half-eaten sandwich aside. "There has to be a good guy

out there somewhere. And I deserve him. But until I meet him, there's nothing wrong with having a little fun."

"You go, girl." Courtney picked at her salad, then looked up with a sly glance. "You don't think this Matt might be Mr. Right?"

She evoked the image of his head on her pillow, his body twisted in her sheets. "Not likely. Mr. Right doesn't hang out in bars."

Courtney rolled her eyes but graciously didn't remind Lisa that she'd been hanging out in that bar too. "So Matt is just a booty call."

Lisa winced. When she'd thought of it that way herself, it sounded cool. Having Courtney say it made her sound...slutty. "I like him, Court. I really do. But he's not 'the one.' This is just a little fling I plan to enjoy until the right guy comes along."

"Can you do that?"

Courtney knew her too well. "Sure." How hard could it be? No expectations, no commitments. Just fun and great sex.

But despite her bravado, Lisa found herself checking her cell phone several times on the way home that afternoon, making sure the volume was up and she hadn't missed a call. And walking from the car, she couldn't help scanning the sidewalks as she approached her apartment. No calls. No Matt.

No assumptions, Lisa. He came over last night to return your phone. You might not see him again for a week. Or ever.

Ten minutes after she'd traded her business clothes for a tank top and pajama pants, the intercom buzzed from downstairs. "Hey, it's Matt. Can I come up?"

Hearing his voice made her heart skip. Lisa punched it back into her chest. "Long day at work," she said. "I'm kind of tired."

"I brought food."

Two minutes later he stood at her front door, wearing a backward-facing ball cap, a Lakers sweatshirt, and khaki shorts, carrying an aromatic bag from the Bangkok Kitchen.

"I hope you like Thai. You haven't eaten yet?" He glanced at Lisa's attire. "Or made other plans?"

She grabbed the bag, inhaling the spicy scents, her tongue already tasting the orange crispy beef. "Love Thai. Actually, I pretty much love food, period." She set the bag on the small kitchen table, shoving her laptop aside. "I just...wasn't expecting you." Hoping. But not expecting.

He tossed his ball cap on the arm of the sofa. "I guess I should have called

first. But I just finished a job and I was literally in the neighborhood, so I thought..." He held up both hands, outstretched.

The obvious next question was to ask what kind of work he did. But Lisa stifled her curiosity. When she'd started dating Darryl, she'd wanted to know everything about him. First kiss, favorite song, what he thought about every conceivable subject of interest to Lisa.

A total waste of time and energy. No, she'd save all the serious stuff for a *real* relationship. Though part of her craved to explore Matt's mind as well as his body, the rational part deemed it best to know as little about him as possible. Learning he ate Rice Krispies for breakfast or liked dogs and hated cats would yield unwanted mundane reality. She preferred to think of Matt as phantom lover who existed only in her pleasure zone.

* * *

"That was wonderful," she panted, stretching with satiation after two hours of exhilarating sex.

Matt lay on his back beside her, recovering his own breath. "Yeah."

For several awkward moments, they both stared silently at the ceiling. What else could you say to a man who'd taken you to amazing places you'd never been before? *Thank you?* "I'm not interested in a relationship," Lisa blurted out before her brain fully engaged.

He didn't even turn to look at her. "Okay," he said.

That was it? No questions, no comment? She should have felt relieved. Matt wanted, apparently, the same thing she did: easy sex, comfortable camaraderie, no complications. Not even the pretext of being friends with benefits--just the benefits.

Still, she might have appreciated at least a semblance of a protest. Every woman wants a man to want her body, but no woman—at least no woman Lisa knew—wants a man to want *just* her body.

"I should tell you something." She turned to view his magnificent body, his chest rippled with muscle and sweat. "I'm not the kind of girl you think I am."

A small, teasing smile played on his lips. "And what kind is that?"

"You know. Easy. Slutty. To be perfectly honest, I've never picked up a guy in a bar before."

"I didn't think you had."

She swallowed. "It was that obvious?"

"To me." He grinned. "But what would I know? I'd never picked up a girl

in a bar before either.”

“I don’t believe you.” The man exuded charm and pheromones. Saturday night she’d watched him surreptitiously from her corner booth for almost an hour, unable to take her eyes off him.

His finger outlined her lips, then trailed down her chin and neck. “If you thought I was a player, then why did you come on to me?”

“I didn’t--” But of course she had. Aided by liquid confidence, egged on by Courtney, when she’d finally worked up the courage to walk up and talk to him, she’d probably seemed like just another barfly. “You’ve honestly never picked up a woman in bar before?”

“Never.” He lifted his right hand from where it had almost come to rest on her breast. “Scout’s honor.”

“So why me?”

He smiled again. A smile that made this gorgeous naked man even more irresistible. “Because you didn’t look like you made a habit of picking up guys in bars.”

Now she knew he was snowing her. What guy who doesn’t pick up women in bars goes to a bar to seek out a woman who looks like she doesn’t pick up men in bars?

He sat up and propped a pillow against the headboard. “It’s been a while since I dated, Lisa. I came out of a bad break up too. Yes, I was looking for a good time that night, but I didn’t want to wake up in the morning with someone who’d make me hate myself.”

If that was a line, it was a good one. Despite her wariness, Lisa went all warm inside. She leaned over and kissed his chest. Matt stroked her hair. It felt so natural lying with him like this. Even in the afterglow, Matt’s body continued to seduce.

She rolled to her back. “Your break-up. Long-term girlfriend?” she asked.

“Wife.”

He didn’t seem like the marrying type. Not that it mattered, since she had no interest in marrying a guy like him. She sat, crossing her legs on the mattress. “I’m sorry. What happened?”

He shrugged. “Just the tired old story. Man comes home from work, finds a note from his wife saying she doesn’t love him anymore...”

His confession made Lisa feel uncomfortable. Not knowing how to respond, she launched into what she hoped was a sympathetic tell-all about how Darryl had gawked at every big-boobed blonde when he thought Lisa wasn’t

looking. Sometimes even when he knew she was. “I almost bought him one of those blow-up dolls for Christmas. I was going to put it in bed beside him and then leave him.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Darryl the Dirt Devil lived in *my* apartment.”

Matt laughed. “Catchy name.”

Lisa hadn’t considered her experience exactly funny at the time, but the pain had dulled over the last months and morphed into sarcasm. The story of her bad breakup could be the subject of another blog. Surely half the women in L.A. had once dated a dirt devil.

Matt found her stories entertaining, and his amusement was contagious. Remembering all the stupid mistakes she’d made trying to paste together a shredded relationship with post-it-notes, Lisa joined his laughing-on-the-outside-crying-on-the-inside emotional catharsis. Now that she’d dated Mr. Wrong, she knew exactly what kind of man to avoid. Next time out, she intended to land Mr. Right.

“So, no relationship,” he said, when he sobered up.

What? Lisa swallowed. She’d forgotten how this conversation had started. “We’ve both bombed out on that front. Let’s just enjoy what we have.”

“One day at a time,” Matt agreed. And he pulled her into his arms, wrapping her legs around his back. Giving her exactly what she wanted and needed from Mr. In-the-Moment. Great sex with no complications.

* * *

The *So-Cal Social* launched at nine the next morning, and by noon it had enough hits to officially declare the e-magazine a success. Friends Lisa hadn’t seen since high school Facebooked her to congratulate her on her byline blog, and everyone asked the same questions. Who is this guy? Was it really just a one night stand? Do you think you’ll ever see him again?

Courtney, Jess and Tish texted their good wishes. No word from Matt. But that was good, right? It meant he hadn’t read her blog. She wouldn’t want him to think she’d just used him for literary fodder.

Of course not. You used him for his body.

The whole gang went out for drinks to celebrate and bring in the weekend. Several of her colleagues continued with dinner, but Lisa begged off in favor of stopping at Ralph’s Supermarket on the way home to buy chicken breasts and other groceries. Matt still hadn’t called, but that wasn’t surprising. She was sort of getting used to him just showing up. And if he did tonight she wanted to

dazzle him with her culinary skills.

Just as soon as she developed some.

The 'easy' and 'just five ingredients' chicken recipe she printed from the Internet was more complicated than the instructions for the 'some assembly required' coffee table that had taken her three weeks to put together, but Lisa gave it her best shot. After sautéing the chicken breasts with fresh vegetables in a wok she'd never used before, she drowned the contents in some Asian sauce from Trader Joe's that tasted sweet and tart at the same time. It was a nice change from takeout, and made Lisa feel kind of homey and domestic.

Uh-oh. Neither homey nor domestic was part of her agenda.

When Matt hadn't showed by eight-thirty Lisa dug out her cell phone. Her finger hovered over his number. *Don't do it.* Last night had been wonderful, but when he'd left this morning, refusing her coffee and doughnuts in favor of stopping at the Coffee Bean on his way to work, Matt had said nothing about a return visit.

And why would he? She reminded herself this thing with Matt was supposed to be just for sex. Still it seemed odd that he'd come to her apartment two nights in a row, make himself at home on her sofa and in her bed, and then...nothing? Not even a text?

She needed to clear her head. Covering the wok with a lid that didn't quite fit, Lisa went downstairs and took a jaunty stroll up the block. And back across the street. And back again to the intersection where his truck might have appeared.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She should never have mentioned the R word. Saying she *didn't* want a relationship could be taken to mean she did. Hadn't Debra Winger used that tactic in *An Officer and a Gentleman*? Assuring Richard Gere she was only interested in a temporary fling had lulled him into a comfortable, non-pressured state, which culminated in his falling in love with her. Maybe Matt was afraid Lisa was trying the same thing.

Or maybe, after less than a week of blissful, mind-blowing sex, he was just bored with her.

When she opened the door of her apartment, smoke choked her nostrils and teared her eyes. The alarm wailed. Lisa dashed inside. All the liquid had boiled out of the skillet. She'd forgotten to lower the temperature on the stove. The chicken was dry and shriveled and the vegetables burnt like S'mores that had fallen into a campfire. She turned off the stove, then opened all the windows in the apartment. Using bath towels as potholders, she removed the dish from the

burner and tossed it in the garbage, wok and all.

When she finally did meet Mr. Right, he'd better know how to cook.

Chapter Six

Lisa slept until almost noon the next morning, much later than even her typically lazy Saturday. Normally she would have checked in with Courtney to see if she had weekend plans with her boyfriend or wanted to hang out at The Grove or Venice Beach. But Courtney was out of town this weekend.

Lisa hadn't even spoken to her best friend in days. She'd been too wrapped up in her job by day and Matt--literally--by night. And she'd be too embarrassed to admit to her friend that she wasn't doing No Strings as well as she'd claimed she could.

She padded to the kitchen, fixed a cup of coffee, and stared out the window at the never-ending traffic on the 405. On days like this she missed the open prairies of west Texas. In her funky mood, she missed home.

The intercom buzzed. Still in her pajamas, she raced to her door and pushed the button to unlock the downstairs lobby. He was back!

Her heart filled with unanticipated relief. Smoothing down her bed head hair, she composed her expression to look bored, at least less excited. Then she flung open the door and found herself lifted off her feet and into the arms of...

"Drew?"

Her handsome, six-foot-two brother released her from a bear hug and set her firmly back on the floor. "Hey, Sis."

"It's so good to see you." Lisa smothered Drew with another hug. "But what are you doing here?"

His face screwed up in confusion. "You didn't get my email?"

"Telling me you'd been transferred to the naval base in San Diego? Of course. But I didn't know when. And you never said you were coming up here."

"You didn't get my other note then. I emailed you Thursday that I'd be coming up to L.A. for the weekend. I--" He drew back, studying her nocturnal attire, then glanced toward the bedroom. "Oh shit. Am I interrupting something?"

"Not at all," she assured him. "I just slept in. I must not have read your email because I've been super busy this week. At work," she added but she felt a telltale blush rising to her cheeks.

Which her brother didn't miss. "When I rang the buzzer, you didn't even ask who it was. Were you expecting someone else?"

"No," she answered too quickly.

“Not dating anyone now?”

“No.” She kept her eyes on her bare feet. “That is...” She turned toward the kitchen. “I just fixed a pot of coffee. Want a cup? Then you can tell me all about your new posting.”

“Sure.” Drew joined her at the table and nibbled at a carton of leftover Thai rice as he drank. “I’m posted at Naval Base Coronado, NAS North Island. My assignment doesn’t start until Monday so I thought I’d come up and see how my favorite sister is faring in the big city.”

“Your only sister. This is so fantastic.” When he was stationed in Norfolk, Lisa had seen her brother only once or twice a year. “Now we can see each other almost every weekend.”

“Once or twice a month, anyway.” Drew finished off the rice and scavenged the refrigerator for anything else edible. “I had breakfast at oh-six hundred this morning and I’m starving. “How about you throw on some clothes and we grab lunch somewhere?”

“Great.” Lisa showered and dressed in ten minutes. When she came out, Drew was puttering in the living room, browsing through her DVDs.

“What’s Freckle Face doing today?” Drew looked up approvingly at Lisa’s khaki Capri’s and white blouse. “Maybe she’d like to join us.”

Lisa chuckled. “It’s been eleven years, Bro. Courtney still has red hair but it’s darker now, and the freckles have either disappeared or they’re hiding under makeup.”

“Well, get her on the horn and invite her out with us,” Drew said.

Lisa shook her head. “She’s out of town for the weekend with this season’s boyfriend.” She grinned. “In San Diego, in fact.” Courtney had said something about seeing the pandas at the zoo.

“Ironical.” Drew chuckled. “Maybe I’ll catch her next time.” He offered Lisa his arm, escorted her to his Chevy Tahoe, and only forty five minutes later they’d negotiated the six miles to the pier and were eating seafood in a white-tablecloth restaurant overlooking the ocean.

Drew talked about his new job field testing a new electronic warfare system on a ship to be deployed next year, and Lisa told him about the successful launch of the e-magazine she’d been working on, and her byline blog that was already getting hits.

“That’s terrific. You’ve always wanted to be a writer.” Drew dipped his fried shrimp into a tangy sauce. “California seems to be the place where dreams come true.”

Lisa smiled and patted her napkin to her lips.

“So, tell me about this guy.”

“What guy?” Lisa played innocent. “Darryl and I broke up three months ago. I told you that.”

“Not him.” Her brother had never met the Dirt Devil but Lisa had shared enough stories for him not to regret it. “The guy you were expecting this morning. Or not expecting.”

There was no point in hedging. Drew’s senses of observation were finally honed. If he hadn’t found a dark brown hair or some other evidence of Matt’s presence, he had probably smelled vestiges of his masculine cologne.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone. I went out with this guy a few times, just for grins, but that’s done.” She placed her knife and fork across her plate. “I’m still hoping the right guy will come along eventually. I’ve just got to be more careful about my choices next time.”

“Did this guy hurt you?” Drew’s hands didn’t exactly fist up, but his jaw set in a face prepared for militant action. “If he harmed one hair on your head, I-”

“Calm down, big brother, nobody hurt me. Darryl was a jerk, but not violent. Matt is just a guy I know. We are not dating.”

“Is that right?” Drew grinned.

“Yep. Just friends.” If that. “But at least now I know for sure that I am soooo over Darryl.” Just one night with Matt had made her six months with the Dirt Devil look like a pale imitation of pleasure.

Her brother’s eyes raked her face as if her pores revealed the emotions she took great pains to hide. “But now how are you going to get over Matt?”

* * *

“*C’est la vie*,” Jessica responded to Lisa’s report when the posse had assembled for lunch the next Tuesday. “It wasn’t meant to be.”

“Nada?” Tish was less philosophical, in a different language. “He hasn’t called, texted, or even Facebooked?”

“Nothing,” Lisa repeated. Hanging out with her brother all weekend had kept her from dwelling on it, but...

“Did you try to contact him?” Tish persisted.

“I texted him Saturday. No response.”

Jessica raised a brow. “What exactly did you say?”

Lisa took out her phone, scrolled to outgoing texts, and held it up for her friends to see. She’d spent a lot of time and thought composing those three short

sentences.

She pointed to the first one. *Missed you last night*. “This states a simple fact. I did miss him. But it doesn’t go all boo-hoo over it.”

“*Hope all is okay*,” she read the next sentence aloud. “This shows I understand that something might have come up, either work or family-related. It conveys my concern without asking personal questions or acting needy.”

“*See you soon*. This is a positive, assertive statement. It lets him know that I’d like to see him again. In a matter of fact, non-clingy way. If I’d said *I hope to see you soon* that might have come across as needy.”

“Geesh.” Trish looked up from her diet soda. “Are all writers that anal?”

“You have no idea,” Courtney said dryly. “Lisa second guesses her second guesses.”

“Well, if he read your blog, he’s probably ticked that you didn’t tell him about it,” Jessica said.

Lisa choked on her diet coke. *The blog*. What if he’d read it and, despite the change of name, recognized himself? Maybe he was embarrassed and angry at her for splattering their amazing sex life on the digital page for anyone to see.

“If he read the blog, I doubt he’d be upset,” Tish said. “A woman might be embarrassed. A man would probably print copies and hand it out to all his buddies to advertise his sexual prowess.”

“And he would have called,” Courtney said. “If only to make sure that he was the stud she was writing about.”

Tish giggled.

“That blog was a bit racy,” Jess said. She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket to check the last five minutes worth of emails.

“It was wonderful.” Tish defended the blog. “Hot and sexy. I had to take a cold shower after reading it.”

“But well written,” Courtney added. She brought up the e-magazine on her phone. “*My yin connected with his yang in a glorious profusion of satisfying emotions*. Isn’t that romantic?”

Tish followed suit with her phone. “*His rising star breached my universe*,” she quoted with all the dramatic flair the aspiring actress possessed. “They should make a movie out of this. Breach my universe, baby.”

“Whoa.” Cassie arrived with their food. “Is that the new sexy book everyone’s talking about?”

“It’s Lisa’s blog from her new magazine.” Courtney held up her phone for the waitress to read.

“Wow.” Cassie’s cheeks flushed the color of Courtney’s hair. “I didn’t know you wrote that kind of stuff. I thought you were a newspaper editor.”

“And it’s a true story,” Tish added.

