

Chapter One

He knew the second he laid eyes on her that she was the woman he was going to marry...

He had been minding his own business at the grocery store, like any other Thursday, picking up some food for dinner on his way home from work. After settling on a cut of teriyaki steak and some ready-made salad, he made his way over to the beer aisle. His hand was poised to grab a six-pack of Heinekens off the shelf when she came strolling around the corner. He actually sensed her before he saw her, and when he turned, his eyes fell upon the most beautiful and enchanting woman he had ever seen.

She stopped just a few feet away from him, full lips turned downward into a thoughtful little pout as she surveyed the selection of beer in front of her. His eyes shamelessly traveled down to survey her form, and since she was so absorbed in her beer dilemma, she hardly noticed. Curves adorned her athletic physique; full, womanly hips framing a round, supple butt. He almost sighed aloud—she had the most perfect ass he had ever seen.

As thoughts of running his hands over her caramel-colored skin danced through his mind, she suddenly turned and looked at him, her right eyebrow arched. He flushed, partly in embarrassment at being caught in the midst of impure thoughts, but also because she seemed to know exactly what he had been thinking!

She had the most incredible eyes, two luminous pools of wisdom and experience shining back at him. Light brown and beautiful, they were the only feature on her face that gave away her age. This was no girl—she was all woman. As the subject of her penetrating gaze, he felt a rare wave of self-consciousness pass over him, wondering if

she liked what she saw. Not that he ever had a problem attracting women—as the product of a Black father and white mother, he had been blessed with chocolate skin, hazel eyes, and a head-full of curls that formed actual ringlets if he let it grow out long enough. He was used to women throwing themselves at him, with little or no encouragement, but this one didn't seem the least bit fazed or impressed. Was he losing his touch?

Before he could think of anything witty or charming to say, she shot him a sweet smile, picked up a six-pack of Sam Adams, and set off down the aisle. She bounced when she walked, so childlike, the swish in her hips accentuating her womanly curves. As he watched her walk away, he was struck with the impulse to go after her, ask her name, ask her to dinner... But instead he found himself frozen on the spot, hypnotically watching her graceful movements as the swaying of her hips lulled him into a little trance.

She had a similar effect on the other men in the grocery store. She would breeze past someone, and then as she passed they would inevitably do a double take, as if a goddess was in their midst and they couldn't quite believe their eyes. Men of all ages, of all races and colors, even those shopping side by side with their wives—they all paused to look, some to stare—and this goddess just moved through it all with a fixed expression of jaded indifference, seemingly oblivious to the stirred longing and aroused passions she left in her wake.

She had the aura of a woman on a mission, steps deliberate, concentration focused on staying two steps ahead at all times. Moving up and down the aisles with a leisurely efficiency, she went directly to the item she needed, placed it in her basket, and moved

on. She wasn't hurried necessarily, but she definitely had purpose, and he found that quality particularly attractive. Yes, a woman who knew what she wanted and wasted no time going after it. Not a clingy, codependent waif, like his last girlfriend, but a woman with drive and confidence to add to her incredible beauty. She was perfect for him.

He altered his shopping route so they were weaving down the aisles in opposite directions, ensuring that she would pass him on almost every aisle so he could once again try to catch her eye. For a while, she hardly noticed him, and then on Aisle 8, after plucking a box of cereal off the shelf, she turned and bumped right into him. He could swear he felt an electric shock at that instant!

"Oh, excuse me," she apologized, a flicker of recognition registering on her face from their previous encounter on the beer aisle. His heartbeat jerked to a stop—her voice was like a song that he desperately needed to hear again. Only a breath away from her, he struggled to produce coherent speech. But before he could respond, she was off again, leaving him to stand there stupidly speechless, staring at those swaying hips...

He had never felt this lovestruck in his entire life and he hadn't even spoken to her yet! He knew nothing about her, nothing at all, yet he was unmistakably drawn to her in a way that was more than lust and desire and impure thoughts. He found himself wanting to know everything about this woman—what made her laugh, cry, where she'd been, where she was going, how she looked while she slept...

