

## Chapter One

Samantha Merrick, a good girl, had spent her whole life playing by the rules and doing what was expected of her. But even good girls are susceptible to making bad decisions, or a series of bad decisions, as they try to figure out who they are.

She woke up that fateful morning with a hangover and a strange boy in bed next to her. Where was she? Squinting in the darkness, her lover's form came into focus—chin-length blond hair, muscular arms, a perfectly sculpted chest. A thin sheet covered the lower half of his body, and like her, he was completely nude. Her eyes darted around the unfamiliar surroundings until they landed on a surfboard propped in the corner of the room. *Ah yes, the surfer dude.* It all trickled back to her.

She felt around in the dark for her clothes. Regret, combined with the aftertaste of tequila and stale cigarettes that lingered in her mouth, triggered a mild nausea. Determined to sneak away before he woke, she crept out of his bedroom, without bothering to leave a note. She had no desire to see him ever again.

Samantha jumped behind the wheel of her trusty Toyota, the pounding in her head merciless. As if on autopilot, she shook off the morning brain fog and maneuvered her car toward the beach. Whenever she felt the urge to run, she always ended up at the water's edge. The ocean was her sanctuary, and she could sit for hours on the edge of the cliff, imagining the water washing the ache away. Layers of disappointment and regret worn down as the waves crashed against the shore, an emotional erosion of sorts.

Her second year of college was nothing like her freshman year had been. When she'd first arrived at UC Santa Cruz, she had been so excited to be away from home for

the first time, anxious to soak up all the knowledge and experiences that her sheltered, suburban upbringing had lacked. The sleepy, coastal town of Santa Cruz was everything Samantha had hoped it would be, and she often marveled at how blessed she was to have the opportunity to attend college in such a beautiful place, amongst such progressive, liberal-minded people. She'd been having the time of her life.

But the events of last summer changed all that. Her awestruck wonder and sense of adventure had been replaced by a searing cynicism, the quest for knowledge taking a backseat to the more pressing pursuit of finding something, anything, to numb the pain. Samantha was no longer concerned with freeing her mind. All she wanted to do was forget...

She pulled into the deserted parking lot just before sunrise. The Santa Cruz coastline had no shortage of scenic vistas, but Samantha was partial to this one secluded ledge she'd stumbled upon. She grabbed a blanket out of the trunk as the sun crept upward in the morning sky, erasing the last traces of night with its ascent. Sunrise was a particularly magical time, the pre-dawn air curiously still, as if the day were holding its breath, waiting to be born. The dew-speckled ground glistened in the morning sun and cast an aura of shiny newness across the landscape. She took a deep breath, drawing in the crisp, salty air. The promise of a new day was one of the few things that still inspired her.

As Samantha made her way down the narrow footpath, she was surprised to find a guy sitting in her spot. He was staring across the ocean, legs hanging over the side, still and motionless like a statue. Tempted to leave and look for somewhere less populated, she decided against it. If she relocated now, she'd miss the sunrise, so she selected a spot

on the eastern side of the cliff, several feet behind him. Together, yet apart, they watched the sky slowly change from red, to orange, then gold, before finally fading into blue.

Half an hour passed before he moved. When he finally looked her way, a startled expression briefly marred his serene features. He blinked and shook his head, as if she were a mere apparition he expected to disappear. Samantha smiled at him and waved. A simple, casual gesture to assure him she was indeed real.

“Sorry I’m in your spot,” he called out. Samantha’s heart stopped. How could he have possibly known that?

He pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights from his breast pocket and held one out in her direction. “Smoke?”

Samantha stood up and walked over to where he sat. Taking the cigarette from his outstretched hand, she sat down beside him. Their eyes met, and she was struck by this odd sense of familiarity.

“Forgive me if the answer is yes,” she began, “but, do we know each other?”

A sly smile played on his lips. He lit her cigarette, then his own, saying nothing.

“Did I say something funny?” she asked, irritated by his non-response.

He took a long drag from his cigarette and chuckled. “Do you often meet people and forget you’ve met them?”

“No,” she snapped, a tad defensive. Then her thoughts flashed back to the nameless boy whose bed she had just fled. She amended her answer quickly. “Well, sometimes...” She cocked her head and looked at him curiously. “You didn’t answer my question.”