“Really.” Cassie took the phone in her own palm and scrolled to the next page.

“Mostly.” Lisa blushed again. “I took a little poetic license.”

“Erotic license, you mean.” Trish grinned.

Actually she hadn’t embellished the sex passages much. But she’d played down Matt’s gentleness, his kindness, the way his warm eyes seemed to see only her. The way he listened.

Cassie grabbed Lisa’s empty coke glass to refill. “Well, you hold on to that man, honey. He seems like a winner.”

Lisa groaned and crunched into her BLT.

“It may not be all over,” Jessica said when the waitress had moved on. “You told him you didn’t want a relationship. Maybe he’s just taking some space. It’s only been a few days, hasn’t it?”

Since Lisa’s mouth was full, Courtney filled in the details. “She met him Saturday night. He called Monday. They went out Tuesday. He came over Wednesday and Thursday. And then ditched on Friday.”

“No contact on the weekend,” Tish recapped. “Yeah, I hate to say it, Lisa, but it looks like you were last week’s woman.”

Lisa wasn’t sure if that made her feel stupid, rejected, or just relieved it wasn’t personal. She picked at her food and listened to Jessica expound on shopping for rings with her long-time boyfriend, in minute detail. Though their planned spring wedding was almost a year away, Jessica had a calendar with every pre-nuptial task scheduled.

“Hey,” Jess said suddenly. “What if he’s married?”

“Who, Josh?”

Jess glowered at Lisa. She had no sense of humor when it came to her fiancé. “Matt,” she said primly. “I mean, it makes sense. What if his wife was out of town? Saturday night he’s bored and goes to a bar, meets Lisa, yadda yadda yadda. She’s up for a quick hookup--Sorry, Lisa, I didn’t mean to imply you’re easy--but you were--so he makes a week out of it. His wife comes home Friday from her business trip or whatever and voila! he’s back with her.”

“He said he’s divorced,” Lisa said quietly.

“And you believed him?” This from Tish. “I wish I had a dollar for every man I’ve met who claimed to be divorced and still lived with his wife.”

“Or maybe he lives with his mother.” Courtney frowned. Everyone groaned.

“Doesn't matter. Rebound relationships never work out anyway,” Jessica said definitively.

As if she would know. Josh was the first and presumably the only guy she'd ever gone out with. But Jessica fancied herself an expert on everything. She'd probably read some article in *Modern Woman* while she was scrolling through looking at wedding gowns.

“Amen to that,” Courtney said. And she *would* know. Court had been in half a dozen relationships since college. But it never seemed to daunt her spirit. Or maybe it had. Since moving to L.A., she'd made it her practice to always be the first one to leave.

“Well, it was supposed to be a one night stand, anyway, wasn't it?” Trish balled up her napkin. “So you got a little more bang for your buck.” She grinned at her own pun. “Now that you've gotten your itch scratched, maybe you should start looking for that Mr. Right you've always wanted.”

“Where, on the Internet?” As if meeting a guy in a bar wasn't stooping low enough. At least she knew he was human. Hooking up with a fuzzy profile on the Internet could mean making a date with a robot or an orangutan.

“Why not?” Courtney tapped a finger against her glass. “Why don't you try one of those match-up sites? That's how I met Jared.”

Jared. The man Courtney was currently living with and who'd asked her to move in, Lisa suspected, mostly to defray the costs of his rent. Jared really wasn't such a bad guy. She just thought her friend could do better. “No offense, Court, but I'd feel so...desperate.”

Courtney patted her shoulder. “You are desperate, Sweetie. We all are. Not a lot of Texas gentleman out here. If you want a man, you settle for what you can get.”

Lisa didn't want to settle. She wanted the romantic dream. Which was exactly what Matt had been, a dream. She'd played out her erotic fantasies with him until they'd...played out. The girls were right. She'd had her fun and it was time to move on.

Tish scooted out of the booth and picked up her check. “I've got a class to teach at two. See you ladies at yoga this week?”

Lisa nodded. It wasn't like she'd made other plans.

“I've got to go too.” Jessica typed a last message into her phone and shoved it into her suit pocket. “Need to prepare for a client meeting.”

Jess, Lisa and Courtney eased out of the booth, paid their tabs, and headed outside. "I'm parked over that way," Lisa said, pointing toward Wilshire Boulevard.

They strolled in silence to the corner. "Wow," Courtney exclaimed, shielding her eyes from the midday sun. "I wouldn't mind getting me some of that," she tittered and then stopped, mid-titter. "Holy sh...sugar. Isn't that...?" she turned a questioning eye to Lisa.

Lisa's gaze followed where Courtney's had been. And her heart stopped. Plastered all over a bus bench on Wilshire was a photo of a long, lean, rakishly handsome man, wearing nothing but a pair of briefs, smiling for the world in general and Lisa in particular. She clutched her chest. "Oh God."

"What? Who is that?" Jessica peeled her eyes from the underwear advertisement and faced Lisa.

She could barely get the words out. "Matt."

Chapter Seven

“Batter up!”

Matt leaned forward on the metal bleacher and propped his elbows on his knees, watching his son walk up to the plate. *Be confident*, he mouthed although he knew Tyler wasn’t looking at him. *You can do this*.

The nine-year-old inched forward, gripping his bat as if the fate of the free world depended on his performance. But as the first pitch careened toward him, he shrunk back and almost fell into the catcher’s lap.

“Strike one!” the Little League umpire called.

Come on, Tyler, remember how we practiced.

Wearing a determined expression, the boy straightened and moved to straddle the plate. When the pitcher released the next ball, he swung wildly, connecting only with air. The umpire called a second strike.

Damn, the last thing Matt wanted to see was the disappointment in that little boy’s face. He stood and tried to catch his son’s eye, but Tyler was intent on watching the pitched ball.

This one flew high over his helmet but Tyler stood his ground. “Way to watch ‘em, Tyler,” Matt roared.

Tyler glanced at the bleachers and grinned at his father.

There were two more wild pitches, balls two and three, then one that flew in right over the plate, between the boy’s shoulders and knees. Matt gulped in his breath. Tyler swung and hit, knocking the ball straight out to...the foul area beside third plate.

“Foul ball.” The umpire held up two fingers of one hand, three of the other to indicate a full count.

Was Little League this painful and heartbreaking when Matt was a boy? He sat and closed his eyes, offering up a prayer. *Please let him hit it. Let him get on base. Please—*

“Ball four.”

Matt opened his eyes. Tyler loped to first base, grinning as if he’d hit a home run with bases loaded. He nodded to Matt like a star athlete acknowledging his fans.

The next batter hit a pop fly to center field, and Tyler took off for second base. *No, no, no, go back, son*. Matt gritted his teeth.

But he’d forgotten how clumsy fourth graders are. The second baseman

dropped the toss from the center fielder, allowing Tyler to slide into the base with two seconds to spare. Yes! Matt took off his own baseball cap and fanned his face. Thirty was too young for a guy to have a heart attack.

“He made it to second base?”

Matt looked up. His ex-wife scrambled up the stairs, wearing a brightly colored medical smock and tennis shoes, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail.

“He got on base with a walk. Crazy kid stole second on a pop fly.”

“Good for him.” Stephanie sat beside him and crossed one green cotton pant leg over the other. “Looks like those confidence talks Seth has been giving him are paying off.”

The talks Seth gave him? Matt had been tossing balls with Tyler every night this week. Stephanie always had to give her husband credit, whether deserved or not. “I’ve got Tyler’s stuff in the truck. You want it now?”

“Yes, please. Seth is cooking tonight and I told him we’d come home as soon as the game is over.”

With Tyler’s team still scoreless, Matt waited until the side was retired with two men left on, and then walked his ex-wife out to the parking lot.

“So how have you been?” she asked after Matt had retrieved Tyler’s book bag from the truck and reloaded it in Stephanie’s van. “How’s the screenplay coming?”

“Almost finished.”

“That’s what you said the last time I asked.”

“And it’s still true.” Matt hunkered down on the second row of bleachers, with Stephanie beside him, just as Tyler came up to bat again.

This time Tyler swung on the first pitch and connected with the ball with a resounding crack. He ran halfway to first base before looking up to see the fly ball land securely in the second baseman’s glove.

“Tough deal, Tyler.” Matt stood and waved his support as his son trudged back to the dugout. “You’ll get ‘em next time.”

Stephanie, the poster child for glass-half-empty, rolled her eyes.

“I sold the last script, you know.” Matt affected a blasé look. “To Paramount Pictures.”

“Really.” Stephanie turned to him. “Are they going to produce it?”

He shrugged. “Probably not.” Definitely not. The guy had been up front with him at least, confiding that the story was too much like another currently in production, and the movie house was only buying it to make sure the competition didn’t acquire it and promote something similar.

“So it’s like the other one then?” Stephanie didn’t just prod, she poked a hole until she drew blood. “Isn’t that just like the farmers who get paid to not grow crops?”

Matt smoldered but kept his composure. The best thing about the ‘ex’ in ‘ex-wife’ was that he didn’t have to put up with her crap anymore.

Stephanie’s pitying gaze roamed over his face. This was the look he hated even more than the snide one, the critical one, and the why-don’t-you-get-a-real-job one. “Seth said they’re looking for substitute teachers at his school. He could put in a good word for you.”

Like that was going to happen. The day he considered accepting charity from the man his wife had left him for was the day he’d toss his laptop into the Pacific and follow it in. “Not necessary. I’m doing okay.”

“By selling your body?”

Matt bit down hard on his back teeth. “My modeling jobs kept a roof over your head and food on the table.”

Stephanie sighed. “Why couldn’t you have been a normal Hollywood hopeful?” Though they’d been divorced almost a year, she still felt entitled, apparently, to rehash old arguments. “Wait tables or park cars while waiting for your big break?”

Matt shot her a withering glare. She knew damn well why he hadn’t worked at any of those menial jobs. Because they required forty or more hours a week away from his computer. That wouldn’t have been waiting for his dream, it would have been postponing it forever. With modeling, it was one day here, one day there, and a wad of cash in his hand. And you never knew when a big director might happen by. In Matt’s dreams, Steven Spielberg had an idea for a new film, and casually mentioned that he was looking for a screenwriter...

“I’m just saying--”

“Well, don’t.” He snapped out of his daydream and focused on Ms. Reality. “You work in a doctor’s office and you married an elementary school teacher. That’s the life that makes *you* happy. Not me.”

That put her on the defensive at last. “Maybe we don’t make tons of money but it’s a steady paycheck.”

Steady paycheck. Security. If he had a nickel for every time she’d thrown those phrases in his face... “If that’s all you want out of life...”

She flushed. “I have a family. Seth is good to me. And I have Tyler.”

“We have Tyler.” Ever since she’d gotten remarried--a month after the divorce was final--Stephanie had been ‘suggesting’ that their joint custody

agreement could be improved upon. That she was a better parent because she had a 'more stable home life.' Well, that was not going to happen. Matt might be a pie-in-the-sky kind of guy but he had one thing right now that meant everything to him. The love of his son.

"You guys fighting again?" Tyler trudged up, dragging his toes in the dirt.

Stephanie planted a kiss on their son's forehead. "Daddy and I were just...discussing something." She smoothed back a stray hair from his head. "Now scoot and get your gym bag. You can change at home. Seth's cooking your favorite—spaghetti and meatballs."

Instead of scooting, Tyler held his palm up to Matt for a high five. "Did you see that run I almost made? If the skinny kid hadn't caught that ball, I would have scored and batted in two other runners."

"Nice one, son. Maybe next game."

Tyler hugged him, an embrace Matt wished could last forever. "See you next Friday, Dad." He ran off to fetch his bag and say goodbye to his friends.

Before following him, Stephanie turned to Matt. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Encourage him. Tyler can't hit, he can't field, and he can't run. He'll never be good at baseball. You're teaching him to hope for the impossible."

Matt clenched his fists. "I'm teaching him that it's okay to fail. That to find out what you're good at, you have to make a few false starts. That anybody who ever made a success of his life had to fail a few hundred times first."

"Well, you would know."

Matt drew in a deep breath. "I do know. I know that every 'no' is one step closer to a 'yes'. And I know that greatness was never achieved by playing it safe."

She shrugged. "Tyler loves baseball because you love it. But when he misses at bat, or can't catch a pop fly, it's bad for his self-esteem."

He watched her walk away, her arm draped around Tyler's shoulder. Matt had always believed in following his dream, no matter what. But since he'd turned thirty last month, doubts had crept in. How long could he keep up his hopes? He probably had only five, maybe ten more years in the modeling game, less for underwear and intimate apparel. He patted his flat stomach. These days, it took longer work-outs to keep in shape. Eventually he'd be passed over for younger guys. How would he make a living then?

He filled his lungs and released his breath. After his last rejection, he and Brady had discussed forming their own production company. His friend shared

Matt's vision for his latest screenplay and would be perfect to play the lead, a tough, emotionally closed off hero.

Of course he hadn't mentioned that to Glass Half Empty Stephanie. Not only did she dislike Brady, she would have gleefully pointed out the obvious deficiencies in the plan. Primarily, funding. Even Matt had to admit that without investors, his new ambition was just another pipe dream.

You could go work for Tom. His college buddy had offered him a steady, nine-to-five job more than once. Copyediting other people's work. Matt bit down hard on his lip. Uncreative. Stultifying. He'd die of boredom within a week.

He knew he was good enough to make it. He just needed to find the right producer or director, the right set of eyes to give him a chance. But at thirty years old, the clock was ticking faster. His stubborn determination had already cost him his marriage. He couldn't, wouldn't sacrifice his son. How long could he afford to pursue his dream before chucking it like yesterday's garbage and joining the mindless grind of the nine to five, 'mature' adult?

Chapter Eight

Lisa's blog was a success. The minute the second weekly edition of the So-Cal Social hit the 'e-stands,' the magazine's Facebook page started going berserk. This week's posting on the One Night with a Stranger blog, from 'Shy Shelly in Santa Monica' got just as many comments as had Lisa's. Even Mr. Arnold was in a great mood, and his smile got wider and brighter every time he passed Lisa's cube. Her palms were sore from constant high fives--a good kind of sore--and after work, she and her colleagues went to a nearby watering hole to celebrate.

The crowd was so noisy, she didn't notice until she got home later that she'd received two missed calls. From unknown numbers.

She listened to the messages. One was a hang-up. The other from a guy responding to the profile she'd posted this week on an online dating site.

It had taken her hours to write that profile, and to scan through those of the eligible bachelors. Some of the self-descriptions read as too good to be true. Lisa had skipped past those, obviously either liars or conceited assholes. *I like walks in the rain*, several profiles read. Like that was the epitome of a romantic date. *I love the beach*. Lisa wondered if the nerdy looking guy whose picture accompanied that profile had ever *made* love on the beach.

The guy on her voice mail sounded normal. Boring normal. Lisa tried, she really tried, to listen to him with an open mind. But she kept hearing Matt's voice in her ear, imagining his body caressing hers. Damn, was she that shallow? Could she not give a guy a shot even though the chemistry was absolutely flat?

Lisa started to call back, then hesitated. As a teenager, she'd never gone out with any of the guys her brother had wanted to fix her up with. Was she now so lonely, and so needy, that she would make herself available to anonymous strangers from a dating site?

No, you'd rather go to a bar and hook up with some hot guy for quick, easy sex.

Her phone rang again, and she decided to ignore it. One ring. Two. After the third it would go to voice mail. Thr—

She glanced at the caller ID, snatched up the phone and clicked it on, suddenly breathless. "Hello?"

"Hey Lisa, it's Matt."

She gave her lungs a minute to recover, restraining herself from replying

‘Matt who?’ It would not even be sarcastic, since she still didn’t know his last name. She managed a casual “Hi.”

His pause might have been imperceptible had she not been counting her breaths. Then he said, “I got your text message. I’m sorry I took so long getting back to you, but...”

She should have let him flounder in his unfinished sentence but she couldn’t help stepping into the pause. “Busy week?”

“You could say that.” He cleared his throat. “Look, I know it’s short notice, but if you’re not busy tonight, I’d really like to see you.”

His sexy growl almost had her. Another night of out of this world sex tempted, but keeping things casual didn’t mean she had to be his beck and call girl. “Sorry, I already have plans.” It wasn’t a lie. She planned to wash her hair, catch up on reruns of *The Big Bang Theory*, maybe play Words with Friends online with her brother.

“I understand. How about tomorrow?”

Lisa swallowed hard. Her mind said to play it cool but her body was giving her brain a run for its money.

“If you’ve got other plans, a date or something, we could meet up early,” he suggested. “You ever climb the Culver City Stairs?”

“What’s that?”

“Two hundred seventy steps up to a great scenic overlook. Or we can take the trail, your choice.”

She hesitated.

“I promise I’ll get you home in time for your date.”

She hadn’t said she had a date, he’d assumed it. And yet he was asking her out for...a daytime hike? Not a booty call? Just a couple of friends getting together?

Do you want to see the man or not? “Sounds cool,” she said.

“Great, I’ll pick you up at nine. Wear walking shoes and bring water,” he added.

When she clicked off the phone, she realized her hands were shaking.

This would be good. A little morning hike, with the wind in her hair and the sun in her face would be fun. No one said fun had to be just sex, or only one night.

* * *

Matt arrived the next morning exactly at nine, looking better than any man has a right to in baggy shorts that hung to his calves and a faded tee shirt.

Lisa plopped her backpack of water and snacks onto the floorboard of his truck and offered an offhand “Hello,” hoping she looked half as cute in her new jogging pants, a stretchy top that was both comfortable and clingy, and a Bubba Gump sweatshirt. She’d disregarded her new, spotless white tennis shoes in favor of a dirty, well-broken-in pair. She had no doubt Matt was every bit as athletic as his body looked, and she had no intention of twisting an ankle or whining about her feet hurting, in the first ten minutes of their adventure.

“Did you have fun last night?” he asked when they’d pulled away from the curb.

Last night? Lisa went blank.

“You said you were going out. Did you have a good time?”

“Sure. Thanks for asking.” Games. Lisa hated them, and last night she’d used one of the oldest feminine diversions, letting him think she’d been out with someone else. But to keep this from getting serious, she’d have to get used to playing the game.