He felt like he was back in high school, nervous, anxious and tongue-tied. Why couldn't he just talk to her? It's not like he was one of those game-less fellows who didn't know how to step to a beautiful woman when the opportunity arose. But this one, she was different somehow. She wasn't going to take any shit or fall for some cheesy

line, he could tell that much. He might blow it if he came on too strong. Best to hang back and wait for the perfect moment to make his move.

She headed for the checkout and fell into line. Getting into line behind her, he was hoping to strike up some kind of a conversation, but she picked up a Soap Opera magazine, of all things, and became completely absorbed in some article. She didn't look up at all until the clerk started scanning her groceries. As she fumbled with her wallet, he strained to see if she was wearing a wedding ring. Thankfully, her ring finger was bare. Relief washed over him—maybe there was hope.

He listened to her chat with the clerk. Her voice was so sweet and her manner so friendly and polite, another rare quality in this day and age. And that smile, it really did light up the room. He kept hoping she'd turn and look at him again, but she didn't. She just paid for her groceries, collected her bags, and headed for the door. Watching her depart, a twinge of anxiety set in. What if he never saw her again? Shouldn't he go after her? He was truly torn on how to proceed. But right before she walked out of the building, she glanced back, looked directly at him, and smiled. That gorgeous smile, just for him. If he hadn't been in the middle of paying for his groceries, he would have run after her right then. But damn, he blinked and she was gone.

Chapter Two

Samantha had been looking forward to this moment all day. Setting her groceries on the kitchen counter, she collapsed onto the couch, thankful to finally be home. In a few minutes she would adjust to the quiet of her sanctuary, as the blessed silence drowned out the chaos, drama, and demands of the day. She cherished these meditative moments, when she could clear her head, release all the work stress, and finally be free of other people's expectations. She let that all go once she got home—chances were it would still be there in the morning anyway.

Her kitty Leila hopped into her lap. “Hey Princess,” Samantha cooed as she stroked Leila's soft fur. “Did you miss your mama?”

Leila purred in response as Samantha stretched out and reviewed her day. Even though she was exhausted, she had gotten a lot done. Several important projects had been completed, and were officially off her desk. She'd run errands after work, and had crossed several items off that to-do list as well. She'd even managed to catch the attention of a handsome fella at the grocery store, and unsolicited adoration, from a distance, was always nice. There was no place like home though. All she wanted to do at this point was take a bath, watch some TV, and go to bed.

She got up and checked her answering machine—no messages. She was thankful for that as well. Samantha was somewhat of a recluse, and on any given day there seemed to be more people she was trying to avoid than people she actually wanted to talk to. Though she had tentative plans to meet some friends at La Verdana around 9pm, she was feeling pretty burnt-out on socializing for the day. She really hoped they didn't call.

Just as that thought passed through her mind, the phone rang. She shook her head

and let the machine get the call.

“Samantha, it’s Faby.” A pause. “Girl, I know you’re there trying to hide from the world. Pick up the damn phone.”

Samantha smiled to herself, Faby knew her so well.

After a moment of silence, Faby continued, trying to mask her irritation. “Anyway, we’re hitting up La Verdana and you *have* to meet up with us... No excuses Miss Thang! Rob is bringing along this new guy from work who just moved here from the Bay Area. He’s tall and mixed—just the way you like’em. So call me, okay? Love you.”

Samantha finished putting the groceries away. She really didn’t feel like going out. But how to break the news to Faby?

Samantha loved her friends, she really did. Especially Faby, who had stood by her through some of the hardest times she’d ever had to go through. But if she had to suffer through one more disastrous blind date, she was going to scream. As the only single woman left in her circle of friends, she was constantly being set up and introduced to the city’s most eligible bachelors, and quite frankly, she was over it. Unlike some women, she didn’t need to be in a relationship to feel complete. With a thriving career and the deed to a 2 BR condo in her name—what did she need a man for? Men presented an emotional complication she didn’t need, and Sam wished people would respect that, instead of wasting their time trying to fix what they perceived to be her biggest problem.