He smiled at her again. “No, we’ve never met.”

“Then how did you know you were sitting in my spot?”

“Let’s just say that I love sunrise as much as you love sunsets,” he whispered mysteriously.

Though she’d never seen this guy before in her life, Samantha was intrigued. How did he know she loved sunsets? How did he know this was her spot? Who was this presumptuous stranger?

He returned his attention to the ocean, which gave her the opportunity to examine him more closely. He was actually very attractive, with a coolness and patience that suggested he was much older than the college boys she was used to seeing around campus. His caramel skin tone matched her own, almost exactly, and he had a head full of curls where an afro should have been, betraying his mixed-race heritage. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she knew him from somewhere, and wondered if maybe she’d seen him at one of the multicultural functions on campus.

As if reading her mind, he confessed, “I’ve seen you here before.”

She giggled nervously. “What, are you stalking me or something?”

“Not exactly.”

Another long pause. Samantha grew more confused by the second.

“Relax,” he said finally, sensing her discomfort. He gestured to a large Victorian house located off the main road. “I live up there. The window on the second floor, with the wind chimes outside of it, is mine.” He smiled again. “Watching you talk to yourself is one of my favorite ways to spend the afternoon.”

A wave of vulnerability washed over her—this man *had* been watching her! “Oh, I see, you’re like a peeping Tom or something.”

He laughed and put out his cigarette. “No, I’m a people watcher. You happen to be a very interesting person to watch.”

He captured her eyes in a penetrating gaze, as if he was looking *in* her, rather than at her. Samantha felt herself being drawn to him psychically, hypnotically, a level of intimacy present that hadn’t been earned. She turned away to break the spell.

“So why do you come out here and sit on the cliff by yourself?” She glanced toward the house. “I mean, you can obviously see the sunrise fine from your window.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cigarettes again, offering her another. She declined.

“Don’t get me wrong, the view is great from up there. But sometimes I need to get away from it all. When you sit in this spot and look out across the water, all you can see is ocean for miles in three directions. All evidence of life and the city is behind you.” He took a drag from his cigarette, exhaling slowly. “When I’m feeling overwhelmed, all that water makes my problems seem so small and insignificant. It’s quite humbling really, a great way to start the day, with a fresh perspective.”

Curiosity piqued, Samantha couldn’t help but wonder what kind of problems he was referring to. “Do you come out here every morning?”

“Nope. Only when I’m feeling a little lost.”

The word echoed in her head. *Lost*. One simple syllable that perfectly described the past four months of her life. She thought she was the only one who felt that way. Minutes passed as they sat together in shared solitude, looking across the sea.

“So what’s got you up and out on the cliff so early?” he asked, breaking the silence.

She smiled at him knowingly. “I guess I was feeling a little lost this morning, too.”

Empathy and concern filled his dark-brown eyes. “You want to talk about it?”

Samantha drew in a deep breath. It had been so long since she'd confided in someone. She had tried talking to her friends, but they were too busy partying their lives away to be of much help. If she was told to move on and get over it one more time... “I don't want to bore you with my problems.”

“I can think of many adjectives I'd use to describe you my dear, but boring would not be one of them,” he said with a wink. “Talk to me.”

Strangely enough, something in his eyes made Samantha feel like she could trust him. “Have you ever had something happen to you that made you doubt every instinct you've ever had, every decision you've ever made?”

He nodded sympathetically. “Sure. Everyone experiences that kind of wake-up call at some point in their lives. It's like a rite of passage.”

Samantha picked up a stick and started drawing designs in the sand. “Maybe so, but some days I wonder if I'm going to make it through to the other side.”

“Of course you will,” he assured her. “Heartbreak and disappointment build character.”

“But that's just it—how can any experience build character when I don't even know who I am anymore? Getting up every day and going through my normal routine... It's like trying to squeeze into clothes two sizes too small.” She threw the stick over the edge of the cliff in frustration. “My old life just doesn't fit me anymore.”

He took a moment to search her face, as if seeing her for the first time. “I know exactly what you mean.”

“You do?”