As they drove she chattered about the weather, Los Angeles traffic, and the Dodgers upcoming season. Lisa knew next to nothing about baseball, but from the insignia on the cap perched between them on the gear shift, she guessed him to be a fan.

As she’d hoped, once she broached the subject, Matt was off and running with details about spring training and the Dodgers’ best hopes for the season. Leaving Lisa to silently enjoy the view of his tanned, chiseled face, and sculpted, well-toned body.

At the Baldwin Hills Scenic overlook, Matt expertly squeezed the pickup into a space a Corolla would have been hard-pressed to fit into. “I can’t parallel park very well,” she felt compelled to say admiringly. “I grew up in west Texas. They don’t build a convenience store without a parking lot to go with it.”

Matt chuckled. “A Texas girl, huh? You don’t have much of an accent.”

“I guess I kind of lost most of it after I moved to L.A. two years ago.” She hefted her backpack to her shoulder and waited for Matt to walk around the truck to join her. “Are you from this area?”

“Not exactly. I moved out here from Oregon a while back.” He placed a hand on her back and guided her to the park entrance.

“Wow.” Lisa stared at the expanse of rock stairs carved into the mountain. Although it was barely nine-thirty, intrepid Saturday morning climbers in vibrant shirts and windbreakers splattered the hillside like an array of colorful birds.

“Race you up the first set.” And Matt was off. Lisa followed a few steps

behind, wishing she hadn't skipped yoga class last week. The steps were of irregular height, some as low as her ankle, and others reaching almost to her knees.

The second set was easier, once she'd gotten used to the non-pattern. But by the third she was breathing heavier, and when she turned at the ledge to see how far they'd come, her neck bobbed and she felt lightheaded.

"Don't look down until we get to the top," Matt warned. He wasn't breathing heavily at all. Nor was he sweating. He looked as comfortable as if they were strolling through a field of daisies. "Wanna rest?" He pointed to a bench beside the stone steps.

Lisa's calves ached like someone had pounded a mallet into them. She hated looking like a wuss, but her legs thanked her for the reprieve as she collapsed ungracefully on the bench. "I thought I was in better shape than this." She unzipped her bag and drew out a bottle of water, gulped several swallows, then handed it to Matt.

He took a swig and passed it back. "Nobody breaks any records their first time."

This was obviously not Matt's first time. He'd leaped gracefully up the stairs like a gazelle, his stamina reminding Lisa of his energy in the bedroom. She stood, shook out her legs and took a breath. "But I'm slowing you down."

"It's not a race." He grinned. "I'm in it for the company." He stretched his leg onto the bench and leaned his body over it, then repeated with the other leg. "The trail intersects at the next plateau. We can walk up that for a while."

The trail was better. Longer, but what was their hurry? Feeling stronger, Lisa lunged up the path several paces ahead of Matt, rounded a curve, and twisted her ankle on an unseen rock.

Matt was at her side instantly, propping her up. "You okay?"

In the cocoon of his arms, she righted her balance, more embarrassed than hurt. Though her body wanted to linger in the embrace, she broke away. "I'm okay now. Thanks."

He insisted on checking her ankle to make sure it wasn't sprained. "It doesn't look serious. I'm not a doctor, but I've twisted my ankle a time or two."

Leaning on him, she shook out her foot, feeling only minimal pain. "It'll be fine."

"Good." He eased her onto both feet. "I wouldn't want to have to carry you the rest of the way up the mountain."

"Carry me *up*? If I couldn't walk and you had to carry me, wouldn't we be

going *down*?”

“Hell no.” He grinned. “You haven’t seen the overlook yet.”

The thought that he’d carry her so she wouldn’t miss the view made her smile. Which made Matt’s smile even broader.

The view from the top was magnificent, though not the natural beauty of trees, deserts and ocean Lisa had expected. Except for the Hollywood Hills with its famous sign, the vista below was urban, a panoramic view of Los Angeles sprawl. “I’ll bet I can pick out my apartment from here.”

At the viewing platform, serious hikers did sit-ups and planks, stretching their muscles. The sun beat down on the concrete, and on Lisa’s cheeks. After swallowing the remains of the first bottle of water, she reclined on a hard bench and shed her sweatshirt.

Matt stripped off his shirt and bent over his knees, defining the muscles in his back. After a dozen or so toe-touches, he walked to Lisa’s bench. Unlike his smooth-shaven chest in the underwear ad, sparse hairs circled his nipples and arrowed down to his stomach. Lisa’s mouth watered.

Apparently she wasn’t the only one. A few feet away, a group of college-age girls giggled among themselves as they cast not-so-surreptitious glances at Matt. Finally, the tallest of them stepped forward.

“You look familiar,” she said, tossing her blonde ponytail. “Do you go to UCLA?”

Matt shook his head.

“Do you work in the Valley, then?” When Matt answered again in the negative, she batted her blue eyes and said, “I know I’ve seen you somewhere.”

A short silence. Lisa couldn’t help herself. She blurted out, “A bus bench on Wilshire Boulevard, maybe?”

Matt shot her an unreadable glance.

“No-o,” the co-ed said slowly. “But...oh, yes! On a billboard near Venice Beach. You’re the underwear guy.”

Matt actually cringed, then offered an embarrassed smile. “That’s me.”

“I’m Sheila,” the girl responded. She pointed to her friends and introduced them as well.

“Nice to meet you all.” Matt doffed his baseball cap and without offering his name, he grabbed Lisa’s elbow and directed her off the platform.

When they were out of earshot, he pressed her back against the wall of a small museum building and blocked her with his arms. Their bodies inches apart. His mouth moved close to hers, as if he intended to kiss her.

He didn't. "So that's why you've been so quiet this morning," he said in a loud whisper. "Are you embarrassed to be seen with me? Because I model underwear?"

"No," she said too quickly. "It's an honest living. And you have the body for it, so why not?" Thinking about that made *her* body react in ways she hadn't planned. "Are *you* embarrassed about it?"

He dropped his arms but didn't step back. Even without his touch, the aroma of male sweat and Matt's close-range body heat melted Lisa in places that had so far been able to resist that combination. "I'm not proud of what I do for a living," he said, "but I'm not ashamed of it either."

"So how is it you never happened to mention it?"

A sensuous smile widened slowly into a grin. "Until today, our times together haven't involved much talking." He scraped his knuckles gently across her cheek. "And frankly, you didn't seem interested in learning anything about me."

Lisa didn't deny it. "There didn't seem to be much point for only one night."

He chuckled. "It's been four nights."

"Yes." Four wonderful nights--and maybe more to come--that she would forever cherish in her memory, long after she met and married Mr. Right. But even though Matt was only for the here and now, acting like they were total strangers was kind of silly. She giggled. "I don't even know your last name."

God, he had a beautiful smile. "Matt Owens." He held out his hand.

She shook it. "I'm Lisa Randall."

He kept her hand in his for a long minute, seductively stroking her palm. "Nice to meet you, Lisa."

His touch warmed her. Reeling her in with an invisible string. Her heart warned her. *Don't let him get too close. It will be harder to resume your life when this is all over.*

"No promises, right?" Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand. "We're still doing this one day at a time."

"Absolutely."

She started back down the path, Matt at her heels. Fun and casual. She could do this. She just wouldn't let herself get emotionally involved.

Chapter Nine

“So, how did you get into modeling?” Lisa dipped her warm sliced bread into her olive spread.

Matt breathed in the savory smells of garlic and tomato sauce. He’d managed to snag them an outdoor table in a busy Italian restaurant on the Third Street Promenade at the height of lunch hour. He was always lucky in the small things. “I answered an ad,” he said and then shoved a delectable slice of bread into his mouth.

Lisa stared at him across the table, her face shining like a child’s. The breeze rustled her chestnut brown hair but she didn’t seem to mind. She was so natural. So easy to be with. And to think he’d picked this treasure up in a bar.

“I don’t get it.” The woman who hadn’t even wanted to know his last name was suddenly full of questions. “Why choose a sexy guy to model underwear? It’s not like men are going to be turned on by that ad and run out to buy the product.”

He chuckled, choosing not to respond to the ‘sexy guy’ compliment. “Because it’s not the men who are buying the underwear. It’s their wives or girlfriends who do the shopping.”

“I never bought underwear for the Dirt Devil.” She plucked another bread slice from the basket. “Did your wife buy your underwear?”

“My wife bought me practical underwear.” Stephanie was nothing if not practical. “The kind you buy at Wal-Mart that come six in a package.”

“Not the kind you were wearing in that ad” She licked her upper lip.

He grinned and sipped his water.

Steam enveloped the table as the waitress set down a piping hot bowl of ravioli and an order of spaghetti and meatballs. Lisa took a bite out of her meatball, then dropped her fork, fanned her mouth, and grabbed Matt’s water glass.

“Wow, that was hotter than I expected,” she said after gulping what was left in his glass. She handed the empty glass back to him. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” He stared at the lipstick imprint on the rim of the glass, remembering another place those lips had been. A place he’d like to enjoy them again.

They watched the southern Californians strolling down the sidewalk

beside their table, and made up stories about them while they ate.

“Doesn’t that guy look like Brad Pitt?” Lisa pointed discreetly to a man with long blond hair strolling with his dog.

“No, I’d say he was more of an older Jason Segel type.” Matt swiveled his chair. “But there’s Angelina Jolie, right there.” Of course it wasn’t really Angelina, though the dark-haired woman did have the same kind of pouty-faced bone structure.

“Close,” she said. “But without the lips.” And with the last word, Lisa stuck out her lips in a close imitation of the movie star’s face.

He chuckled. “Do that again.”

“What? This?” She plumped her lips as if she’d just had a collagen injection.

Matt tried to copy her gesture with his own mouth but Lisa laughed heartily at his attempt.

“You look like a fish.” She leaned across the table, mimicking his expression.

He leaned in himself until their lopsided lips met. “Mmm.” “You have nice lips,” he said when she drew back. “Promise me you’ll never get any collagen injections.”

She smiled. “We don’t make promises, remember?”

“Right.” He reached across the table for her hand. “No promises. Live for today.” He winked. “Let’s just have fun and lots of sex. Screw the future.”

“Are you mocking me?”

He shook his head and dug into his ravioli. Lisa twirled a few strands of spaghetti on her fork. “I understand exactly where you’re coming from,” he said when she took a bite. “You just got out of a bad relationship and you’re wary. I totally get it.”

“Do you?”

He nodded, wondering if sharing his history would melt her defenses or just make her more skittish. “I am the King of Jumping into Things Too Soon.”

Her eyes twinkled. “How’s that?”

Matt fork-sliced a ravioli. “I met my wife on a Tuesday, proposed to her on Saturday, and we got married a month later.”

“Wife?” Twinkling eye flashed into angry glare. “You told me you were divorced.”

“I am. It’ll be a year next week.” Damn, had he said ‘wife’ instead of ‘ex-wife?’

“And how long were you married?”

“Nine years.”

Her brows lifted. “How old are you?”

The reminder set his heart ticking faster. “Thirty.”

She studied him as if trying to decide whether to believe him. “I’m twenty-four.”

“I figured as much.”

Her eyes questioned his assumption.

“You’ve been in L.A. two years, you came out here with your girlfriend, I presumed right after college. Doesn’t take a genius to put the numbers together.”

She stabbed a meatball with her fork but didn’t bring it to her lips. “I guess I hadn’t realized how much I’d blabbed to you about my life.”

“I’m an easy guy to talk to.” Or so he’d been told.

Her smile could have melted the snows on Mt. Hood. “Yeah,” she said beguilingly. “You are.”

* * *

After a delicious lunch, they walked to the Santa Monica pier for a ride on the Ferris wheel. Belted into the seat beside Matt, Lisa felt her heart soar along with the ride. “Have you ever wanted to do anything besides modeling?” she asked as they sat suspended above the city.

“Of course.” Sporting that tantalizing grin that could mean almost anything, Matt pulled her closer and draped his arm around her shoulders. “Everyone in southern California is here to do something else.”

“Sooo...an actor?” A lot of acting hopefuls who couldn’t get cast went into modeling.

“Nope. That would be my buddy, Brady. I write screenplays.”

“A writer?” She didn’t know why that was so shocking. “I’m a writer.”

“Yes, I know.” His hand slid down her shoulder and cupped her waist. “A good one too.” He winked. “You do tend to overuse the word ‘tantalize.’”

Lisa’s chin dropped to her chest. “You read my blog.”

“Of course.” He tucked her hair behind her ear and whispered, “You breach my universe, baby.”

She giggled.

“Shane was me, wasn’t he?”

“No, it was a composite of the ten thousand other guys I’ve picked up in bars and slept with.” She smoothed her hair over her cheek. “Of course it was about you. I told you I’d never done a one-night stand before.”

“You still haven’t.” His silky voice hinted at night number five to come.

But probably not this night. She’d led him to believe she’d made other plans, and if she invited him to stay over, he’d know she’d lied. Sort of.

The Ferris wheel jolted, and they started moving again. Gliding down was a bit scarier than going up. It made Lisa feel like a slowly descending meteor about to hit the earth. She grasped Matt’s hand. “What kind of screenplays do you write?”

He squeezed her palm, making her feel safe again. “Action adventure. Wars. Future apocalypse. Guy stuff.”

“I’d like to read it.”

He cocked his head in an odd way. “Why?”

“Because I’d like to get to know you better.” Wow, where had that come from?

He looked as surprised as she.

“I’m new at this one-day-at-a-time thing,” she admitted. “I’m not ready to commit to anything. But...” She took in a big breath, her heart hammering wildly as if questioning her good sense. “I’d like to keep seeing you.” *For a little while longer.*

Matt nodded thoughtfully. “I want that too.” His warm brown eyes softened his grim expression. And made her feel spongy inside.

She let out her breath. “So, can I read your screenplay?”

“Maybe. Sometime.”

Sometime as in soon? Or as in never? Even though this thing with Matt was merely temporary, she was suddenly eager to drink in everything just-for-fun had to offer. Including reading his manuscript. If he ever became famous, she’d have the secret pleasure of having known him when he was just starting out. When he was the ‘transition’ relationship in her romantic life. The just-for-fun liaison that comes after the bad breakup and before the one, true, lasting love that Lisa had no doubt would eventually arrive.

* * *

“Made it. As promised.” At a quarter to six, Matt pulled the truck up in front of Lisa’s apartment. She hadn’t said what time her date was--hell, he wasn’t even sure she really had a date--but whatever her evening plans were, he’d gotten her home in plenty of time.

A Toyota Camry pulled away from the curb fifty feet ahead, and Matt gunned the motor and swung into the parking space. Lucky in the small stuff.

“I had a nice day,” Lisa said beside him in a small voice.

“Me too.” It had been a wonderful day, the first date they’d had together that hadn’t ended in sex. And he hadn’t minded so much. As the King of Jumping into Things Too Soon, he’d had to learn to rein in his natural desire to push forward, to sprint to the goal line without taking in the scenery along the way. It was good to pull back, slow down, get to know each other more intimately in non-physical ways.

Good, that is, if he didn’t think about the guy who was probably on his way over here now to spend an intimately physical evening with Lisa.

He reached across and unlocked her door, but she made no move to get out.

“You’re not mad?” she said, leaning closer to him. “About the blog?”

“Nah.” He turned to face her. “You exaggerated my assets a tad, but what guy’s gonna complain about that?”

She giggled. “Literary license.” Her gaze lowered to his crotch and she smiled. “Actually, I might have understated.”

Damn, he was trying to act like a gentleman, but as usual, his body gave him away. He drew her close for a kiss. She melted into his arms, her teasing tongue exacerbating his condition. Slowly he pulled back, his gaze lingering on hers for a long moment. “Have a nice evening.”

She still didn’t move. He started to get out of the truck, to open her door for her as she apparently expected, but she grabbed his elbow. “That’s it? You’re outta here?”

What was she expecting? A fast fuck under the steering wheel? Not that they hadn’t tried that before. “You said you had plans.”

She bit her lower lip. “I didn’t actually say that. You assumed and I let you think it.”

Lying by omission. His temper flared but then he remembered he’d done the same thing by not telling her about Tyler. And he still had no intention of mentioning his son, not if this was just for fun, with no long-term prospects. The last thing an impressionable child needed was for his dad to bring a woman into his life who wasn’t going to stay.

“Lisa.” He shut his door again and faced her. “We can keep this simple, no expectations, no promises. But let’s not play games. When I want to see you, I’ll call you and take my chances that you’re free. When you want to be with me, you do the same. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” she said, but she didn’t let go of his arm. Instead, she reached her other hand into her purse, brought out her cell phone, and punched in a

number.

Matt's cell phone rang in his pocket. What the hell? He answered the call with a confused "Hello," his eyes on her face.

"Hi Matt, this is Lisa. I don't have any plans for tonight and I'd really like to be with you. Would you please come upstairs with me?"

Every skateboarder, jogger, and dog walker they passed on the way from the truck to her apartment building was probably laughing his ass off at Matt's shit-eating grin.

Chapter Ten

“Got any breakfast food?”

Shielding her eyes from the morning sun, Lisa rolled to her side. Matt stood beside the bed, beautifully naked, the loopy grin he’d sported last night still on his face.

“Good morning to you too.” She stretched, still tingling in the places he’d aroused and satisfied, then pushed off the bed. Unable to resist pressing her body against his, she fitted herself to him, skin touching skin. “Or,” she purred into his ear, “we could just go back to bed.”

He slapped her bottom playfully. “Food first. A man needs sustenance to perform adequately.”

And Matt performed way more than adequately. Reluctantly she pulled away, grabbed a robe, and padded into the kitchen to check the fridge.

She had exactly half a cup of stale cereal, a few eggs, and a carton of soy milk. And a head of kale that she’d purchased intending to start eating healthy salads.

“Kale is like spinach, right?” Now wearing jeans but still barefoot and shirtless, Matt threw a handful of the greens into a skillet, cracked in the eggs, and added a touch of the soy milk. “You’ll have to cut me some slack for the substituted ingredients, but I think I can get an omelet out of this.”