Sam made her way to the bathroom and ran a bath—heavy on the bubbles. Last year she had splurged and installed a whirlpool tub big enough for two, a purchase her mother had thought was a bit extravagant, though Samantha hadn’t regretted it once. Soaking in hot water was her favorite way to unwind, and every day she looked forward

to these precious moments of quiet self-indulgence. As the room filled with apricot-scented steam, she lit several of the vanilla candles encircling the tub to complement the fruity aroma hanging in the air. Hitting play on the CD player, Norah Jones' melodious voice filled the room as she slowly lowered herself into the swirling apricot water. She surrendered to the heat as the water washed the tension away.

She'd been lost in sleepy, dreamy bath-land for almost an hour when the phone started ringing again. A few seconds later, she heard Faby's frustrated voice yelling at her through the machine.

"Samantha, I *know* you're there! Pick up the damn—"

Sam reached over and grabbed the phone before Faby started filling her message-machine tape with cursing and obscenities. Faby had quite a temper, and Sam could tell from her tone that she was about to go off.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here," Samantha mumbled, grabbing a towel and stepping out of the tub.

Faby's tone softened a bit when she heard Sam's voice, but she couldn't hide her annoyance at having her call screened. "So what are you wearing and what time are we picking you up?"

Sam tried to sound as tired as she possibly could. "You know, I'm not really feeling—"

Faby cut her off. "I don't even want to hear it! This is the third time you've flaked on me this month. What is going on with you?"

"It's nothing personal," Sam assured her. "I just haven't felt like going out lately."

"Well snap out of it already. It's not like you're not getting any younger."

Samantha rolled her eyes. “You are absolutely right—I am almost thirty years old and have been there and done that many times over. So why should I waste my time hanging out in bars, getting groped and hit on by idiots? I can think of a million other things that I’d rather be doing.” Why did she feel like she needed another bath all of a sudden?

“Like what? Watching TV?” Faby demanded. “Explain to me how sitting at home alone every night adds up to a fulfilling existence. I know you like your space, but this is getting ridiculous. Every guy isn’t Tony...”

And therein lies the problem. Tony was the love of her life and she’d never been able to get over losing him. Every man she tried to date was compared to him, and unfortunately, everyone came up short. His memory was like a hex on her love life. “Now Faby, you know the quickest way to get me to hang up the phone is to bring Tony up.”

“I know. I’m sorry. You’re just starting to worry me, that’s all. Come on, just one drink—I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“Sorry Fab, not tonight. But we can meet for a drink tomorrow after work if you want.”

Faby knew when she was fighting a losing battle. “Fine. Can you get off early? Rob and I have to be on the ferry to Catalina by 8pm.”

“No problem, earlier works better for me, too. Now I really should get off this phone and put some clothes on—you know you pulled me out of my bath.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Faby drawled sarcastically. “I know how much your *baths* mean to you. But just think of how much fun you could be having if you had someone in there

with you, like Rob's hunky friend."

"Oh enough already!" Sam interrupted, slightly annoyed. "If I wanted a man in my bath, there would be a man in my bath. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Alright. I love you."

"Love you, too."

Samantha hung up the phone. Now that she was officially freed from all external obligations, she needed to decide what to do with her evening. She could curl up on the couch with her book, or flip on the TV and get lost in Soaps. Samantha didn't care if Faby thought she was hopelessly boring, she loved her simple little life. Keep the drama on television where it belongs.

Chapter Three

Jake could not stop thinking about the woman from the grocery store. He had been in Southern California for two months and had met many smart and attractive women at various nightclubs, bars, and work functions, but it was this mystery woman from the grocery store, the goddess without a name, who had caught his attention. Typical. It was three hours later and he was still kicking himself for not making contact. Why had her beauty been so paralyzing? He liked to think of himself as a man of action, yet he had let her walk away. Hopefully he wouldn't come to regret that.

Taking a sip of his Rum and Coke, Jake leaned back against the bar and surveyed the room. La Verdana seemed to be *the* Thursday night hangout, and he could see why—it was an upscale club with plenty of character. The ground floor consisted of two full bars on each side of the room, separated by a large dance floor. Plush vinyl couches in a variety of bright colors rimmed the perimeter—each with an accompanying black marble table—and an assortment of fake palm trees and large plants were scattered throughout the club contributing to a jungle atmosphere. On Thursdays, the DJ spun nothing but Hip Hop, and the dance floor was packed with people of all colors, bouncin' and gettin' their groove on. Jake nodded his head to the beat of Rob Base's "It Takes Two" as he took it all in. He was happy they were reppin' the old skool, it brought back so many good memories. He was feelin' this spot, definitely his kind of scene.