“More than you know. But isn't that what going away to college is all about? We're supposed to be finding ourselves, right?”

“Supposedly, but I only feel more and more alienated from my surroundings as the days go on. Sometimes I don't know *why* I do some of the things I do.” Her thoughts returned to the anonymous boy she'd spent the night with, and a fresh wave of shame washed over her. For the first time she felt slightly self-conscious. She had literally just rolled out of bed and hadn't looked in a mirror since sometime last night. Samantha ran a hand through her shoulder-length curls—she probably looked tore up!

“Don't worry,” he said, turning toward her. “You look fine.”

Was he reading her mind? She lifted her head and found him looking at her. This time she didn't retreat from his gaze, choosing instead to return his stare and look deep into his eyes. They were beautiful, he was beautiful. Every ounce of fear and mistrust evaporated as he stared into her soul. She could have spent the entire day sitting out there just looking at him. A few moments ago, he was just some random guy she'd met on the cliff. Until she felt it. *Click*. It was quiet, and it was subtle, but it was there. *Click*. And she had no words...

She was lost in his eyes when he was suddenly distracted by the appearance of an older couple making their way down the path toward the cliff, hand in hand.

“Looks like we have some company.” He put out his cigarette, then collected their discarded cigarette butts and put them in his half-empty pack.

Samantha glanced at the older couple and smiled, but inside she was secretly disappointed they were no longer alone. She wasn't ready to part ways with the mysterious stranger.

He was looking at her thoughtfully. “You wanna get some coffee or something? I’m just about due for a caffeine fix.”

Samantha’s heart skipped a beat as she tried to hide her relief and excitement. “Sure,” she answered, as casually as she could manage. “That sounds great.” He rose to his feet and extended a hand to help her up. She felt a shock of electricity when they touched, and much to her surprise, he continued to hold her hand as they started toward the path. “Wait,” she said, pulling away reflexively. “I don’t even know your name.”

He smiled at her again and she melted. “Tony,” he responded, then corrected himself. “Well actually, it’s Anthony, but no one ever calls me that. You?”

“Samantha,” she replied softly. “Most people call me Sam.”

“It’s nice to meet you Samantha.” He extended his hand again and she took it.

*Yeah, she thought. Nice to meet you, too...*

## Chapter Two

They exchanged life stories over coffee. Samantha couldn't get over the instant connection she felt to this stranger, how comfortable she was in his presence. They had both grown up in a predominantly-white, middle class suburb, where they had been one of the few brown kids in their schools. Straight-A students throughout high school, they were both majoring in Sociology at UC Santa Cruz. Children of divorce, neither of them was very close to their fathers. To discover that he shared the same rare ethnic mix—Black and Filipino—was icing on the cake. The similarities were numerous and startling—he could have been her twin, the male version of herself. He was new and familiar at the same time.

Conversation flowed easily, and Samantha found herself revealing more to him about her life, fears, and dreams than she ever had with anyone. It had been so long since she'd had a sympathetic ear that the sentiments poured out of her like water rushing through a broken dam. Tony listened attentively when she spoke, eyes full of empathy, asking thoughtful, probing questions that pushed her to look deeper into each issue. He appeared to have an intuitive understanding of exactly what she was feeling, and on those few occasions when Samantha had to pause to search for the perfect word to complete her thought, he would often jump in and finish her sentence. It was eerie, like he truly had the ability to read her mind.

Coffee turned into lunch, and as the hours passed, Samantha discovered she was able to read his mind, too. Tony was one of those long-winded individuals prone to rambling, as if his tongue could hardly keep up with the speed at which his mind churned out ideas. Sometimes his thoughts would break off into a seemingly meaningless

tangent, only to wrap back around and come full circle four tangents later to make a very insightful and profound point. To a normal person, he may have been a bit hard to follow, but Samantha was able to keep up with him through every random turn and subtle iteration. A couple of times, Tony had paused dramatically mid-sentence, as if testing their newfound connectedness by challenging her to complete his thought. His face would register amazement, then amusement, as Samantha confidently finished his interrupted sentences, assuring him they were indeed on the same page so he could continue with his profundicizing.