Whatever it was, it tasted better than any concoction Lisa could have come up with on short notice. She rarely cooked, and when she did, it was with a recipe book at her elbow and antacids at the ready.

After breakfast they did go back to bed, where Matt proved the truth of his words. His morning whiskers tickled her neck, the tips of her breasts, and her stomach while his tongue teased, caressed, and yes, *tantalized*.

When Matt put his heart—and his mouth--into something, he gave himself to it fully. Lisa squirmed in delicious agony, panting and moaning. *So close. Just a little more.* She wriggled frantically, thirsting, needing. *Almost there. Almost there.* “Oh!”

She threw her head back on the pillow, eyes shut, lungs pounding with exhaustion. When she opened her eyes, Matt’s head was next to hers, and he was staring at her.

“I missed the spot, didn’t I?”

“Oh, no. You found it. Eventually.” She cringed, wishing her strong suit

was tact instead of honesty. “If I were a teacher, I’d grade that a B plus plus.”

“I was going for an A.” He slipped his fingers into her wetness. “Mind if I try again?”

Her body responded immediately to his touch.

Matt kissed her fingers and then laid her hand across her pleasure mound. “Show me.”

She blushed at the thought of him watching her touch herself, but she showed him.

He pulled her to the foot of the bed until her bottom touched the edge. Kneeling on the floor, he spread her legs apart. When his lips touched her sensitive nub, Lisa squealed.

“Good,” he said. “Talk to me. Tell me where to touch you.”

Lisa had always considered sex to be a mostly silent, physical activity, not a discussion. Embarrassed at first, she guided him to her special place of ecstasy, the crown of her woman’s desire. He was patient. Unwavering. With unflagging stamina. And he brought her to waves of ecstasy never before experienced.

Afterwards, she lay quivering on her pillow, her mouth open, eyes brimming with happy tears.

If this was what a rebound fling was like, she never wanted to go back to solid ground.

* * *

Matt left Sunday night, promising to return after work on Monday. And he did, carrying a plastic bag, presumably a toothbrush and a change of clothes.

“I missed you,” he said, covering her mouth with kisses.

“It’s only been one day,” she answered, trying to act laid-back. “And we spent the whole weekend together.”

“It wasn’t enough.” His hands roamed down her shoulders, waist and hips, to cup her bottom. “Or maybe it was too much.” He licked her ear and the side of her neck. “I think I’m addicted to this mole here.”

Lisa was feeling addicted to his entire body. She grabbed him by the belt loop and tugged him to the bedroom like a caveman bringing home his prey. Clothes hit the floor in waves as they stripped down to their underwear. Lisa did a double take when she saw Matt’s. Instead of his usual black briefs, he wore a strip of translucent material that showed off everything he had.

“Wow.”

“A perk from the underwear company I work for.” He turned around, offering a view of two firm butt cheeks separated only by a narrow thong.

“Double wow.”

He dug through the pile of his discarded clothes and drew, from the pocket of his jeans, an itty bitty teeny weenie black lace thong. “I brought this for you.”

She narrowed her eyes at the scrap of fabric.

A wicked grin lit his face. “It’s edible.”

More seductive words had never been spoken. Directing Matt to turn around, she changed into the little pleasure thong, then wrapped her arms around him, rubbing the lace of her bra against his back. He whirled around and, with barely an effort, tucked his hands under her thighs and lifted her, then lay her spread-eagled on the bed. And took her to paradise.

Nobody had ever fulfilled her needs as well as he did. Eager to reciprocate, Lisa snapped off her bra and tossed it onto the pile of clothes beside the bed. Then slipped her fingers inside the waistband of Matt’s barely-there-wear.

He was still hard.

“Come here,” she ordered.

No argument from Matt. She pushed him onto his back and straddled him, thrilling to his body’s passion. Attuned to his pleasure, she rode him, as eager to satisfy his needs as she’d been her own. Enjoying watching his face as he peaked. Rolling in his arms afterwards, her sighs in rhythm with his groans.

Clinging to his slippery skin, she dozed against his chest. Until her stomach’s rumbling stirred her awake. She glanced at the bedside clock. It was after ten and she’d had no dinner.

“I’m starving,” she announced. “Should we order a pizza?”

Gently he lifted her off him and rubbed his eyes. “No need. I brought a few things.”

The plastic bag he’d brought, now in the refrigerator, contained a slab of raw meat and some fresh vegetables.

Thirty minutes later, they were enjoying a delicious meal of sautéed pork and peppers over jasmine rice. The underwear model/screenwriter/lover extraordinaire was also a fantastic chef.

“Did you cook when you were married?” Lisa asked licking her lips.

“Almost always,” he replied. “My wife worked nine to five so I was the chief cook and bottle washer. You don’t cook?”

“Of course I do,” she said defensively, although she’d fed her last attempt into the kitchen disposal. “But not like this. This is such a treat.”

“Well, we can’t fuck all the time, can we?” He winked.

His smile was so charming, his banter so appealing. *Do not get too*

comfortable with him. Granted, Matt was a terrific guy and he did seem to like her, for now, but this affair was just temporary. In a few months, or a few weeks, this gorgeous man would succumb to the wiles of one of those desperate, enticing women whose eyes had undressed him as he and Lisa strolled down Third Street, and she would be just a blip on his conquest radar.

Meanwhile, she'd enjoy the good times and good sex--make that great sex. Embrace Courtney's go-with-the-flow attitude. Live for the moment.

"So, when can I read your screenplay?" she asked.

He winced. "You were serious about that?"

"Of course."

He sighed. "I'm not sure it's ready yet."

"Have you sent it out to any studios?"

Matt nodded.

"Then it's ready." She grabbed a napkin and a pen. "Here's my email address." She scribbled it onto the napkin and would have shoved it into his shirt pocket, were he wearing a shirt. "Send it to me."

He shrugged. "It's kind of rough. But...sure. Why not?"

Lisa smiled. Despite his reticence, no writer could resist learning what another writer thinks of his work.

He left the next morning before Lisa's alarm rang, kissing her cheek softly. Lisa purred and rolled over, wondering if this satisfied sensation was how married people felt. Quiet affection, reading one another's work, as if they shared a...partnership.

But when she got up to fix her coffee, the scrap of napkin with her email address was still on the kitchen table.

Chapter Eleven

“Your new boyfriend’s a screenwriter?” Jessica looked up from texting on her cell phone and glanced across the restaurant booth. “I thought he was a model.”

“Yeah, so did I.” Lisa plucked a strip of bacon from her BLT sandwich and crunched it into her mouth. “And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“She didn’t even know his last name until a couple of days ago.” Courtney dipped a French fry in ketchup.

“Yeah, what’s up with that?” Tish eyed Lisa suspiciously. “Why is he so mysterious? What’s he got to hide?” Tish might be every man’s dream girl, but by her own admission, she’d never found a man she could trust.

“It’s not him,” Lisa replied. “It’s me. I’m the one who wanted to keep this...this *thing* at arm’s length.” She refused to use the word *relationship*. That would imply something she didn’t yet want implied.

“Like a business transaction?” Jessica had gone back to checking her emails but now looked up again. “Tit for tat? Sex for...?”

“Sex,” Lisa supplied quickly. “It’s a mutual agreement.” God knows she enjoyed their couplings as much as Matt apparently did. He’d woken her early this morning with a kiss and a hard-on. A great way to start the day.

“So it’s worth it to put up with a guy who disappears for a week with no explanation,” Tish asked, “just to get your itch scratched?”

“It’s more than that,” Lisa said defensively. “I enjoy his company.” God, that sounded lame.

“So you’re willing to be available any time he calls or shows up without invitation?” Despite having a high school education and a low powered career, Tish was nevertheless a committed feminist.

“Not any time. We agreed to call first.”

“So when are you going to see him again?” Tish persisted.

“Tomorrow night. He texted a little while ago and asked if he could see me then.” Her cheeks burned at the memory of yesterday and in anticipation of tomorrow.

“You’ve been seeing a lot of this guy,” Courtney commented. “All weekend and two nights—so far--during the week.”

“Yeah. So?” It was amazing how quickly and easily Matt had become part of her life. His presence was a calm reassurance, not the jarring annoyance the

Dirt Devil's had been when he lived with her. Matt was easy, unobtrusive. And then there was that amazing bedroom thing.

"Sounds like a relationship to me," Jessica said drily. "Why are you fighting that notion?"

"I just want to keep things...magical. At least for a while. The less I know about his quirks and flaws, the longer I can enjoy the mindless sex." She faced her challenger. "You and Josh have been together twelve years and you probably shared all your secrets ages ago. Don't you ever wish that you knew less about him? That there was still some mystery you could unwrap like a Christmas present?"

"No." Jessica stiffened. "Josh and I share everything. That's what committed couples do."

Great, now she'd offended her friend. "Well, Matt and I are not a committed couple. We're just in it for the fun." She met Jessica's eyes. "You said it yourself, rebound guys never work out."

"Sure, you live in your dream world, Girlfriend." Courtney patted her shoulder. "Although I wouldn't mind sharing my dreams with that hunk."

Tish rolled her tongue seductively across her upper lip. "Did you ever find out where he was for a week?"

"I didn't ask. Not my business."

"You're not curious about what he does when he's not with you?"

After her bold, ignorance-is-bliss statement, Lisa didn't want to admit that she was. Matt was so in-the-moment, so I-wouldn't-want-to-be-anywhere-else when he was with her, but when they were apart she seemed to fall completely off his radar.

"I still think he's married," Jess said.

"He's not married." Lisa shoved the crusts of her sandwich aside. But..."

"But what?" Tish smoothed a blond curl behind her ear. "Spill, Girlfriend."

"Sometimes I feel like I know too much about him already. Finding out he models underwear was...disconcerting. But still kind of exotic. But now that I know he wants to be a writer--is a writer, I can sort of put myself in his place. Understand his dreams and his worries."

"And that's a bad thing?" Jessica raised a brow.

Lisa glanced at Courtney for help. Her BFF was the only one of the group who might get what she was trying to say.

Thankfully, she jumped in. "She's not ready for him to be a real person," Court said. "She never lived with anyone before Darryl, and he was too much

reality for her. Lisa wants to keep Matt as a fantasy, an anonymous man who swoops into her bedroom at night and fulfills her dreams.” She glanced at Lisa. “That about get it?”

Probably more accurately than Lisa had admitted to herself. But the more time she spent with Matt, the harder it was to cling to the fantasy. And the easier to lose her grip on non-reality and slide down the slippery slope of falling in love with him.

* * *

Although she left work a little early the next evening, Matt was already waiting on the steps outside her apartment.

“Are you ready to go?” He stood and took her arm. “I don’t want to miss the sunset.”

The sunset? It happened every night. Over the ocean. “Go where?”

“I thought we’d have dinner up the coast. There’s a nice place right on the beach with a great view.” He grinned. “And afterward, we can wiggle our toes in the sand.”

The man was an actual romantic. Which was exactly what she'd expect from an after break up affair. Wonderful while it lasted. But Matt’s live-for-the-moment attitude would never endure for a lifetime. Probably another reason rebound relationships always crash and burn.

The drive to Pacific Palisades was nice, the food delicious, and the view of the sunset as magnificent as he’d promised. “How’s your e-magazine doing?” he asked, after the horizon swallowed up the sun.

“Great! Subscriptions are way up beyond what was expected after only four weeks. Mr. Arnold thinks it’s because of the One Night with a Stranger blog.”

“Way to go!” He held up his hand for a high five. “It’s all because of you, Lisa.”

“Actually, it’s because of *you*.” She leaned across the table and poked her finger at his chest. “I’ve had hundreds of readers write in and ask about ‘Shane.’ They all want to know who he is. And a dozen people have sent in their own blogs about their experiences.”

“Maybe I should send one in.”

She glared at him. “You claimed you didn’t do one night stands.”

“I did one. Until it turned into a seven night stand.” He grinned. “Maybe eight if I get lucky tonight.”

Oh, you will definitely get lucky tonight.

When they par back at her place, Matt reached behind him and pulled a small black bag from the floor of the truck. "I brought something for you." He hefted it to the front seat.

It seemed too heavy to contain jewelry. "More sexy underwear?" she guessed. "Your dirty laundry?" The latter was the kind of present Darryl had been fond of bestowing on her.

"My laptop," he said.

"Your screenplay?" When he nodded, she added eagerly, "I can't wait to read it."

"Really? Right now?" He took her in his arms and planted a soft kiss on her cheek, then targeted her lips, his tongue leaving a trail of wetness on her face. "I thought we might engage in a more physical...activity first." He kissed that sensitive spot on her neck, sending delicious tremors through her body. "That is, if you'd like me to come upstairs."

She definitely did. With the scent of the sea still in her nostrils, her windblown hair caressing her face, Lisa was hungry for Matt's up-close-and-personal touch. As soon as she unlocked the door to her apartment, she tugged him inside, and they stumbled together to the bedroom.

Making love with Matt was like rafting down the rapids. Dangerous. Thrilling. A celebration of life. So what if this wild ride couldn't last? Some people could live their whole lives without knowing such excitement. Lisa intended to treasure every mind-blowing moment.

"How come we're always at my place?" she asked after they'd watched TV and sipped wine entwined on the sofa, brushed their teeth side by side in her small bathroom, and snuggled back under the sheets. She rubbed the sole of her bare foot along his calf. "Why don't we go to yours next time?"

His leg muscles tightened. "My place is too messy for company."

She let it go, but tiny doubts played with her mind. Could Jess be right? Was he still married? Did he and his wife have some sort of 'open marriage' arrangement? Or might he have another woman in his life, one whose scent and underwear lingered in his bedroom? Maybe a flight attendant who was home one week and gone the next.

She'd never heard him murmur another woman's name. But Matt was scrupulous about focusing his whole attention on Lisa whenever they were together, in bed, or anywhere. He might be just as attentive to whatever other woman he might be involved with.

You're being silly. Over-analytical. Paranoid. Probably it was just as he'd

said, that his place was really too messy for company.

She glanced at Matt's face, already relaxed in slumber. If he harbored any guilt, it certainly didn't disturb his sleep.

But Lisa tossed and turned, unable to relax her mind. Maybe she should try reading something.

Matt's screenplay!

Naked, she slipped out of the covers and tiptoed to the living room, where Matt's black bag still sat next to the sofa. She took out the laptop and plugged it in. Making herself comfortable, she propped a cushion behind her back and one under the computer, then clicked through several branches of folders and files until she found a word document labeled *No Mountain Too High*.

The story was as she'd expected, a good guys versus bad guys film with action sequence after action sequence. But the dialogue was intriguing. Solely through their speech, Matt had developed strong, and for the most part likeable, characters. The main character came across at times as a colossal jerk, but even he had his moments. Terrific lines. Philosophical, inspirational even, without being preachy.

You can't think about the fucking mountain, you just gotta focus on climbing and eventually you'll get to the top.

When she read those lines, uttered by the hero, John Callahan, her breath caught. She felt as if she'd been granted a peek at Matt's inner life. He was determined to succeed in his chosen craft, a cause he'd probably been pursuing for most of the last decade. But he wasn't the flaky dreamer Lisa had once presumed him to be. His willingness to take any job, including underwear model, demonstrated that he had a plan.

Or she could just be reading too much into the lines.

Still she couldn't stop reading, hastily turning page after page, hooked on the character's moral dilemma. The writing was riveting. And emotionally draining. One moment Matt had her laughing out loud, and the next, almost in tears.

She really should stop, put down the laptop and go to bed. Lisa had an early meeting in the morning and if she showed up bleary-eyed, her colleagues would assume she'd been cavorting with 'Shane' all night.

Whereas the cavorting had only been part of the night.

It was dawn before she finally reached the last of the hundred and twenty pages and wiped a satisfied tear from her eye. He was good. Damned good. In fact, she was kind of in awe of Matt's talents.

Yawning in satisfaction, she crawled into bed. Matt was snoring lightly, but as if he sensed her presence, he rolled over and threw his arm across her breasts, like a flower turning toward the sun.

Lisa snuggled into his embrace. How many more things about this man had she underestimated?

* * *

“What time do you have to be at work? Shouldn’t you be up by now?”

Lisa opened one eye to see Matt standing beside the bed, fully dressed.

She glanced at the clock on her cell phone. And kicked her way out of the bedcovers. “Oh my god, I missed my meeting!” Mr. Arnold always started his weekly meetings promptly at nine, which was fifteen minutes ago. Even without a shower, by the time she dressed and drove to the office...

“Was it important?” Matt leaned against the bedroom wall.

“Not really. Just my OCD boss summarizing this week and planning the next. I can get the gist from his email report.” She searched frantically for her underwear.

“Busy rest of the day?”

She paused in her search. Tomorrow’s blog had already been formatted, as had the rest of the magazine. The only thing left to do was push the button to send it over the Internet. And she’d trained two other people to do that. “Not really,” she admitted.

“Then call in sick,” Matt suggested, that sexy gleam in his eye. “We can spend the day together.”

It was so tempting. But Lisa had never played hooky from school or a job in her life. *You’d never slept with a stranger before either. And look where that’s led you.*

Right into trouble. Delicious, hit-me-again trouble.

Before she lost her nerve, she reached again for her phone and called Mr. Arnold, feigning a cough. At least this would give her an excuse for missing the meeting.

“He bought it,” she whispered to Matt after clicking off the phone. She pulled him into the bed and climbed on top of him, imprisoning his chest with her breasts. “You’re a bad influence.”

Grinning, he raked his fingers through her hair and kissed her, then rolled her to her back and shrugged out of his clothes. “I try.”

Chapter Twelve

Matt cleared away the breakfast dishes--or more correctly, brunch dishes, since they hadn't eaten until noon--and scraped slivers of pancake batter out of the skillet while Lisa loaded the dishwasher. He should probably feel guilty for making her miss her meeting, but he didn't. He was enjoying this day way too much. "What time did you come back to bed?"

"Five-thirty." Her cheeks flushed a rosy shade of pink. "I didn't realize you'd noticed me get up."

How could he not notice the warmth disappear from the bed beside him? "What were you doing up that late?"

Her pink cheeks turned bright red. "Reading your screenplay."