Jake made his way upstairs so he could get a better view of the room and its occupants. The second floor consisted of a third bar, four pool tables, and a terrace that overlooked the dance floor below, high above the heat and noise. Past the bar upstairs was an outdoor smoker's lounge, complete with strategically-placed heat lamps, where

the smokers could gather to light up without having to leave the bar. Very convenient. But perhaps the most impressive feature of the club was the entrance. The entire front wall of La Verdana was a huge window that rose from the floor to the ceiling and overlooked the action outside on the Promenade. The place was classy without being pretentious, and drew a crowd of late 20 - early 30 something, mostly single, middle-class professionals.

Jake noticed an attractive woman in a simple black dress nursing a martini, her eyes laserbeams of potent lust aimed right at him. He smiled politely in her direction before looking away. Jake was a good-looking guy, having even modeled a bit in college to earn some extra cash, but he preferred that people notice him for his intelligence or sense of humor rather than for his looks. He could easily be a player if he wanted, but he really didn't have the taste for superficial relationships or casual sex, much to the disappointment of his buddy DC, who was always trying to hook him up with this hottie over here, or that honey over there. At one time DC had been so stunned by his string of refusals that he'd actually asked Jake if he was gay! DC was such a character; he couldn't comprehend the idea of a man turning down a sure thing.

DC was currently on the dance floor with one of his girls, Marie or something, who reminded Jake of Tootie from *Facts of Life*. They were grindin' so hard that her skirt was slowly riding up over her thighs, the lower curve of her ass exposed as DC gripped her butt cheeks and pulled her pelvis toward him in rhythmic, thrusting motions. Jake laughed—those two were going to need a room in a minute, as much heat as they were generating down there.

DC (short for David Carver), was one of his new co-workers, and the first real

friend he'd made in LA. Since Jake was new to town, he was still in the process of meeting people and establishing a social circle, but DC had welcomed him into the crew like he was family, taking him out every weekend and introducing him to all the folks. Jake was grateful for that, considering how overwhelming LA had felt at first for a newcomer with no friends or family. He missed the Bay Area at times, but was slowly adjusting to the pace of life in Southern California. Things moved a lot faster here than he was used to, and there seemed to be more of everything—more people, affluence, traffic, smog. LA was definitely different, but he hadn't regretted his decision to relocate once. He had a great job at a stable company, cool co-workers, and most importantly, a chance to start over. There were no ghosts from the past to haunt him, no manipulative ex-girlfriends, and no meddling family members to make him feel guilty about the choices he'd made. For the first time in his life, he was truly free. He was going to get things right this time around.

Jake noticed his other co-worker, Rob, enter the club with his girlfriend Faby. Jake had heard a lot about her, but they had yet to meet. Faby was cute, a petite Latina with wavy hair that hung down almost to her waist. He watched as the couple made their way to the bar hand in hand, greeting friends and acquaintances every few feet. According to DC, Rob and Faby had been together for five years, and Rob was *this close* to popping the question. Putting down his empty glass on the nearest table, Jake made his way toward the bar to greet them.

Rob and DC were the only other men of color in their department besides himself, which probably explained why Jake bonded to them so quickly. But aside from their career paths and skin tone, the three of them couldn't be more different. DC was the loud

one—more thug-ish than the other two in voice and demeanor, and quite the ladies man. At every club or bar they went to, he always had a different set of women jocking for his attention or asking why he hadn't called. The terms monogamy and commitment didn't exist in DC's vocabulary, and though Jake had only known him for a few months, he had a hard time imagining DC in a serious relationship with any one woman. Rob, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. He was quiet, somewhat shy, and deeply committed to his relationship with Faby. So loyal that he didn't even look at other women, even when he was kickin' it with just the guys. DC was constantly riding him about being so whipped on his girl, but even though the two argued like brothers, Jake could tell there was a deep love between them. DC and Rob had been best friends since Middle School, with decades of shared history between them, good and bad. The two of them were like family, and Jake was beginning to feel like part of the family, too.