Samantha was captivated. Tony was by far the most interesting person she had ever met—definitely an intellectual, very spiritual, yet refreshingly grounded. She was spellbound by his elaborate narratives and soapbox diatribes, delightfully entertained by his wit and humor, and impressed by his unique perspective on the world. This man had a truly global consciousness! His words resonated so deeply at the core of her being that at times she resisted the urge to pinch him, pinch herself, just to confirm that he was real. She couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed someone this much, and as the day wore on, she felt the blossoming of a powerful physical attraction. It made sense—he was stimulating in every possible way. As a matter of fact, Samantha was on the verge of being *overstimulated*.

After lunch they decided to drive up the coast to one of the more remote and secluded beaches. No topic was off limits—they delved into subjects such as politics, social problems, religion and spirituality, women's rights, and racism. With very few exceptions, they agreed on virtually everything. They even shared the same secret fantasy of abandoning Capitalist society altogether in favor of a simple little life on a

remote island somewhere in the sea of their choosing. The only difference in their fantasies was that she preferred the Mediterranean, while he dreamed of the Caribbean.

They strolled down the beach side by side, marking a path just above the water's edge, footsteps in sync. Samantha marveled at how easy it was to share silence with him as well. After an entire day of nonstop conversation, they had naturally lapsed into a contemplative silence, both lost in their own thoughts. Talking out her anxieties had cleared her head, and the heavy weight she had been carrying around seemed to have temporarily lifted. She felt steadier and lighter, experiencing peace and contentment for the first time in months.

As they made their way back to the car, Samantha started to tense—she didn't want the day to end. She unlocked the passenger side door for him, but Tony made no effort to get in the car. Instead, he folded his arms across his chest and studied her thoughtfully. "This is crazy."

"Which part?" she asked, relieved that he didn't seem to be in a rush to leave.

"Do you realize we've been together for almost twelve straight hours?" A slight tremble in his voice betrayed a flicker of insecurity. "I can't believe you're not sick of me yet."

"Are you kidding? I can't believe you're not sick of *me* yet," she confessed, mirroring his quiet vulnerability back at him.

Tony reached up to brush an eyelash off her cheek. "To tell you the truth, I can't imagine ever being sick of you Samantha."

Samantha caught her breath. No one had ever said something like that to her before. He turned her head toward him and their eyes met. There it was again, *Click*.

Time stood still. Looking into his eyes, she felt a renewed sense of hope, like maybe it was possible for her broken heart to heal. She had resolved herself to a lifetime of loneliness, vowing never again to let someone get close enough to hurt her, but the strength of their connection was undeniable. This man made her want to believe in love again.

“What’s crazy to me,” she started, struggling to regain her composure, “is that even though we just met this morning—”

“It feels like we’ve known each other forever,” he finished simply.

Samantha looked up to find sad and troubled eyes staring back at her. A dark cloud had appeared in Tony’s disposition, and she had no idea what had brought it on. She scanned his face for a clue to what was going on in his head, but the mind-reading thing didn’t work this time. “What is it?”

He said nothing. Instead, he took her hand and led her to a bench a few feet away. After they were both seated, he started speaking again. “I have never wanted to kiss anyone more than I want to kiss you right now.”

Samantha’s heart caught in her throat. “Okay... But why do you look so tortured about it? Kissing is supposed to be fun.”

“I have a girlfriend.”

The words hung in the air—all her buoyant hopes and blissful feelings instantly deflated. Now she understood why he looked so sad and troubled. She had no doubt that a similar expression had settled in on her own face. Of course she would meet the man of her dreams, only to find out he was unavailable. Of course. Her self-protective walls snapped back into place as she scolded herself for being so foolish and trusting. The

disappointment stung and burned much more than it should have, and though she tried to hide it, she doubted she was successful. It was hard to appear unaffected when all she wanted to do was scream, curse, and throw things. But not yet, not in front of the man. That tantrum would have to wait until she was in the privacy of her own home.

“I can’t believe that after twelve hours you’re just now getting around to mentioning that,” Samantha muttered sarcastically. She grabbed the pack of cigarettes from his front breast pocket.