His stomach muscles tightened. If she'd liked it, she would have already mentioned it. He joined her at the small kitchen table and drew in a deep breath. "So, what did you think?"

She hesitated.

"Please. Be honest."

Smiling, she leaned over and touched his arm. "It was wonderful. You're an amazing writer."

He sighed. "I asked for an honest critique, one writer to another. Not a boyfriend to girlfriend snow job."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Sorry. That just slipped out." He gestured as if to take his words back. "Seriously, what did you think?"

"I told you," she protested. "Why do you think I stayed up all night reading it? It was riveting."

"You're the first one to think so." He strode to the living room, scooped his latest rejection letter out of a folder in his black bag, and waved it at her.

"So what?" she said when she'd glanced at it. "There are other movie studios."

"This is rejection number nineteen," he admitted. "I'm about out of options. Either I make this movie on my own or..." He took a deep breath. "Admit it's time to give up on writing and take this nine to five job my friend keeps pushing on me, covering someone else's copyedits."

"You're thinking of quitting?"

He sighed. "What choice do I have? This body can't model forever." He

tried to sound flippant but his hopelessness pervaded his words.

She studied his face. "Can I see the letter again?"

He handed it to her.

"*Stilted.*" she read, and her eyes flashed. "Not true. You had me completely engaged and the characters seemed real to me."

He nodded, hoping she wasn't just stroking his ego.

"*Slow-moving,*" she continued. She looked up at him. "Definitely not true. There's so much action in this I could barely catch my breath."

His opinion exactly. "Keep going."

"*The main character is tough and heroic, but his lack of emotion doesn't make us want to root for him, and he doesn't grow throughout the course of the script.*" She set the letter down on the kitchen table. "Well, now there you might have me, Matt. Your hero is a selfish jerk."

"Really?" He'd written the character of Callahan for Brady, who he'd pegged to play the lead. "I modeled him after a friend of mine."

"Is your friend a jerk?"

He grinned. "Kind of." But he'd figured that Brady's don't-give-a-shit attitude would strike a chord with moviegoers who wanted to be just like him.

Lisa gazed at him thoughtfully. "Who's your target audience?"

That he knew for sure. "Males between the ages of fifteen and forty-five."

"What about their girlfriends?"

He raised a quizzical brow.

"Do these guys in your target audience go to movie theaters solo, or in packs, or do they go out with their wives or girlfriends?"

He hadn't thought about that. "All of the above, I suppose."

"Well, men are easily satisfied with shoot-em-ups and special effects, but women want more of a story."

He gritted his teeth, but he *had* asked for her opinion. "What do you suggest?"

She hesitated. "Can I be blunt?"

"Please."

"A love story."

"A romance?" He affected a gagging noise. "Jeez, Lisa this is a war pic. And I do have that really hot scene when Callahan leaves the bar with that hooker..."

"I'm talking love, not sex. Put in a love story and it will appeal to women dragged in by their significant male others, and I guarantee you it will make your

Callahan character more likeable.”

“There’s no place to fit in a romance.”

“There is. What if she’s a nurse who heals Callahan after his initial injury, and he goes off to the war zone not realizing that she’s being sent out to a M.A.S.H. unit, and what if she’s in danger, and he has to save her or...hmmm.” She smiled. “What if *she* rescues *him*?”

She was really getting into this. And he hated to admit it, but she did have a point. He took a breath. “Want to give it a go?”

Lisa blinked. “What? You want me to write the love story?”

“Why not? You’ve already started working on it.”

She smiled coyly. “If I do, and you do make this movie, will I get credit as a co-writer?”

“You betcha.” Matt had always been a loner when it came to his writing, barricading himself in his work area, totally focused with no outside distractions. But the thought of collaborating with Lisa was somehow...appealing.

He looked over his laptop, trying to imagine the insertion of a new plot line. What if Lisa totally messed it up? Then he’d have to hurt her feelings when he told her it stunk.

But somehow, he didn’t think her efforts would stink. He thought it might make the screenplay better, for all the reasons she’d mentioned. It was worth a shot. Ten years of failure had brought him to the point of desperation.

For the rest of the afternoon, Lisa wrote and Matt paced. Would she get that little nuance between Callahan and his best friend? Would a mushy love story weaken the hero’s resolve, turn him into a lovesick puppy?

“Quit breathing down my neck,” she said as he hovered helplessly, unable to sit. “I’ve saved this as a new file, so if you don’t like it, you can go back to your original and forget I ever touched it.”

This was more suspenseful than a first date, wining and dining and wondering if you were going to get lucky. Patience had never been Matt’s strong suit.

At last she stopped typing, shook out her cramped fingers, and faced him. “This is just bare bones,” she said. “It needs a lot of tweaking, adapting so it matches your voice. But a writer with your talent shouldn’t have any problem with that.”

He was so antsy about reading the revision that he almost missed the compliment.

“Please,” she said, as she got out of the chair to allow him to slide in,

“Promise me one thing.”

Involuntarily, his muscles tightened. “What’s that?”

She scoured him with grim brown eyes. “This is your dream, and I don’t want to see you give up on it. “Promise me you won’t take that day job until you’ve at least given this one more shot.”

Matt wrapped his arms across his middle to keep his emotions from spilling out of his chest. *I think I could love this woman.*

* * *

The next morning, Matt packed up his laptop and dirty clothes in his black bag, but left his green toothbrush in Lisa’s bathroom. Across the sink from her purple one and looking very much like it belonged there.

As he stood at the front door, hand on doorknob, she moved in for a kiss. Matt took her in his arms and gave her one for the ages, his tongue so far down her mouth she felt she could swallow him whole, his arms so tight around her she thought she would never breathe again. And, just for a moment, she let herself wonder what it would be like to kiss him every morning for the rest of her life.

“See you tonight,” she murmured.

Slowly Matt extricated himself from her arms. “Um...about that...” He backed against the door. “I can’t make it tonight.”

“No problem.” Lisa could have kicked herself for assuming. *No commitments, no promises.* Fun and casual. She took a step back. “I’ll see you...whenever.”

“Whenever,” he repeated, staring down at his shoes. When he lifted his head, his eyes looked miserable. “Lisa.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “There’s something I need to tell you about me.”

No! He really was married. Or involved with someone else. Or--“Not necessary.” The words leaped out of a dry throat. “You don’t owe me any explanations. This isn’t a heavy relationship, this is one day at a time.” She forced a cheery smile. “If we’re free and want to see each other, we’ll call. Remember?”

“Yeah. I remember.” He looked as uncomfortable as if bugs were crawling in his jeans. “I hadn’t wanted to mention this when we were just about the sex. But the way things have been going--”

“Stop.” She held up her hand. “Whatever it is, I don’t want to know.”

He lifted a quizzical brow.

“I already know more about you than I wanted to.” She couldn’t allow

herself to be dragged more emotionally into this interim relationship. "This isn't supposed to be serious."

"I see. Still just sex," he said dryly.

"No!" *No?* "It's more than that. But..." Words clogged in her chest and her breathing stalled.

"But what?" He folded his arms across his chest.

I like you a lot. More than I expected to. But I can't let myself feel what I'm starting to feel...

"Lisa?" His gaze locked on hers. "What are you afraid of?"

Falling in love with you. Matt was her Mr. In Between, the guy who soothed her heartache after her Bad Break Up and made her feel desirable again. So she could move on with her life. With her heart intact.

"We've talked about this." She tried to ignore her heart's rampant pounding. "No emotional strings. We're both recovering from bad relationships and you admitted you jump into things too fast."

"I've been divorced almost a year."

She stared him down. "You're telling me you're looking to get married again?"

"No." His eyes met her gaze. "But I'm ready to explore the possibilities. See where this might go."

"It's not going anywhere." Her stomach roiled. Matt was the nicest man she'd met in a long time, and the last thing she wanted was to hurt him. But she had to protect her own heart. Because if she let down her guard, he could so easily sweep her away into a glorious dream. And when inevitable reality came crashing down and shattered it, her heart would break into a million pieces as well. Lisa swallowed the lump in her throat. "We agreed to keep this casual."

She reached out to touch his cheek, but he brushed her hand aside. And stared at her, unblinking. "Well, I'm glad you cleared that up." He studied her face with a cold disdain that hurt worse than an angry outburst, then grabbed his bag from the floor. "I'll see you... whenever."

Before Lisa could process what she'd done, he was out the door.

Chapter Thirteen

The woman was driving him bat-shit crazy. *Keep it casual but sleep with me every night.* Did she even know what she wanted? Maybe she did but it just wasn't him.

Matt walked up the bleachers of the Little League stadium, hand on forehead to shield his eyes from the sun. He couldn't spot Stephanie anywhere.

The thought of his ex-wife made him feel even more despondent. Why *would* Lisa want to take a chance on a guy who was still struggling at thirty, hoping everyday would bring his big break? Stephanie had grown tired of waiting. And despite her initial encouragement, Lisa eventually would, too.

Maybe it would have been better to play it her way, to not have shared anything at all with each other. *Shit.* It was a good thing Lisa hadn't given him the chance this morning to tell her about Tyler. If she couldn't handle a relationship, no way she could have made room in her life for someone else's nine year old son. *Whew.* Bullet dodged.

He settled near the top of the bleachers. He still didn't see Stephanie anywhere.

Tyler came off the bench, faced the stands, and spotted Matt immediately. His son waved and a big grin came over his face. "Dad! Hey dad!"

Matt waved back. *Missed you buddy,* he mouthed, though he knew his son couldn't read his lips. Seeing his boy happy was the best feeling in the world. It was difficult enough enjoying that only every other week. He didn't know how those fathers who only saw their children during the summers and on school holidays got through it.

"Hey, Owens."

Matt turned to acknowledge the tall, lanky man's presence. He'd always thought Stephanie's new husband looked like Ichabod Crane. He reached out for the school backpack Seth Larson held out to him. "Where's Steph?"

"At the school talking to Tyler's teacher."

"Why? What's happened?"

"Nothing serious." Seth took a seat beside him, his long legs sliding into the bleacher row below. "He's just been acting out a bit."

"What kind of acting out?"

Seth shrugged. "The teacher thinks he's still adjusting to the divorce."

And the remarriage? Stephanie had barely waited until the ink on the

divorce papers was dry. Small wonder Tyler was confused. In the blink of an eye his daddy had moved out of his house, and in the blink of another, he'd found himself uprooted and sharing his mom's attentions with a strange man. And if adapting to that wasn't difficult enough, he was shuttled back and forth every week to a different parent's home, like a damned boomerang. Of course he was still adjusting.

Anxiety skyrocketed to anger. "Why wasn't I informed of this meeting?"

"Umm...Stephanie wanted to talk to the teacher alone first."

"The agreement states that both parents be included in meetings, calls, and emails from Tyler's school." A bad feeling settled in Matt's stomach. "Does Tyler know he's being discussed?"

"Of course not. We don't want him to feel like he's done anything wrong. We just want him to be comfortable, feel he can talk to us about anything."

The 'us' grated on Matt's nerves. Seth Larson might be experienced at teaching elementary-age kids, but he had no clue what raising a child from birth was like. The sleepless nights. The worry over every little cough. Dealing with temper tantrums in the middle of the grocery store. Seth thought he could just waltz into Tyler's life and become Instant Daddy.

Never gonna happen. Matt turned his gaze to his son, just taking his stance in the batter's box. "Go get 'em, Tiger!"

He could feel rather than see Seth's disapproval of his rowdy cheer, but Tyler looked up and grinned. Matt winked at his son, noting with smug satisfaction that Tyler's focus was on him, not sober Seth.

"I've got this," he said to the interloper. "You can go."

"I just want to see if he gets a hit."

Of course, Tyler didn't.

Seth stood and stretched his long legs, but he didn't leave. Instead, he sat back down, looking at the baseball diamond instead of at Matt. "Stephanie says you've been having a hard time finding steady work."

Geez, was he going to bring up the substitute teacher job? "Thanks, Seth, but I've got things covered."

"Still, Stephanie is concerned."

Concerned? The uneasy feeling in Matt's stomach escalated to a sour stench. "Steph has no need to worry about my life and/or finances."

Seth cleared his throat, drumming his fingers on his knees. "She thinks Tyler would have a more stable home life if he lived full time with us."

Matt's stomach muscles clenched and bile rose to his throat. His eyes

drilled on his ex's husband but he kept his voice calm. "She does, does she? Is she planning to file for sole custody? And sending you to do her dirty work?"

"Now, we haven't talked to a lawyer yet." That we chafed deeper on Matt's already frayed nerves. "But you have to admit, as a single guy without a steady job, your life is more...erratic."

Erratic? Matt consulted his mental thesaurus. *Unreliable. Inconsistent. Unpredictable.* But he forced Steph's errand boy to say it. "In what way?"

Seth actually squirmed on the bench. Not a pretty sight on a man six foot four weighing a hundred and thirty pounds. "You remember our neighbors, Jack and Glenda Holmes?"

He did. They'd lived in the same apartment building as Matt and Stephanie for most of their married life.

"Glenda mentioned to Stephanie that Jack heard you were seeing someone."

And that was a crime? "Where did Jack Holmes hear that?"

Seth blinked. Twice. The man looked like he was in over his head and wished he were anywhere but here. "Your friend Brady. He mentioned some woman you picked up in a bar?"

Brady? The man was as tight-lipped as they come. But of all things to get chatty about, he'd chosen Matt's love life as conversational fodder? With someone Matt and Brady used to play poker with and was a sure bet to run home and tattle to his wife? Jack Holmes was a pussy whipped husband who enjoyed living vicariously through Brady's stories of his sexual exploits.

Matt groaned. Bragging Brady had probably told Jack about the one-night stand bet, mocking Matt for being too nice-guy to fuck and run, continuing to date a woman who...well, it was obvious what kind of woman Jack, and Glenda, and now Stephanie, thought Lisa was.

"I'm not seeing her anymore," he hissed through tight lips. At least that's what he decided on his way to the curb this morning. He might jump into things too soon, but he was damned if he'd be relegated to 'whenever.' "Not that it's any of your business, or Stephanie's, or Jack and Glenda's. As you pointed out like it's an epithet, I'm a single guy. I'm entitled to go out with women. But I don't bring them home to meet Tyler." He practically spat out the last sentence.

Seth shrugged. "Just saying."

Matt was so hot under his collar he could feel a rash burn down his back. "You tell your wife to back off. I'm not giving up my son. I'm a good father, Tyler is well provided for, and anything else she's 'concerned' about is bullshit."

He grabbed Tyler's stuff and moved down several rows and to the other side of the bleachers. Seth didn't follow him. Matt waited until Ichabod Crane loped down the stairs and disappeared behind the stands. Then he leaned over his knees and grasped his thighs so hard his muscles spasmed.

When he could breathe normally, he looked down at the field. Tyler was up, feet spread, bat poised, and looking determined. His son might be the worst slugger in the history of Little League, but he loved the game. Of course, that was Matt's fault for sharing his enthusiasm, right? Better he should encourage the boy to restrict his activities to only those he was good at and guaranteed success in. At least according to Stephanie and the spineless lump she'd married.

It wasn't trendy to be an optimist these days, but Matt couldn't help thinking this morning's confrontation with Lisa was for the best. He didn't need a woman in his life right now, demanding his time and messing with his head. He needed to invest his total emotional commitment in his son.

Even if Lisa liked kids--which he had no idea if she did--he couldn't have let her meet Tyler. He couldn't introduce a strange woman into the bond he and his son shared. Certainly not one who'd jumped into his life so hastily, and had just as carelessly vaulted out of it. Kids needed security, certainty. And even if those elements were in short supply in Matt's own unsettled life, he was determined, with his last breath, to provide that for his son.

Especially with Stephanie scrutinizing his every move, searching for any reason to label him an unfit father.

* * *

"Quit moping." Courtney elbowed Lisa in the ribs and shoved her uneaten BLT toward her.

"I'm not moping." She picked up half the sandwich, studied it, and set it down again. "I'm just facing reality."

"Welcome back to earth, friend." Tish grinned. "Men suck, don't they?"

That hadn't been exactly what Lisa meant. If anyone sucked, it was her. "God, my track record is in a downward spiral. High school boyfriend for four years, college beau for three. The Dirt Devil for only six months. And now, Matt, for less than three weeks."

"Well, you don't technically have to count this as a breakup." Jessica's eyes twinkled with an annoying smugness. "Since this wasn't really a relationship."

Courtney rolled her eyes. Bless her heart, Court had patiently listened to Lisa vent for hours Friday night. She'd shed less tears over Darryl, Brice and

Sam put together.

Rebound fling, she reminded herself. *They're not supposed to last*. But just because she'd told herself that didn't mean her heart agreed. A small part of her had thought, maybe even hoped...

Stop it. It was over. She knew from the look on Matt's face he wasn't going to call again. Whenever was just another word for never. Time to move on. She wiped away a tear that hadn't gotten with the program.

Tish reached across the table and patted her arm. "He's not worth crying over, Girlfriend. The guy was a dick."

Lisa stared at her friend and wondered, for the first time, what it was like to live inside Tish Varner's body. How would it feel to be so attractive that guys fell over themselves for the chance to get inside your pants? No wonder she was wary of trusting men. "Matt's not a dick," she said quietly.

Tish lifted a brow, opened her mouth, and then shut it again.

"He's not a dick," Lisa repeated, warming to the realization. "Technically, he's the one who bailed, but I drove him to it." She covered her face with her hands. "Why did I do that?"

Silence. She looked up. Courtney and Jessica were exchanging shrugs. Tish bit her lip thoughtfully, then said, "Self preservation. You wanted to ditch him before he dumped you."

Lisa blinked. She'd had the same thought, but she hadn't expected such an astute observation from Tish. Their blond beautiful friend always seemed so self-assured. Lisa had always assumed her friend gave the time of day to so few men because she was picky. But maybe she'd been burned. Maybe, like Lisa, Tish was protecting herself from falling too hard for the wrong guy.

"Maybe it's not too late," Jessica, always the practical one, said.

"The phone rings both ways," Courtney added.