Rob spotted Jake approaching and pulled Faby away from the group of girls she was talking to. "Jake Clayton," Rob started, with a playful tone of formality. "I would like to introduce you to Miss Fabiola Martinez, interior decorator extraordinaire, and love of my life."

Faby punched him in the arm. "God honey," she joked, a little embarrassed. "You are soooo cheesy." She turned to Jake and stuck out her hand. "Really nice to meet you Jake," she replied with a big smile. "I've heard a lot about you."

Jake shook her outstretched hand. "Same here. It's great to finally meet you."

Jake and Rob started talking about work, and it was all Faby could do to keep from staring at Jake. She couldn't help it, he was by far the most gorgeous man she had *ever* seen in real life. His strong arms, broad shoulders, and well-defined chest resembled that

of a professional basketball player, while his facial features were softened by the most beautiful amber eyes and a kind, welcoming smile. *God*, Faby thought, *if I wasn't already spoken for...*

“So how are you liking Southern California so far Jake?” Faby interrupted.

Jake took a sip of the drink the waitress had brought him. “LA’s different from the Bay Area in a lot of ways, so I’m still getting used to it. But it’s cool so far.”

“Are you seeing anyone?” Faby asked, without a hint of shyness. She was a fairly direct person and had a way of getting straight to the point.

“Um, honey,” Rob interjected, slipping his arm around her waist, “You already have a boyfriend.”

“Like you’d ever let me forget it,” she winked playfully. “But I wasn’t asking because I want to date him. I’m looking out for the single, female population in the area.” *One in particular*, she thought to herself.

Jake took another sip of his drink, the shift in conversation striking an unpleasant nerve. He really wasn’t interested in being set up on blind dates or pimped out to Faby’s friends. He could find his own woman, and already had his sights set on one in particular...

“Well, I’m not seeing anyone exclusively,” Jake started, choosing his words very carefully. “But I *am* interested in someone that I have very serious intentions about.” He conveniently left out the part about having not even met her yet.

As Jake wracked his brains for a way to change the subject, Faby proceeded like a pit bull, refusing to give up her line of questioning. “But if you’re just interested in this someone, but aren’t dating exclusively, then you’re still technically on the market, right?”

Cause I have a friend..."

But before Faby could finish her sentence, DC and his freak for the evening walked up and interrupted them.

"Wasss Upppp my peoples!" DC boomed as he approached. He whispered something into his date's ear, patted her on the ass, and sent her to get him a drink. As he watched her walk away, his gaze locked on her backside. "Now *that*, my man, is a nice piece of ass. Jennifer Lopez ain't got nothin' on my Marie."

Jake couldn't help but smile and nod. This was precisely the change of subject he'd been praying for.

Faby, on the other hand, was clearly annoyed by DC's sudden appearance. "DC," she spat, not even trying to mask her irritation. "You are such a fucking pig. It's amazing to me that your dick hasn't fallen off yet." There was obviously some tension between the two of them, if not outright hatred.

DC wasn't affected in the least by her harsh words and just turned on the charm. "Ah Faby, why you gotta be like that? You know you love me." He winked at her and flashed his biggest and brightest smile.

"I so do *not* love you, you idiot," she snapped, rolling her eyes. She turned to Jake, converting her grimace into an apologetic smile. "It was really nice meeting you Jake. I'm going to go somewhere..." She shot a look at DC. "...Else. Hopefully we can talk again later." She gave Rob a quick kiss on the cheek and made her way toward her girlfriends at the other end of the bar.

"Fucking Feminist," DC mumbled as soon as she was out of earshot.

"Dude, that's my girlfriend, shut up." Rob looked at Jake and shrugged his

shoulders. “You may not have noticed, but DC and Faby don’t get along so well.”

“Whatever man,” DC replied in a tone of mock hurt. “It’s all her. I try to be nice, you saw. I smiled in her face after she called me a fucking pig. It’s not my fault your girlfriend’s got PMS every damn day.”