Tony lit her cigarette, and then lit one for himself. “I know, I’m sorry. I don’t want you to think I was intentionally misleading you—I swear that wasn’t it. Honestly, I didn’t think about her at all for most of the day, as terrible as that sounds. It wasn’t until the chemistry kicked in and I realized you and I were bonding at this ridiculously rapid rate that it occurred to me ‘Shit, I have a girlfriend.’ But by that time we were having such a great time, I didn’t want it to end. I still don’t want it to end. I figured the second you found out I had a girlfriend something would change.” He searched her face. “I can see in your eyes something already has.”

It was her turn to say nothing. She was in a state of shock, speech wasn’t even possible at this point.

“Samantha, I have never met anyone like you before. It sounds crazy, but I have this feeling we were supposed to meet, you know, that our paths were supposed to cross. This is some crazy Fate shit, right? I knew the second I turned my head on the cliff this morning and saw you sitting there that it was Fate. All things happen for a reason, right? This had to have happened for a reason, right?”

She continued smoking, saying nothing.

“You totally think I’m a jerk; it’s written all over your face. See, I was afraid this was going to happen.” He stood up and began to pace. “That’s the only reason I didn’t say anything earlier. Not to make excuses or anything, I just... well... I just didn’t know what to do. I mean, this has never happened to me before, you know what I mean? Samantha? Damn it woman, will you say something?”

She ignored him. He pulled another cigarette out of his pack and lit it in frustration.

“How long have you guys been together?” she managed finally. Of all the questions racing through her mind, that was the one that came tumbling out first.

He stared at the ocean, unable to look at her. “Four and a half years.”

“God Tony.” How could this be? They had hit it off so well. “Do you love her?”

Tony paused for a long while before answering. “It’s complicated but... Yes, I love her.”

Samantha’s heart sank—that wasn’t the answer she’d wanted to hear. “Then what exactly is it you want from me?” she snapped, not bothering to mask her bitterness.

He sat down beside her, eyes pleading, but she continued to avoid his gaze and fixate on the ocean, refusing to get sucked back into what she had been starting to feel for him.

“I know this is incredibly selfish of me,” he began softly, his expression pained and miserable. “But I can’t imagine just walking away from this.” He hesitated for a few seconds, and then continued. “I was hoping, for now at least, that we could be friends.”

Samantha shuddered. “Friends,” she repeated. “Do you know how many traumatic childhood memories you conjured up with that sentence?” A dry laugh

escaped her lips. She had way too much pride to let him see how devastated she really was.

He relaxed at the sound of her laugh, the playful twinkle returning to his eyes. “Give me your car keys.”

“Whoa.” She pulled her purse out of his reach. “You drop that mega-bomb on me, ruin my lovely afternoon, and now you want my car keys? You may be cute, but you’re not that cute.”

His playful tone evaporated. “Look, I know you feel I’ve misrepresented myself, and if you decide you want nothing to do with me, I’ll have to accept that. But girlfriend or no, I haven’t felt like this in a long time, and that’s the truth. Please, just give me a few more hours, a chance to end this day the way it should have ended. One perfect day, from sunrise to sunset. That’s all I ask.”

She should have run screaming in the other direction, far away from this man named Tony and the tidal wave of emotions she was feeling. Her rational mind flashed warning signals, cautioning her to get out while she still could, but her heart wouldn’t cooperate. Why was he so irresistible?

“Where are you going to take me?” she asked suspiciously. She didn’t have any intention of turning him down, but refused to come off as too eager.

“Will you just give me the keys and trust me?”

Trust. Now there was a concept foreign to Samantha. Her ability to trust had been completely crippled by her last relationship. But for some reason where Tony was concerned, trust was disturbingly automatic. Even with this new revelation about the girlfriend, every instinct she had was telling her to give in and go with him, consequences

be damned. She'd finally found someone she could open up to, who understood her, and she didn't want to give that up. Handing him her car keys, Samantha couldn't help but smile at the way his face lit up when he realized she wasn't going to deny his last request. Yup, she was about to board a runaway train. The only thing left to do now was hang on and try to enjoy the ride...