The wrong guy, her mind repeated. *Interim. Transitional. Not the permanent one*. And yet she did want to call him, see him again. There was something so appealing about a man who hadn't given up on his passion. Who grabbed onto life like the tail of a tiger and wouldn't let go until it surrendered to his will. She sighed, remembering those moments when she'd been the romantic recipient of all that passion.

Cassie arrived to cart away their plates. Lisa placed hers, with most of her sandwich uneaten, on the top of the stack. "A good man is hard to find, Sugar," the waitress said. "I wouldn't give up on yours until you have absolute proof that he's an a-hole."

Lisa didn't want absolute proof. She'd wanted to continue in blissful ignorance, and when Matt turned all serious the other morning, she'd panicked.

There's something I need to tell you about me.

It could have been anything. That he was a spy for the CIA. That he was an illegal alien in need of a green card. That he was dying of Stage four cancer. But she'd immediately fallen back to her suspicions that he was seeing someone else. Why?

Because she'd met him in a bar. And slept with him the first night. And it stood to reason that she wasn't the first woman who'd found paradise in the cab of his pickup truck.

Rebound fling. It had been fun while it lasted. *Move on.*

Easier said than done.

Chapter Fourteen

Lisa could barely concentrate at work that afternoon, wondering how she could have handled things better. Should she call Matt? Apologize?

No. As much as she'd missed him these last four days, she wasn't any more ready to risk a relationship with him than she had been Friday morning. She shouldn't have let herself get emotionally attached. Her bad. She'd let him too deep into her life and now she was paying for it, like withdrawal from a narcotic drug.

"Lisa." Mr. Arnold stood at the entry to her cube. "Could I see you in my office, please?"

Great. Now this affair was interfering with her work. Had her boss guessed she wasn't really sick last Thursday? Or just noticed that she had accomplished exactly squat all day?

"Sit down," he said, after he'd closed his office door behind her.

Oh this was going to be bad.

"I've been giving some thought to the circulation of the magazine," her boss said, rifling through papers on his desk as if to avoid looking at her.

Lisa swallowed. "The blog is still doing well sir," she squeaked.

"I'm well aware of that. And I appreciate your efforts. That's why I've selected you to conduct the first interview."

"Interview?"

"We're a social magazine with a pulse on the heartbeat of southern California. What's more So-Cal than Hollywood?" He met her eyes for the first time. "I think we should post interviews with high profile Hollywood celebrities."

She wasn't sure how to respond. Was he expecting her to go out and find a celebrity, grab his or her arm, and convince the icon with just her bold charm to give an interview to a small new e-magazine? "Good idea sir," she said tentatively. "But I don't know any--"

"I do." Mr. Arnold offered one of his rare smiles. "I play golf with Royce Buchanan and he's volunteered to be our first interviewee."

"The director?" Lisa's eyes widened. Buchanan was hardly as famous as Spielberg or Scorsese but he'd made a lot of action and special effects movies, and if even *she'd* heard of him, he had to be pretty well-known.

"Yes. He's coming into the office tomorrow afternoon. Can you free up

some time to meet with him?”

Could she free up some time? That was like asking if she was too busy to go on an all expense paid cruise. “Of course.”

“Use my office.”

* * *

Royce Buchanan was friendlier and much more down to earth than Lisa could have imagined. His silver gray hair lent an air of wisdom to his remarks, but his twinkling blue eyes hinted that he didn’t take himself too seriously.

Though the interview started out patchy, with Lisa constantly clearing her throat and looking down at her prepared questions, he soon eased her anxiety, and she began to talk to him just like a real person. Despite the irregular stream of curious employees filing past the slightly ajar door of her boss’s office every few minutes.

“So where do you hail from, young lady?” Mr. Buchanan asked after he’d given her more than enough material for her piece and she’d run out of impromptu questions. “And how long have you been in southern California?”

She attempted a demure smile. “What makes you certain I’m *not* from here?”

He chuckled. “Because everyone out here is from somewhere else.” He took off his glasses and laid them on Mr. Arnold’s desk. “Or am I speaking with the rare exception?”

“No.” She stifled a giggle. “My best friend and I moved here two years ago from Texas. She wants to be a video editor.”

Buchanan raised a brow. “Not an actress?”

“No.” That would be her friend Tish.

“And you?” He peered at her across the desk. “What are your Tinseltown dreams?”

“I don’t have any.” God, that sounded unmotivated. “I mean, I’m happy with what I’m doing now. I was a journalism major, so getting to interview a famous director is pretty cool stuff to me.”

Pretty cool stuff? Seriously? The man must think her aspirations were to be a Valley girl clone.

“You flatter my ego, and of course, we famous directors can never get enough of that.” He chuckled. “It is refreshing, though, to meet a young person who isn’t ruthlessly trying to push and shove her way to the top.”

Lisa shrugged. ““You can’t think about the mountain, you’ve just got to focus on climbing and eventually you’ll get there,”” she said.

“Very philosophical.” Buchanan twitched his silver brows. “And quite mature from one so young. But then, you’re a writer. Did that just come to you right in this moment?”

She blushed. “Actually,” she admitted, “I was quoting a line from my friend’s screenplay.” Lisa lowered her head to her hands, unable to meet Buchanan’s eyes. Her heart beat faster. What if...?

“Interesting.” He didn’t say anything else for a moment, the only sound in the room Royce Buchanan’s breath. Because Lisa was holding hers. “What studio is producing that movie?”

Hearing Matt’s screenplay described as a movie made Lisa want to squeal. “It’s not under contract. Yet.” Her head said keep silent, act professional, not like those pushy, shoving young people he’d described, but she couldn’t help charging forward, synopsisizing Matt’s war story in a sixty second pitch.

There was another long silence. At least it seemed like five minutes, but it was probably only a few seconds. “Interesting,” Royce Buchanan said again. “I’ve recently been going over some options for my next project. I’d like to read that screenplay. Do you think your friend would mind?”

Mind? The chambers of Lisa’s heart starting beating wildly against each other like clapping hands. She envisioned Matt doing handstands at the news, but with the greatest of difficulty, she retained her composure. “I’ll try to convince him, sir.”

* * *

Lisa sat at her kitchen table, cell phone at her elbow, staring at Royce Buchanan’s business card. Not that she hadn’t already memorized every word and digit the first ten times she’d read it. Five hours after the interview, her heart was still thumping. This could be Matt’s big break.

Or his biggest disappointment. If Buchanan didn’t like the script...

Well, then Matt was no worse off than when he started, was he?

She punched in his number, almost as nervous as she had been earlier, talking to the director. The phone rang three times, and she was mentally composing a voice mail message when he picked up.

“I’m kind of busy now, Lisa.” A voice hummed in the background, barely audible. She tried not to think of what--or whom--he might be busy with.

“This will only take minute.” Lisa tried to keep her tone mellow but she couldn’t contain her excitement. “Guess who I met today--Royce Buchanan!”

There was silence at the other end of the line.

“You know, Royce Buchanan the director?”

“I know who Buchanan is.” Terse, clipped, succinct. “How did you meet him?”

She told him about the afternoon’s interview, the words rushing out double time, until Lisa found herself gasping for breath. “And he wants to read your screenplay. Isn’t that amazing?” The silence from the other end was so long she thought they might have been disconnected. “Matt?”

His voice was low and shaky. “You’re not messing with me, are you?”

Oh God, did he really think she could be that cruel? “Here’s his email address.” She read it off the card, slowly and distinctly. “How soon do you think you can send him the script?”

He uttered a guttural sound which could have been a laugh or a sob. “How quickly can you hang up the phone?”

* * *

There was no reason to expect to hear back from Matt the next day. Royce Buchanan probably had hundreds of scripts coming in over his email, he probably wouldn’t get to read Matt’s for months. If he even opened it. If Matt had even sent it.

The third issue of the magazine was all ready to run the following day, so Lisa left the office promptly at five, and, since her fridge was completely empty, she stopped at the market on the way home and stocked up on convenience and comfort foods. Screw being healthy and fit. She’d get fat and happy. Well, fat, anyway.

She was rounding the cereal aisle when she saw him. Saw *them*. Matt stood next to a little boy about eight or nine years old wearing cut-off jeans, a tee shirt, and a baseball cap. The kid looked enough like Matt to be his...son?

Lisa swallowed. And gawked, way past the point of politeness. Matt looked stricken. He blinked rapidly, his face ashen white.

“Daddy?” The boy tugged at Matt’s sleeve. “Why is that lady staring at us?”

Daddy? Lisa’s heart clamored like a tornado siren. Without waiting for him to speak, forcing every bit of personal strength to her feet, Lisa abandoned her cart, turned on her heel and strode back the way she’d come. When she was out of sight of man and son, she ran toward the grocery store’s glass doors and fled.

Chapter Fifteen

“Daddy, did you know that woman?” Tyler stabbed a fork into his carrots and peas. “She was looking at you like you were The Hulk on steroids.”

Matt inhaled a pained sigh. “Yes, I know her.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“No.” He kept his hands calmly on the table even as random images raced through his head. “We went out a few times. I don’t think I’ll see her again.”

“Why not? She’s pretty.”

“Yeah, she is.” Matt sipped his iced tea, thinking that even by age nine, a male’s propensity to exalt the physical properties of a woman had already been formed. “What if I had a girlfriend?” The ice in his glass tinkled as he set it down. “How would you feel if Daddy brought some woman here to the house?”

Tyler shrugged. “Depends.”

“On what?”

“On if she’s nice or not. Billy Porter’s dad’s girlfriend is cool. She takes Billy out for ice cream, and pitches balls with him after school until his dad comes home from work.” Tyler’s eyes narrowed. “Joe Allen’s father’s girlfriend just tells him to go play in his room.”

Matt felt sorry for Tyler’s friend Joe but he was a little relieved to know Tyler wasn’t a lone pioneer in the child-of-divorce arena. He extended his leg under the table and propped it on the chair next to Tyler’s. “Is Mommy’s husband nice?”

It took him several seconds to answer. “He’s okay. He doesn’t know anything about baseball but he helps me with my math homework.”

For some inane reason, Matt felt a twinge of jealousy. “I help you with your homework.”

“Yeah, with English. And social studies.” Tyler rolled his eyes. “No offense, Dad, but you’re really not very good in math.”

Matt chuckled at the unvarnished truth. He punched his son’s arm playfully, wondering whether he dared solicit another helping of it. Not wanting to look like he was pushing, he took another sip of his tea. Then said, “I understand you had a visit with Principal Myers.”

Tyler’s eyes flashed. “It wasn’t my fault! Keith started it.”

“Keith?” He’d never heard that boy’s name mentioned before.

“He’s new in school. He came from New York. He’s always picking on me

and my friends.”

“What happened?” Matt tried to make his face interested and concerned without being judgmental.

Tyler looked at the ceiling, then back down at his plate. “Billy and Joe and me can take care of ourselves. We just don’t talk to him. But last Friday, Keith was in the lunchroom acting like he had a bug up his ass.”

“Tyler. Language.”

“Sorry. Like he had a bug up his butt.”

Biting back a chuckle, Matt let the language topic go. A bigger issue was at stake here.

“Anyway, Keith goes stomping down the aisles between the tables with his tray, and Shelly Odom has her tray hanging just the tiniest bit off the edge of her table. And Keith slams his tray right into it like he was Godzilla and knocks it off, and Shelly grabs her tray as it’s sliding off but she loses her balance and falls off her chair. And skins her knee.” He looked up at Matt. “Real bad, Daddy, it was bleeding and everything. And Shelly started crying. And Keith just laughed and went on, and everybody else just stood there.”

It had been over twenty years since Matt had been a nine year old boy, but he knew exactly what came next. “So you hit him.”

“Well, somebody had to.”

Matt tried his damndest to keep a straight, stern face, but he feared his lips, trembling to keep the laugh inside, would give him away.

“I didn’t hurt him bad,” Tyler swore. “I used that sneak-up-and-catch-him-off-guard punch you taught me.” The product of Matt’s loins grinned. “But I bet he won’t be picking on Shelly no more.”

“Any more,” Matt corrected, feeling his harsh demeanor slip with each word.

“So Keith goes off, wailing like a baby, to the principal, and *I* get in trouble.” Either Tyler’s indignant expression was for Matt’s benefit, an attempt to mitigate his punishment, or he just didn’t get that he’d done anything wrong.

“It’s good that you stood up for your friend, son. Life is full of bullies and they need to be put in their place. But you shouldn’t have thrown the first punch. You should have looked Keith in the eye and warned him never to do that again. Or told a teacher.”

Tyler hung his head. “That’s what Seth said.”

Of that, Matt had no doubt. Steph’s new husband didn’t believe in fighting. Even when provoked. If Matt hadn’t taught his shorter-than-average son how to

protect himself--and throw a few good jabs too--Tyler might have been the bloodied punching bag of every bully in the fourth grade.

“Are you going to punish me, Dad?”

He took his time as if he were thinking about it. “No,” he said finally. “You’ve probably been punished enough listening to Mom and Seth talk at you for hours.”

Tyler grinned and offered him a high five. Matt finally let a smile slide out of his mouth. Now that he’d heard the story from the source, the episode didn’t sound anything at all like a troubled child’s reaction to a traumatic divorce. Tyler had stood up to a bully, protecting some little girl’s honor. Chivalry might be dead in the movies, but not in Matt’s book. His ex and her pacifist husband meant well, but a man needed to learn to act like a man. And he was damned proud of his son.

But he was losing what little respect he had for Seth Larson. Why had he insinuated that Tyler had gotten in trouble because of a lack of stability in his home life? It was obvious Stephanie had put him up to it, and it was just like her not to pick a fight with Matt directly, but to come at him with tiny, annoying jabs designed to rile him until his temper flared, and he did something stupid.

“Can I have ice cream?”

“You bet.”

Tyler couldn’t reach the top shelf of the freezer so Matt grabbed the ice cream carton and dug two bowls and a scoop out of the cabinet and drawer. Within seconds after digging in, Tyler had a chocolate mustache and a dab on his nose he couldn’t lick off with his tongue.

And a few seconds later Matt had chocolate dribbling down his chin like a goatee that didn’t know where to stop. They laughed at each other. Matt’s heart filled his whole chest.

He wiped the ice cream from his face, then reached across the table and ruffled his son’s hair. “You know I love you, don’t you, buddy?”

“Sure, Dad.” Obviously embarrassed by the sentiment, he tossed his head back out of Matt’s grip.

“I love you more than anything in the world, and what I want most in the world is to see you happy.”

Tyler shoved in another spoonful of ice cream and spoke with his mouth full. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He hesitated. There probably wasn’t a child psychiatrist in the world who would advocate his going in the direction Matt felt propelled to go,

but these precious man-to-boy moments were rare and few, and he wanted to make the most of it. “I guess it’s been hard for you, this past year, to keep changing homes every week, waking up in a different bed every Saturday morning?”

At the question mark, Tyler lifted his head. “I guess. A little.”

Matt closed his eyes and fought the pain building behind his temples. “Would it make things easier...would you be happier...if you just stayed at Mommy’s all the time?”

Tyler’s eyed widened. “You don’t want me to live with you anymore?”

“Oh, God no.” Matt was so chagrined, he didn’t realize he’d said that aloud. “I mean that’s not it at all. I definitely want you here. And even if you were to stay at Mommy’s, I’d be seeing you on weekends, holidays...” He choked back a tear. “You can’t get rid of me that easily, buddy.”

He wanted to push back his chair, leap over the table, and nestle his son in his arms so tightly no force could pry Tyler away from him. But nothing would mortify a nine year old more, and before he could think about getting into a battle *for* Tyler, he had to win it *with* Tyler.

To his amazement, Tyler pushed his own chair back, walked ceremoniously around the table, and threw his arms around Matt’s neck. “I like the way things are,” he whispered.

Relief flooded Matt’s lungs but he held himself still, drinking in the joy of his son’s love. “Me too,” he said.

“Yeah,” Tyler said, sounding older and wiser than his almost-ten years. He rocked back on his heels and released Matt’s neck. “You need me.”

Matt bit back a chuckle. “How’s that?”

Tyler stroked his chocolate mustache thoughtfully. “Mommy has Seth. But you’re all alone. You need me to take care of you.”

Damned if a tear didn’t trickle out of the corner of Matt’s eye. “You’re right, son, I do.” He stood, kissed Tyler on the top of his head, and then swatted his bottom affectionately. “Right now, I need you to get in that bathtub, clean up your face, and get ready for bed.”

Tyler scurried off to the bathroom barely soon enough for Matt to grab for a handkerchief, dab at his eyes and blow his nose.

* * *

“I can’t believe it never occurred to me.” Lisa sipped at the Cabernet wine Courtney had brought with her, wine being a necessary ingredient for any serious discussion. “I mean, the man is thirty years old. He was married nine

years. Makes sense that there would have been a child born out of that union.”

“Well, now you know now why he disappeared both times on a Friday,” Courtney said, grabbing the bottle from Lisa’s coffee table and refilling her glass. “He must have his kid every other weekend. Like Jared.”

In the midst of her own issues, Lisa had forgotten that Courtney’s current boyfriend had a three year old daughter. “Matt disappeared for a whole week,” she said, mentally reviewing the history of their short-lived liaison.

“Maybe he has joint custody with his ex. Where they change custody every week.”

It made perfect sense. Now. But why hadn’t Matt told her?

Because you didn’t want to know. And she’d made that abundantly clear. She’d balked at every chance to let Matt into her life, preferring prolonging the fantasy to accepting reality. Well the fantasy was over now for sure. That little boy was real.

“He never mentioned his son?”

Lisa bit her lip. “I think that was what he was trying to tell me that morning before he left. But I cut him off.”

Courtney shrugged. “So what are you going to do?”

“What can I do? Matt probably already thinks I’m flaky and irresponsible and I only want sex.”

“Is that what you told him?”

Lisa cringed. “Pretty much.” Except for the flaky and irresponsible part. He’d obviously figured that out on his own. “I guess it’s all for the best,” she sighed, wishing she believed her own words. “What do I know about little boys anyway?” The younger of two siblings, she’d never even babysat as a teenager.

“About as much as I do.” The only child of a single mom, Courtney had spent most of her after school hours hanging out at Lisa’s house. “But it’s not that hard to adapt.”