Rob responded with his trademark silence, clearly tired of the recurring argument. Jake could sympathize, he’d been in a similar situation when his ex-girlfriend had tried to phase all of his single friends out of his life. She’d claimed the group of “worthless players” were a bad influence on him. But to have to choose between your best friend since childhood and the woman you wanted to marry? Jake didn’t envy Rob’s position at all. It was like trying to make a father choose which child he loved more—it sucked no matter how you sliced it.

“So are you guys gonna run with me in the game tomorrow?” Jake asked, attempting to steer the conversation toward a lighter topic. A few weeks ago, Jake had started a lunchtime basketball challenge that was gaining popularity and spreading throughout the company. Jake, Rob, and DC were the defending champions.

“Yeah, I’m in,” Rob replied, thankful for the subject change.

“Me too,” added DC. “I’d never pass up an opportunity to dunk on some white boys.”

DC licked his lips as Marie sauntered toward them with his drink in hand. “I’ll be back,” he mumbled, as he took his drink and steered her back toward the dance floor. Tupac’s “I Get Around” had just come on and it was practically his theme song. No way he was sitting this one out.

After DC was out of range, Jake asked, “Do they fight like that all the time?”

A genuine look of sadness crossed Rob's face briefly, an expression Jake had never seen before. "Pretty much," Rob said. "It's not so bad when they're not in the same room though." He was trying his hardest to make light of it, but Jake could tell the whole thing was wearing him out. He was just too nice of a guy to show it.

"Man, that sucks." Jake wished he could think of something more constructive or reassuring to say, but being relatively new to the clique, he had no idea what DC and Faby's history was, or for how long this hate/hate relationship had been going on. Jake was big on privacy, and knew better than to make assumptions about other people's situations. In his experience, he found things were usually much more complicated than they appeared on the surface. But even though he tended to keep his thoughts and opinions to himself, Jake was always down to listen.

Rob must have sensed that about him. "You have no idea how frustrating it is," he confessed, displaying another rare emotion for Rob—anger. "What the fuck do they expect me to do? DC knows I love Faby. Shit, he's the first person I told when I decided I was going to propose. And Fab knows DC's my best friend." He took a healthy swig of his beer. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Get out of the way?" Jake offered.

"Dude, I'll drink to that." Rob cracked a smile as they clinked their glasses together in a toast.

"What about you man?" It was Rob's turn to change the subject. "Are you really seeing someone, or was that just a creative dodge to get my girlfriend off your back?"

Jake laughed. "I'm that transparent, huh?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. But I do work with you every day and you've never said

anything about a woman.”

Jake’s thoughts traveled back to the mystery woman from the grocery store. He could conjure up her image effortlessly in his mind—her face, her eyes, her smile... Though he’d never admit it to another soul, each time he surveyed the crowd, he was secretly hoping his gaze would miraculously land on her face, that she’d materialize before his eyes and he’d have another chance to say all the things he wished he’d said this afternoon.

“She’s beautiful man, so beautiful,” Jake started, staring across the dance floor, searching. “The kind of beautiful that stops traffic and makes grown men studder.”

“Well that’s a good start,” Rob commented, following Jake’s gaze to see what he was looking at. “What’s her name?”

Jake swirled the ice cubes around in his glass. “I don’t know.”

Rob raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know?”

“Well, we haven’t actually met yet. I just seen her at Albertsons today and... I mean, I know this sounds crazy but... Have you ever looked at a woman and just *known* she was it?”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jake felt foolish. The whole thing sounded so ridiculous when he said it out loud. If DC had been there, he surely would have laughed in Jake’s face and called him corny. Jake hoped Rob was easier on him.

Much to Jake’s relief, Rob was surprisingly empathetic. “Well, I knew the first time I met Faby that I wanted to marry her someday, so yeah, I think things can happen like that but—you don’t even know her name?”

“I know man.” Jake shook his head. “And now I can’t stop thinking about her.”

Rob signaled the bartender. “And I thought I had problems.” He gestured toward Jake’s empty glass. “Can I get you another one of those?”

“Sure, why not?” The bartender returned shortly with their drinks and Jake noticed an open pool table upstairs. “Wanna play a few games?” he asked, nodding his head in the direction of the vacant table.

“Best of three,” Rob said. “Loser gets the next round.”

“You’re on.”