## Chapter Three

They were cruising back toward town on Highway One, with Tony behind the wheel, and Samantha staring vacantly out the window at the passing scenery. The afternoon sun was beginning its descent into the West, having traced a perfect arc in the sky since its first appearance over the mountains earlier that morning. Samantha was amazed at how time flew by when they were together, the euphoria of true companionship transporting them to another world where they were the only occupants. Except now she had to face an uncomfortable reality. They weren't the only two people on the planet, not by a long shot.

Samantha had a tendency to over think things, and couldn't help but feel conflicted about how to proceed with her new friend. She was *not* a cheater, and felt confident that she could keep things between them platonic, but spending any amount of time with a man with a girlfriend was like asking for a Soap Opera to unfold in the middle of your life. No matter how innocent things were, someone could still get hurt. But despite all the red flags and potential complications, the simple fact remained that she didn't want to walk away. And Tony didn't seem to want to let her.

"Where are you taking me again?" she asked. It was time to suspend the analysis and try to enjoy the rest of the day.

"It's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises. You can't prepare for a surprise."

Tony took his eyes off the road for a moment to steal a glance in her direction. Knees drawn against her chest, she absentmindedly twisted and untwisted a strand of long, curly hair around her index finger. She did that unconsciously when she was

nervous, one of the many things he'd discovered about her during the course of the day that he found completely adorable. He couldn't deny that he was attracted to her—she was by far the most beautiful, intelligent, and insightful girl he'd ever met. But the timing was all wrong...

He could tell from her demeanor that she was starting to close off toward him. Her usually animated eyes had been cold and expressionless ever since they left the beach. She was also becoming increasingly irritated by his refusal to tell her where they were going. "You're a control-freak, aren't you?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"No I didn't, I just said it." Tony laughed, unable to hide his amusement at having pushed one of her buttons. The slight flare of her nostrils and flush in her cheeks was such a turn-on—she was gorgeous when she was angry. "You need to learn how to be more spontaneous. For example, this thing with the car keys. You couldn't just trust me and give me the keys when I asked for them. Oh no, you had to fight me. Now, thanks to your stubborn resistance, we might be late for our next adventure."

She turned to face him, fire flashing in her eyes. "First of all, I've been plenty spontaneous today, thank you. I've been running around town with a complete stranger, blowing off homework and God knows what else. We just met twelve hours ago. It would have been a little naïve of me to just hand over my keys to some stranger without—"

"I really wish you'd quit referring to me as a stranger," he interrupted. "I'm no stranger, Samantha."

His simple statement completely disarmed her. She softened her tone and

continued in a less hostile manner. “Well, regardless, I think I’m entitled to know where we’re going. Don’t you think I’ve had enough surprises for one day, Mr. ‘I have a girlfriend.’ ”

Tony flinched. “Touché Ms. Merrick, Touché.” He turned off Highway One and headed back toward the cliffs. “I’m still not spoiling the surprise.”

Samantha leaned back in her seat and resumed her hair-twisting. “Fine, have it your way.”

Tony turned onto West Cliff Drive, and followed the winding road alongside the ocean until he got to his house. He still couldn’t believe his luck in finding a sublet in one of Santa Cruz’s prime coast side locations—the luxurious estates in the upscale neighborhood started in the million-dollar range. The house he lived in used to be a frat house until the University shut down the fraternity after a tragic hazing incident. Now the eight bedrooms were rented out to UCSC upperclassmen and graduate students. He pulled Samantha’s car into the crowded lot located toward the rear of the property.

“What are we doing back at your house?”

“I need to grab a few things for the next mission. You promise you won’t take off while I’m gone?”

“How can I? You still have my car keys.”

Tony put the key back in the ignition and clicked on the radio. “I trust you,” he said with a smile. He hopped out of the car and jogged toward the house.

Samantha looked at the keys dangling from the ignition. She could easily slide into the driver’s seat, start the car, and drive away. That’s what she *should* have done anyway. Glancing up at the three-story house looming in front of her, she wondered if

the girlfriend lived there, too. What would she think about Samantha spending so much time with her boyfriend? Yeah, if Sam were smart she'd get the hell out of there. But before rational thought could be converted into rational action, Tony reappeared clutching a brown paper bag and a burgundy sweatshirt.

“That was fast.”