“How is that that working for you?”

“Bethany’s kind of fun. Sometimes we take her to the park or the beach.” Courtney giggled. “And if I’m not in a kid mood, I come over to your place and hang out with you.”

But Matt wasn’t a weekend daddy. At least, not if her assumptions were correct. He was at least partly responsible for raising his son. A relationship with Matt would mean more than just an occasional children’s outing. It would mean putting the child’s interests first. Structure and discipline. Things Lisa had yet to achieve in her own life, and she really wasn’t ready to establish in someone

else's.

"I'm not ready to be a mother." She spoke more to herself than to Courtney. "Especially to someone else's child. I'd be the clueless girlfriend who tries too hard to be liked and messes up whatever rules Matt has set up for his son."

Not that she'd even have that opportunity now. Her sexy, fun-while-it-last-ed affair had run its course. The mystery was over. Matt wasn't a married man, but he was a father. And in some ways, that reality shut her out of his life even more effectively than the other.

Lisa poured herself another glass of wine and stared out the window, watching the sun dip behind a cloud. She pictured it sinking behind the Santa Monica mountains, remembered watching it set that day on the beach. Lying on Matt's blanket. Smelling the salt in the ocean, and tasting it on his skin.

"You'll get over it," Courtney said quietly. "You never intended to get serious about him anyway."

"Right."

The brilliant sky colors muted, then faded. Lisa finished the wine in her glass and poured another. It was just a temporary hook up, she reminded herself. Like the others. High school romances weren't meant to last, and college beaus—well, by the start of senior year she and Brice had known they were fated to go their separate ways. Part of life, and all that. But this time...

This time she'd let the situation get out of control. She'd prepared herself for a one night stand, but when that became something more, she hadn't known how to handle it. Nor how to manage the emotions she'd told herself were unwanted and unnecessary in that kind of dalliance.

Lisa wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, drying silent tears. She hadn't thought breaking up with Matt would hurt this bad. Because she hadn't expected to fall in love with him.

Chapter Sixteen

“You have company,” Courtney said, waking Lisa out of a fog.

She looked up into the darkened room. The sun had long since set. Courtney lay across the sofa, half asleep. How long had she been sitting here staring into her wine glass? “What?”

“The downstairs buzzer.”

She hadn’t even heard the sound. On leaden feet, Lisa walked to the door, switched on a light, and answered the intercom. “Who is it?”

“Matt.” His voice shot adrenaline right to her groin. “Can I come up?”

Breathe. Just inhale. Exhale and repeat. “Um. Sure.”

She let go of the intercom key, and turned to her friend. Court’s eyes lit up and a slow smile took over her face.

“You’ve got to leave now,” Lisa whispered, as if the intercom connection was still open. “Hurry. If you go down the back stairs, he won’t see you.”

“The hell I will.” Courtney took a long slow sip of her wine. “After listening to all the ranting and raving you’ve done over him, I want to actually meet this guy.”

“But--”

Too late. The doorbell rang in her apartment. Lisa pasted a smile on her face and let him in.

“Hi, Matt,” she said as casually as she could manage.” She gestured to Court. “This is my best friend Courtney. I believe you two have talked.”

“We have.” Matt extended his hand and smiled. “It’s always nice to put a face with the voice, although I realize now I’ve also seen the face.” His smile broadened. “You were at The Happy Clam that Saturday night.”

“I was. Nice of you to remember me.” Courtney kept her hand in Matt’s a tad longer than necessary and her eyelashes fluttered.

“I never forget a redhead.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Matt.” She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. “I know it’s a cliché, but I *have* heard a lot about you.”

He actually blushed.

Lisa glared a time-to-leave message at Courtney but if her friend noticed, she ignored it.

Matt turned to Lisa. “I came over to thank you for the referral to Royce Buchanan. I don’t want to get my hopes up, but it’s the best break I’ve had in a

long time.”

So he had sent in the screenplay. Lisa’s pulse quickened. “Have you heard back from him?”

“Just an email from his secretary telling me the script had been received and Mr. Buchanan was looking forward to reading it. The usual bullshit.”

“It will probably take a while,” she said. Matt had to be sitting on pins and needles but she didn’t want him to get discouraged while he was waiting. “Which version did you send?”

He grinned. Damn, she’d missed that grin. “The better one.”

He’d rejected her edits? Lisa tried to hide her disappointment.

“Your version, of course. You were right, it needed a love story.” Beaming, Matt turned to Courtney. “Lisa and I collaborated on a screenplay.”

Lisa and I. That sounded so...nice.

“That’s wonderful,” Courtney said. “Best of luck to you.”

Matt turned back to Lisa, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “About last night...”

“I’ve really got to go.” Courtney grabbed her purse and dashed to the door. “It was nice meeting you, Matt.” Before slipping out, behind Matt’s back, she shot Lisa a wink and a thumbs up.

Lisa indicated the armchair in the living room. “Would you like to sit down?” she said formally.

He sat, and Lisa took a seat on the sofa. Matt cleared his throat. “My ex-wife and I share custody of our son. I keep Tyler every other week.”

Lisa concentrated on breathing. “I’ve sort of figured that out. You tried to tell me last Friday morning, but I didn’t want to hear it.”

He nodded. “I didn’t mention it earlier because you and I started out as just that one night, and I didn’t expect it to go on like it did. Later, I didn’t know how to bring it up. Or how you would react.”

“Not very well, apparently.” She forced a laugh. “Your son must have thought I was a crazy woman, taking off like that.”

He shrugged. “It takes a lot to rattle a kid.”

“I was just...taken by surprise. Seeing you as a father... well, that was the last thing I expected.”

Matt lifted a brow. “What *did* you expect?”

“I thought you were living with a flight attendant who was one week on, one week off.”

He chuckled. “Flight attendant, huh?”

"Yeah," she almost whispered.

"I didn't mean to deceive you." He stared at the ceiling and then returned his gaze to hers. "I really like you, Lisa. I'd like to keep seeing you. But I have to be honest. My son comes first."

"Of course he does." It wasn't sarcasm. If anything, learning that Matt was a loving, responsible father had enhanced Lisa's admiration for him. "I understand. And I respect that. But where does that leave us?" *Us?*

Matt noticed it too. "So there's an 'us' now?" he said dryly.

"I'd like there to be." *What?* Until she said those words, she'd had no idea where her tongue was going. "I mean..." She took a deep breath. "I like you too, Matt. I know things will be different now. And it might take me some time to get used to the situation. But if it's not too late, I'm ready to see where this might go." She closed her eyes, afraid to look at him. When she did, she saw a face lined with sadness.

"Your timing is terrible, Lisa. My ex and her husband have decided I'm not 'stable' enough to raise my son. They've launched a campaign for full custody. So my life style has to be beyond reproach."

"So, no wild orgies. At least not in Tyler's presence," she joked, trying to lift the heaviness from his eyes.

He didn't smile. "There's been some backlash about my seeing a bar hookup. I'm sorry, that's how my friend Brady described you. I can't afford even the hint of an impression that my actions might hurt or disturb Tyler in any way. I'll have to keep a low social profile for a while."

"Low profile?"

"I can't date right now."

She swallowed. "For how long?"

His deep sigh reverberated through his chest. "As long as it takes."

"I don't understand. Your ex-wife is remarried. And from what you told me, she didn't wait very long after the divorce. Why should she expect you to live like a monk?"

He shrugged. "I won't lose my son."

Why had she waited so long to get to know this man? He wasn't the live-for-today dreamer she'd assumed. He had responsibilities, and he took them seriously. Seriously enough to resign himself to a life of celibacy, if that was in his son's best interest. For how long? Six months? A year? Until the boy went off to college?

Long enough to shut *her* out of the picture. Lisa blinked and drew in a big

breath. She tried to keep her voice level, but bitterness oozed out. “So why did you come here today, if you knew there was no chance we could get work things out? You could have called or emailed to thank me for the referral.”

“I felt I owed you a face to face explanation.”

A brick lodged in her stomach, so heavy she could barely breathe. She’d been so abysmally stupid. Playing childish games with a man she’d labeled a fling, hanging on to a fantasy when the right man, the permanent man she’d been holding out for might have been right in front of her. And now it was too late. She would not stand between a man and his son.

Holding her arms across her chest in an attempt to keep her heart from breaking, she stood. “I’m sorry, Matt. I hope things work out the way you want them to for you and Tyler. It was nice getting to know you, at least a little.” Fighting tears, she strode toward the door and opened it.

Matt didn’t move from his chair.

She walked back and stood in front of him. His lower lip was trembling, and he looked almost as if he might cry. “I love my son,” he said heavily, “more than anything else in this world.”

He paused as if waiting for a response, but there was nothing she could say to that. Family came first. A casual, almost-girlfriend wasn’t even in the ball park.

“I will do anything for Tyler. I’m willing to make myself a martyr. Jump through any hoops Stephanie and her husband set out for me. And they know that.” He paused again.

“Yes?” she prompted finally.

“Stephanie and I have different views about life. She’s all about playing it safe, not taking any risks. She hates that I’m teaching Tyler to believe in himself, to shoot for the stars if the stars are what he wants. We’ll always be at odds about those things.”

Lisa waited. “So?”

“I’m thinking about what you said. And you’re right. Stephanie is always going to expect me to do things her way. That’s never going to change. She has a ring hooked through her current husband’s nose. And she knows she can manipulate me through Tyler. It’s never going to stop.”

“What can you do about it?”

“To please Stephanie? Nothing. That’s impossible. But I’m finally realizing, I don’t care. Tyler’s the only one who matters.”

“He’s a child. How old, eight?”

“Nine.”

“He has no say in the matter.”

“The hell he doesn’t.” His face toughened in determination. “I’m not talking about the custody issue. I doubt that my ex has even taken it to a lawyer. She’s just trying to manipulate me into giving up Tyler willingly, because she knows I want what’s best for him.”

“And what is best for him?”

He pressed his palms against his knees. “Honestly? I think he needs both parents in his life.” He lifted his gaze to Lisa’s. “My son and I had a serious conversation last night, man to man.”

Man to man? Lisa suppressed a chuckle.

“I asked him how he would feel about me dating. And he approved of it, conditionally.”

“What’s the condition?”

“The lady has to be nice.”

“Nice.” She kept her face expressionless.

“Yeah, nice.”

“So are you saying that lets me out?”

For the first time all evening, Matt’s eyes twinkled. “I’m saying I’d like to try this again.”

Her heart, barely hanging together in her chest, started doing somersaults.

“I’m not ready yet to introduce you to my son,” Matt added hastily. “And I can’t--I won’t--compromise my time with him.” His slow, hesitant speech pattern sped up. “If we continue with this...us, it’ll mean I won’t see you for a week at a time. Would you be okay with that?”

She perched on the arm of his chair. “For a while. But honestly, if we’re going to have a real *relationship*, I don’t know if I can be with you and make love with you one week, then pretend I barely know you the next.”

“I’ll call,” he promised. “Maybe we can meet for lunch on a week day when Tyler’s in school. I know that’s a half-assed proposition, but it’s the best I can do. For now.”

His last sentence gave her pause. It wasn’t a unilateral decision to shut her out. He was leaving it open for the future. Suggesting they might actually have a future.

Go slow, Lisa. “I...care about you, Matt. I really, truly want you in my life. But I wouldn’t want to jeopardize your relationship with your son.” Tyler might be as mature as Matt had implied, but he was only nine. And if she were to meet

the child and fall in love with him and then she and Matt broke up...

“Trust me, my relationship with my son is foremost on my mind.”

She allowed herself, finally to smile, and the brick that had taken up residence in her stomach dislodged. The idea of opening up her heart, practically inviting someone to stomp on it, scared her to death, but if this worked out it would be sooo worth it.

She reached for his hand. “Would you like to stay?”

He took a visible breath. “I can’t tonight. Tyler left his math book at my house and he has a big test coming up.” He stood. “I’m heading over to bring it to him. But...”

He grasped her hand, guided her to her feet and took her in his arms. And kissed her.

Lisa reveled in his embrace. It wasn’t the most passionate kiss he’d ever bestowed, or even the most sensual. But his lips promised what his words couldn’t yet, a future. Or at least the hope of one. “But?” she asked when he pulled away.

He reached into his shirt pocket and drew out a pen and a business card. Lisa couldn’t read the small print, but the words *Matthew Owens* and *Screenwriter* stood out in bold letters. He flipped it over, scribbled an address on the back, and handed it to her.

“What’s this?” She turned the card from side to side.

“My home address. If you’re not too busy, I’d like you to come to my place tomorrow.” He smiled. “Maybe spend the weekend.”

Chapter Seventeen

Matt lived in a house. An actual *house*. It was small, but the postage stamp front lawn was green and inviting, and there were even a few orange and yellow marigolds in the tiny flower bed. On this beautiful Saturday morning, neighbors were mowing lawns and weeding gardens. Lisa parked behind Matt's truck and walked up his driveway.

He stood waiting for her at the open door. After a brief kiss, he whisked her inside, no tour of the house, just a fast jog to the bedroom. She dropped her overnight bag on the floor and they fell into each other's arms. "I missed you," she murmured, then hurried to get naked. It had been a week since they'd made love, an eon in the lifetime of their short romance.

Yes, she was calling it a romance. They'd talked on the phone last night for hours. About baseball. About movies. Lisa had told him about growing up in west Texas and he'd shared what it was like vying for his parents' attention with two beautiful, overachieving sisters. Lying in bed listening to his voice had been an aphrodisiac, making her ache to lie beside him and caress him with her eyes.

Now, the first touch of his skin on her body aroused her almost to peak. But something was different this time. The desperate passion, the sexual urgency was still there, but today when Matt made love to her it felt like he was...making love to her. And when they lay together later in blissful afterglow, Lisa felt so comfortable in his arms. Like they belonged together.

"That was wonderful," she said with throaty gasps.

"You were wonderful. Are wonderful. I'm glad you're here."

"Me too." She looked around the bedroom she'd never seen before, reminding herself that the room, and the bed, had probably been home to his onetime wife. "Will you show me the house?" She dressed hurriedly, eager to know Matt's life as well as his body.

"There's not much to see," he said apologetically, walking her the short distance from the bedroom to the bathroom to the other bedroom--Tyler's. The latter was decorated with movie posters, baseball pennants and team jerseys, tacked on a wall that had been painted with cheerful, child-size dinosaurs.

"Did your wife do that?" she asked, pointing at the wall.

"No. I did." He moved one of the posters to show her a baby stegosaurus painted beneath. "This is my place, Lisa. Stephanie never lived here." He ran his palm along her cheek, still flushed from lovemaking. "There's never been any

other woman in that bed.”

Something zinged in her heart. Lisa blinked back a tear. And was she imagining it, or did Matt seem different today, freer, more at ease? As if a burden had been lifted from him.

The living area she’d bypassed so quickly earlier was a square room crammed with an overstuffed sofa, a recliner, and a big screen TV. A toy box overflowing with robots and computerized games was squeezed into a corner. “It’s not very messy.”

“I tidied up a bit.”

Somehow, she doubted it had ever been very messy at all. Matt kept a place-for-everything-and-everything-in-its-place house. No space was wasted. It was what a real estate agent might call ‘cozy.’

“I like it,” she said.

“My grandparents owned this house,” he explained. “I lived with them when I moved here from Oregon ten years ago. When I met Stephanie, she was living in a nice apartment so we set up house there.”

Lisa nodded.

“My grandmother died three years ago, and Grandpa followed her six months later. They left me the house, but I didn’t have the heart to sell it. Couldn’t even bring myself to rent it to strangers. It just stood here empty for a couple of years. But after my divorce...”

“It was lucky you kept this.”

“Yep.” He gestured for her to sit in the recliner. “You hungry?”

For the first time, she noticed the aroma of something delicious wafting from the kitchen. “You cooking?”

A pot of chili bubbled on the antique gas range, filling the tiny kitchen with the most delicious aroma. They ate on barstools at the counter separating the kitchen from the living room, and it was the best chili Lisa had tasted since leaving Texas.

After eating, they strolled around the quiet, peaceful neighborhood, walking distance to the ocean. Property this close to the beach had probably been affordable real estate when his grandparents bought it, but Lisa guessed Matt’s little house was way out of the average buyer’s reach nowadays.

“Race you to the ocean,” Matt challenged.

Of course, he won. After Lisa caught up with him, they trudged through the sand to the ocean, then took off their shoes, rolled up their jeans legs, and sloshed through the water, the wind making every step an endurance challenge.

Her feet stalled and sank into wet sand. Matt stopped and grabbed her arm. "Need me to carry you back?"

She shot him what she hoped was a withering glare.

Blocking the wind with his body, he placed his hand on the nape of her neck and leaned over her. His lips slowly descended for a soul-stealing kiss.

Salt spray washed over Lisa's face, infusing Matt's tongue with the taste of the ocean. She drank him deeper, pressed against his body by the wind. Her shirt flapped against her back and the roar of the sea erased all other sound.

A strong wind gust buckled Lisa's knees. She slid down Matt's body, her hands clutching his waist, then his legs.

He moved down to meet her, until they were kneeling, facing each other, like statues in prayer.

Their lips met again. The incoming tide washed over their legs, soaking Lisa's jeans with icy water. Her knees dug a tunnel into the wet sand. Still she clung to Matt as if in a dream, invincible to both wind and water.

The next tide swept her flat on her back, with Matt on top of her. They rolled together into the cold surf, holding hands until the sea separated them. Salt stung her eyelids and invaded her mouth. Lisa struggled to turn upright, then plant her knees.

A hand grabbed her fingers. Matt helped her up, dragging her to the shore. Lisa gasped for air and cleared her lungs, then started to laugh. They were both dripping wet.

"Now I know how Deborah Kerr felt," she giggled.

He chuckled. "*From Here to Eternity*."

She was only a little surprised he got the reference so quickly. "You really do love the old movies, don't you?"

"Yep." They retrieved their shoes and slogged up the beach. "There's a film festival tonight in Culver City. Wanna go?"

"Sure."

Back at Matt's house, they left their gritty, sodden clothes on the bathroom floor and jumped into the shower. Naked and sand-free, with the water cascading over their heads, they did what came naturally. Enjoyed each other zealously and voraciously.