He got behind the wheel, placed the paper bag in the backseat, and tossed the sweatshirt into her lap. “In case you get cold later.”

Samantha was floored by his thoughtfulness and ability to anticipate her every need. It was starting to get a little chilly, and she still had on the thin silk blouse she'd worn the night before. The sweatshirt was perfect. “Thanks,” she mumbled gratefully as she slipped it over her head.

Tony backed out of the driveway and headed for the hills. They passed the University and continued up the mountain toward Bonny Doon, which struck Samantha as odd because the farther up the road you went, the more remote it got. She'd been up there once or twice on hiking expeditions, and it was nothing but rock and forest past a certain point. “Where are we going again?” she asked nervously.

“I told you it's a surprise. But we're almost there.”

They continued to follow the windy road up the hill. Samantha shook her head, scolding herself silently. She used to be so cautious, but lately she'd been behaving so recklessly. What was she thinking, handing over her keys to some strange man and allowing him to take her to some secluded location just before nightfall? He could have been a serial killer for all she knew, though in her heart she was certain she was safe. Safer than she'd ever been. She was more afraid of the uncharted emotional territory she

was wandering into, yet here she was, against her better judgment, throwing caution to the wind, thrilled and excited to have finally found a kindred spirit. True, she had no idea where they were going, and maybe she should have been more concerned about that. But they were having so much fun, it was a detail that was easy to overlook.

Tony pulled the car over in front of a barbed wire fence. "We're almost there."

"You've been saying that for the past half hour."

"Well, this time I really mean it." He grabbed the paper bag out of the backseat and popped the trunk. "Do you mind if we bring your blanket along for the mission?"

"Not at all." Sam grabbed the blanket and folded it neatly. "I take it we're going on a little hike?"

"If you're still up for it."

"I've come this far. It would be pretty silly to turn back now."

Tony held the wire of the fence apart for her as she climbed through. When safely on the other side, she turned around and returned the favor. He led them onto a slightly overgrown trail that wound up and around the mountain. The trail was level for the most part, but whenever they came upon a section that was steep or tricky to navigate, Tony would give her advance warning and reach back to help her up, his strong hands holding her steady as she struggled with her footing. They continued to climb for about fifteen minutes until they reached the top of the hill they were traversing.

Mesmerized by the scene that lay before her, Samantha stopped and caught her breath. They were standing atop the highest point in the area, high above the trees. She could see clear to the ocean from where they stood, and the sun was starting to sink down toward the horizon line. The entire sky was changing from orange to a deep pink before

her eyes, a gentle breeze rustling the tips of the treetops below, filling the air around them with a gentle, soothing hum.

She gasped. “This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Tony laid the blanket on the ground in front of them and gestured for her to sit.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” she repeated distractedly.

He pulled a joint out of his pocket, lit it, and passed it to her. “This is my absolute favorite spot in town. I don’t think many people know about it—I’ve never seen anyone else up here.”

Samantha took a hit off the joint and passed it back. “How did you find it?”

“Luck pretty much. I hike up here all the time. Then one day I noticed this barbed-wire fence, and it piqued my curiosity. It’s the only fence in this area—I had to see what was on the other side.”

“You rebel,” she teased.

“This is my sacred, secret place. I’ve never brought anyone up here with me before.”

Surprise registered on Samantha’s face. “Really? Wow, I’m honored. This spot is just incredible. You know that song that goes ‘I’m on top of the world, looking down on Creation?’ ”

“By the Carpenters?”

“Yeah. That’s how I feel right now. The colors alone—the greens of the trees, the blue of the ocean, the red of the sky turning into violet—it’s totally surreal.”

“I knew you’d be able to appreciate it. Being a connoisseur of sunsets and all.”

Samantha tore her eyes away from the setting sun to look at him. He wasn't watching the sky at all, his eyes fixed intently on her face. She resisted being drawn in by his hypnotic gaze. "What's in the bag?"

"I thought you'd never ask." He reached into the paper bag and pulled out a bottle of red wine, along with a corkscrew.

"You've certainly thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Well that was the plan."

"Right, the perfect day..."

"From Sunrise to Sunset."