Dripping wet, reaching for a towel, Lisa stumbled out of the shower and almost fell onto the tiled floor. A loud roar rumbled through the room. Toiletries on the counter rattled, and the floor rolled beneath her feet. She grabbed onto a towel rack. "Oh my God, an earthquake."

Reaching out to steady her, Matt drew her against his chest. His moist lips teased hers. "The earth always moves when I'm with you."

The quake stopped as quickly as it had begun, but Matt kept her in his arms for another long minute, the warmth of his full body against hers as soothing as his words. When he finally released her and reached for his clothes, his pants played the AT&T ringtone.

He reached into the pocket for his phone. "Hello? Oh, hi. Yes, we had a little shakeup here too. No, no damage. Everything's good."

He was silent for a while but his jaw muscle ticked nervously. "Certainly," he said at last. "Absolutely." His eyes widened, slowly at first, then bulged as if they might jump out of his face. "Yes, sir. Thank *you*."

Matt clicked off the phone, his mouth gaping open. "Holy shit."

"Is everything all right?" Lisa's stomach muscles clenched. Had Matt's son been hurt in the earthquake? "Who was that?"

"Royce Buchanan." Buck naked, Matt leaned against the wall as if his leg muscles could not hold him up. "*No Mountain Too High* has been green-lit."

Lisa's heart stopped and her breath caught in her throat. "And that means?"

A slow smile spread over his face. "Buchanan got it approved for production by a major studio. *Our* screenplay is going to be a movie."

Chapter Eighteen

“You sure you don’t need help?” Matt stood in the doorway of Lisa’s small kitchen, a bemused expression on his face, as he looked over the utensils and serving dishes set out on the counter like battle gear.

“I’ve got this. You’re a guest. The guest of honor.” She’d invited all her friends to celebrate Matt’s screenplay being produced by a movie studio. The menu might be a little ambitious for a first dinner party, but even though Matt could probably achieve better results with half the effort, Lisa wanted to handle all the cooking herself.

She’d purposely chosen two oven based dishes, so she could visit with her guests without having to check on the food every five seconds. Only the sautéed peppers required skillet watch, and they needed just a few minutes cooking time, so she could start them when they were almost ready to eat.

Matt walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “You know this wouldn’t have happened without you, don’t you?”

She smiled modestly. “I just dropped your name to a famous director. It was your screenplay that wowed him.”

“After you improved it with your edits.” Matt kissed her cheek and then left her to her labors.

Lisa took a deep breath and focused on her battle plan. There were sixteen ingredients involved in the baked chicken recipe, and eight in the one for scalloped potatoes. She couldn’t afford to miss a single line of instruction.

After she’d mixed the ingredients, preheated the oven, and inserted the pans, she headed to the bedroom to get ready.

Matt sniffed the air. “Something smells good.”

“I just put it in. It won’t be ready for an hour.”

Matt wiggled his brows. “Do we have time for a quickie?”

“No!” She treated herself to a sampling of his lips. “You’re insatiable.” Which she appreciated most of the time.

After showering and dressing in black jeans and a black sequined top, Lisa went to check the oven and set the table.

Jessica and Josh arrived at exactly on time, Josh carrying a wine bag.

Matt appeared suddenly at Lisa’s side. Lisa made the introductions, and Josh congratulated Matt on his achievement.

Jess smiled sweetly. “I suppose it won’t come as a surprise if I say I’ve

heard a lot about you.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

Tish arrived with some rhinestone cowboy named Rick on her arm. When she batted her lashes at him, every man in the room took notice.

The guests mingled, nibbling on the chips and dips she’d placed in colored glass bowls. *Deep breath, Lisa.* So far, so good.

The doorbell rang again. Tish was closest to the entry so she got the door. A man Lisa didn’t know stood there with a woman in a dress so tight she probably didn’t dare smile, let alone laugh. The man’s eyes locked on Tish’s and then lowered to her chest. Lisa would have been embarrassed for her friend had Tish not made the same trip with her eyes on him, starting at his face and continuing past his waist.

“Brady!” Matt rushed over. “Glad you could make it, man.” He caught Lisa’s elbow. “Lisa, Brady. Brady, Lisa.”

“I’m Tish,” Tish said, her eyes still on Brady.

Matt eyed his friend’s date. “And this is…”

“Um…Cherise,” Brady said. His voice was low and crackling, and his eyes appeared serious but looked like he was enjoying a private joke behind them.

“So you’re Callahan,” Lisa said, shaking Brady’s hand as Tish moved back to join the others.

He raised a quizzical brow, then broke into a smile. And what a smile. No wonder the blonde on his arm had it clenched in a death grip. “I guess you’ve read the script,” he said.

“Read it?” Matt pulled his friend into the room. “She’s rewritten half of it. Callahan’s gonna have a love interest, pal.”

Brady’s dark, searing eyes sparked with curiosity. “The hooker in the bar…?”

“Gone. Read the new script. I’ve recommended you for the lead, but I don’t have final say in the casting. You’ll have to audition.”

“When?”

“Probably in a few months.”

“Sweet.” Brady picked up a glass of wine and offered one to the blonde who hadn’t let go of his arm.

Lisa studied her large dining table and wondered if they could squeeze in one more chair. Though from the looks of things, Brady’s blonde would probably be sitting on his lap.

Courtney called to say she and Jared were stuck in traffic and would be

there in half an hour. Lisa glanced at the clock. Eight forty-five. She'd planned to serve dinner at nine.

After refilling everyone's drinks, Lisa returned to the kitchen, turned on the gas burner, oiled a skillet, and began sautéing the already sliced medley of bell peppers.

The oven timer beeped at exactly nine. Fearing she'd burn the chicken if she didn't take it out in time, Lisa opened the oven to check. Steam and a piquant aroma enveloped her. The chicken pieces were perfectly browned.

The doorbell sounded and she leaned over to shout through the kitchen door. "Would somebody answer that, please?"

"Got it," Matt called back to her.

Face sweating from the steam, Lisa grabbed a couple of pot holders and slid the pan forward toward the open over door.

With the pan slightly tilted, the sauce bubbled over, spilling onto the floor. Quickly shoving the hot pan onto the counter, Lisa missed the trivet, tipping the pan over the edge and sending it crashing to the tile floor.

Sauce and poultry splattered everywhere like debris from a tornado. *No! No! "No!"*

Jessica, the most domestic of the bunch, came hurrying through the doorway. "Need some helppp---"

Jessica's foot slipped on the saucy wet floor. Her arms flapped like a seagull on takeoff. Lisa reached out to steady her friend, bumping the handle of the hot skillet with her elbow.

"Shit!" Lisa jerked from the burn of the hot handle, knocking Jessica the rest of the way to the ground. A spark from the open flame found the trail of spilled pepper oil on the stove top, followed it into the pan, and with a loud sizzle, flared up.

Someone screamed "Fire! Flames shot up to the ceiling. And, rushing in to help, Tish toppled over Jessica.

Scrambling to the sink, Lisa filled a glass with water and tossed it on the blaze. The flames leaped higher, setting off the smoke alarm.

Josh raced in, grabbed Jessica by the elbows, and dragged her out of harm's way. A few steps behind, Rick reached for Tish and picked her up like any cowboy worth his salt would haul a prize calf to safety.

Tears welling, sweat streaming down her face, Lisa stared helplessly at the ruins of her dinner.

"Oh my God." Now Courtney stood in the doorway. "Somebody call the

fire department!”

The voices clamoring around her barely infiltrated the ringing in her ears. Lisa backed away, still holding the empty glass, when someone grabbed it from her hand.

“I’ve got this.” Matt’s reassuring voice penetrated her senses. “Move out of the way.”

He reached for the pan lid. Lisa watched helplessly from the kitchen doorway as he faced the flames of hell and slapped the lid down over the skillet.

And just like that, the fire was out.

The whole crowd stood beyond the doorway, clapping and cheering.

Lisa was mortified. She’d almost burned up her apartment and injured her friends—she *had* injured Jessica, and they were making light of it. “Jess, are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Just an ankle twist. I’ll put some ice on it when I get home.”

Lisa turned to her friends. “I’m so sorry, guys. The dinner is ruined. This is a disaster.”

“No worries.” Josh took out his cell phone. “We’ll just order a pizza. Anybody got a coupon?” The crowd moved back into the living room, leaving Lisa alone with Matt.

“Thank you,” she sobbed into his ear, “for saving my ass. And my apartment. I ruined everything.”

He stroked her hair. “It’ll be all right,” he said quietly. “You panicked and didn’t realize it was a grease fire.”

His words soared over her head into the smoke. “I ruined everything,” she repeated.

“It’s not the end of the world,” he soothed. “We’ll clean it all up later. The important thing is you’re okay.”

He was wonderful. She hugged him tighter. “I tried so hard to make a nice dinner party. And it’s a catastrophe.”

“Don’t worry. Your friends were barely fazed by all this. Right now, they’re getting more upset arguing over who wants pepperoni and who doesn’t like olives.”

She dried her eyes on his shirt. “I’m the worst cook ever.”

He grinned. “Now there you might have me.” He pecked her forehead. “But I still love you.”

“But I nearly burned down the kit--” Her heart jumped. “What?”

“I love you.”

Her lips quivered but no words came out. Her heart danced in her chest. Arms and legs felt like mushy oatmeal. *Breathe, Lisa.*

“Well are you going to say something or just leave me hanging?”

The tears started again, this time tears of joy. “Oh, Matt. I love you too.” She fell on his lips, devoured his tongue. A minute ago her world had been devastated. And now...

While the gang debated how many pizzas to order, Lisa remained plastered to Matt’s body, unwilling to separate from his embrace.

Matt captured her lips again and kissed her slowly and sensuously, as if he would drink all the moisture from her body. He tasted sweet and sexy. And permanent.

Suddenly, the floor wobbled beneath their feet. Matt tightened his hold to steady her. The sounds of delicate glass shattering against plates opened Lisa’s eyes.

“Earthquake!” voices shouted.

“Stand in a doorway!” someone hollered.

“Another earthquake?” Lisa looked up at Matt, her body trembling.

“Nah,” he said mischievously. “That was just us.” And he kissed her again.

Chapter Nineteen - Epilogue

“Where’s Lisa?” Jessica slid into the booth next to Tish, hiding her left hand in her lap. She wanted to wait for the whole posse to arrive before making her announcement.

“She’s on her way,” Courtney said, switching off her cell phone. “Just pulling into a parking space.”

A minute later, Lisa appeared. “Sorry I’m late. I had to take Tyler to the doctor this morning. Matt couldn’t do it because he’s meeting with Royce Buchanan today.”

“Anything serious?” Jessica asked. Her little brother at that age had always been falling out of trees, breaking bones, even had a couple of concussions.

“No, just an earache. The doctor gave him antibiotics and he’ll be fine.”

“Why couldn’t his mother take him?”

“Matt doesn’t like to ask her to take time off from work when it’s not her week to keep him.”

So he’d asked Lisa. Jessica bit her lip. In the past few months her friend had changed, matured. It couldn’t be easy, being the third point of the triangle in an established relationship between father and son. Jessica wasn’t sure she could have handled it if Josh had had a child from a previous relationship. Of course, there hadn’t been a previous relationship. Josh was only sixteen, and she, fifteen, when they’d met.

“So how is the whole Tyler thing working out?” Tish asked.

“Really well. He actually asked me to come and watch his baseball game last week.” Lisa’s face brightened. “And he got a hit! For the first time!” She sounded as excited about that as she had about Matt’s screenplay.

“Can you imagine our Lisa as a stepmother?” Courtney said.

Lisa held up her hand. “Cool it guys, that’s nowhere near happening yet. But I’m cautiously optimistic. It takes time and lots of patience. You can’t build a relationship overnight.”

A relationship, huh? “Are you talking about Tyler or Matt?” Jessica teased.

“Tyler. Matt is...” Lisa’s face lit up in a contented smile. “Matt is wonderful.” She practically purred.

“Maybe we could have a double wedding,” Jessica said mischievously. And she drew her left hand out from her lap and held it up. “It’s official!”

The marquise-cut diamond, a one carat stone, sparkled even in the bright

overhead lights of the restaurant. “Wow, it’s beautiful.” Courtney oohed and aahed. “When did this happen?”

“This weekend.” She and Josh had started looking at rings months ago, and Jessica had fallen in love with this one. Josh hadn’t mentioned it since, and she’d almost thought he’d forgotten about it. But Saturday they’d driven by the high school where they’d met, and Josh had stopped the car and whisked her out, and on bended knee, proposed. “And of course I want all of you to be my bridesmaids.”

The girls grinned. “Just please don’t choose bright orange dresses that look bad on every woman’s figure,” red-haired Courtney pleaded.

Jessica laughed. “I promise.” She took in a deep breath. This was really happening. After twelve years of loving Josh, he was finally going to be her lawfully wedded husband.

But she’d thought she’d feel more excited. All the girls were happy for her, of course, but no one was surprised. This was just the expected next step in Jessica’s predictable life.

She looked across the table at Lisa, still beaming, apparently at thoughts of Matt. Every time she spoke of him her eyes lit up. Who would have thought a one night stand would lead to such a warm, devoted relationship? Jessica was delighted for her friend. But somewhere deep in her soul, also a little envious. She and Josh had been together so long, she’d almost forgotten what being in the throes of new love was like.

And sometimes, as she lay in the dark beside the man she loved, she wondered what it would be like if she were meeting her special someone just now. How would it feel to caress a man’s body for the first time, learn its curves and muscles and nuances, not with the embarrassment of teenage awkwardness, but with the confident passion of a woman?

An indefinable, inscrutable longing stirred within her. What if...?

Read Jessica’s story in *One Night with a Fantasy*, Book 2 of the *Unforgettable Nights* series, and reconnect with Lisa and Matt. [Kindle](#)

Here’s an excerpt:

“I didn’t say I was *unhappy*.” Jessica Pena shoved her cheeseburger away and stared at her friend Courtney across their usual booth at Rico’s Deli. “I just

said I was not feeling happy.”

“What’s the difference?” Tish speared a cucumber slice from her salad and eased it slowly into her mouth. A fitness instructor and aspiring actress, Tish was always watching her diet.

“I get what she means.” Lisa narrowed one eye. “Being unhappy implies a semi-permanent state, or a personality trait. ‘Not feeling happy’ could mean a short phase, or a passing emotional sensation.”

“Thank you, Ms. Oxford English Dictionary.” Jessica smiled at her friend. An editor for an online magazine and now an assistant screenwriter, Lisa was the wordsmith of their group. Since Lisa and Courtney had moved to Los Angeles two years ago, and all three had taken Tish’s yoga class, the foursome had become a supportive ‘posse.’ Jessica chuckled, wondering how Lisa would define that.

“What’s the matter, Jess?” Courtney wiggled a French fry in a puddle of ketchup. “Having second thoughts?”

“No.” Not about Josh. He was definitely the man she loved. Jessica stretched out her left arm and admired her week old, one carat diamond engagement ring. “I love Josh. Always have. Always will. I’ve been waiting to marry him for years.” Since the moment she’d first seen him in high school biology class. “But now that it’s finally going to happen...” She sighed. She knew she wasn’t making sense. And as a second year associate in a prestigious law firm, her arguments always had to make sense.

“Maybe you’re waiting too long,” Tish suggested. “You don’t *have* to have a spring wedding. Why don’t you guys get married now? You can still have it outside, just with autumn leaves falling instead of flowers blooming.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. Twenty-two and happily single, Tish had no idea of all the planning required for a wedding celebration.

“Or you could elope.” This from Courtney. “Just do it, get the legal part over with, and then you’ll be free to enjoy the rest of your life.”

With Josh. Only Josh. Day after day after day... “What’s wrong with me?” She glanced again at her ring, the symbol of forever. “Why am I not ecstatic?”

“Your feelings are normal,” Lisa declared. “Every bride gets the jitters. It shows you’re not just rushing into things in the heat of the moment. You’re serious and thinking it through.”

“Is that why you and Matt haven’t gotten engaged yet?” Jessica leaned across the table. “You’re still ‘thinking things through?’”

“They do a lot of thinking,” Courtney giggled. “In bed.”

“We do some of our best thinking in bed.” Lisa smiled impishly, then sobered. “We have his son to consider. We want to be sure of not making a mistake.” She clapped her hand to her mouth. “Not that I think you and Josh are a mistake. You two are the strongest couple I know.”

Everybody said that. And it was true. Together since high school, Jessica and Josh had remained a couple all through college and law school. Including three years of long distance, with her up at Stanford and him here at UCLA. They were magical together. All their friends said so. ‘Jess and Josh.’ ‘Josh and Jess.’ The couple everyone expected to stay together.

“Josh is the best man I know,” she said. And the *only* man she’d ever loved, ever been with. Ever.

“But?” Tish prompted.

Jessica took in a deep breath. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t met the right man quite so soon. Maybe I should have had some...experience first.”

“Ohhhhh.” All three women puckered their faces in the same way.

Tish voiced the thought. “Josh was your first, wasn’t he? Your only. And now you’re wondering what you missed.”

“That’s not it.” But it was way too close to ‘it’ for Jessica’s comfort.

Read it [now](#)

Want more of the *Unforgettable Nights* women and men?

<http://www.lindasteinberg.com/books.html>

Book 3 *One Night with an Obsession.*

Book 4 *One Night with the Best Man*

Book 5 *One Night with the Professor*

Book 6 *One Night with the Captain*

Book 7 *One Night with a Geek*

Book 8 *One Night with the Wrong Brother*

Book 9 *One Night with a Hollywood Hero*

MEET LINDA

Writing has been a passion for as long as Linda Steinberg can remember. She started writing her first novel when she was living in Lagos, Nigeria, in longhand on school tablets, the only available writing paper, and hasn't stopped since. She writes contemporary romance, romantic suspense, and women's fiction featuring strong heroines with real problems and heroes who sizzle their way into readers' hearts. A retired accountant, Linda now lives in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, with her second time around sweetheart and enjoys reading, travel, family and friends.

Visit her website at www.lindasteinberg.com

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)