Tony uncorked the wine and passed the bottle to her. She took a healthy swig. The sun was melting into the ocean now, the sky slowly starting to darken. They sipped the wine in silence for a few minutes, passing the bottle back and forth, quietly watching the sun disappear. With the sun's exit, the air around them started to cool and Samantha fought back a slight chill. But after a few more sips of wine, she felt the emergence of an inner warmth radiating outward, balancing out the change in air temperature perfectly. Samantha laid back on the blanket and focused on the night sky stretching out above her, marveling at the field of stars that appeared cluster after cluster, growing brighter with each passing minute.

"I can't believe how bright the stars look up here."

"I know. There's barely any light pollution, so the stars really sparkle. It's like a whole other world."

"I really gotta hand it to you, Tony—this day has been absolutely perfect. Well, with the exception of the whole 'I have a girlfriend' moment," she said with a good-

natured chuckle.

“Yeah, talk about a mood killer, huh?”

Samantha rolled onto her side. He was reclined as well, leaning back on his elbows, his face turned skyward. Samantha didn't know if it was the weed or the wine, the clean air or the cool breeze, but she was feeling calmer, steadier, and ready to migrate into choppy emotional waters. Besides, avoiding the subject any longer wasn't going to make the girlfriend go away.

“So tell me about her.”

Tony took a deep breath. “What do you want to know?” He wasn't trying to be evasive, he just didn't know where to start.

“Whatever's relevant. I don't know. We've talked about everything else and it just flowed. You said you wanted to be friends, right? Well, friends talk about their significant others.”

Tony sat up and turned to face her. “Okay, let's see. Her name is Angela. We've known each other since we were kids, and she was one of my best friends in high school.”

“Wow, you two go way back.”

“Yeah, we do. After graduation, most of our friends left to attend four-year universities, but neither of us had the financial resources to go away to school, so we stayed behind and went to a local Junior College first to save money. Somewhere along the way, the friendship turned into something more, and before I knew it, a year had passed and we were moving in together. After that we were pretty much inseparable, until I decided to come up here.”

“She’s still in LA?”

“Yeah. She wanted to move with me, but I told her no.”

“How come?”

“This was my one chance to get out in the world and find myself. You know, figure out who Anthony Carteris really is, without having Angela or my family to lean on. I desperately needed for something to be about me, and only me, for a change.”

Samantha smiled. “So have you found yourself yet?”

*And so much more*, he thought, looking at her fondly. “I’m getting there. With each new experience, the more I am changed. I’ve discovered that I have a burning desire to travel the globe—India, Africa, all over. The more I learn, the more I need to know! And that’s where me and Angela’s paths seem to diverge.” He sighed heavily. “She’s content with her life exactly the way it is. She’s not an explorer. Instead of yearning for change, she wants everything to stay exactly the same. She has her reasons for feeling that way—an unstable childhood, loads of abuse, an absent father, the works. But that’s not me. I need different things, things I know she can’t give me.”

“I see.”

“She hasn’t changed at all since high school, and I feel like I’ve changed so much in the two years that I’ve been in Santa Cruz. Sometimes I wonder if she’s even noticed.”

“I know what you mean. There’s nothing worse than feeling like the people who are supposed to know you the best, don’t know you at all.”

“Tell me about it. To be honest, I’ve thought a lot about ending the relationship. But it’s hard because we’ve been through so much together. Angela has supported me,

emotionally and financially, when I was really struggling. Stood by me through some really hard times. I don't know if I would have made it back to school without her in my corner, encouraging me to do it. She's my best friend, and it's hard for me to imagine life without her, even though I do feel we've been drifting farther and farther apart."

Samantha let silence fill the air between them as she absorbed all this new information. She hadn't realized Tony had entertained thoughts of ending his relationship. But even so, Tony was not yet a free man, and it was clear that he was deeply bonded to this woman. As much as she was drawn to him, mentally and physically, Samantha had no desire to be the third party in a love triangle.

"So what are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"About Angela."

"Well, I graduate in June, and then I'm moving back to L.A. I figured I'd just deal with it when I got home. I don't think it's right to break up with her while I'm up here and she's down there. Seems like a cowardly way to approach the situation, and after five years, she deserves better than that."

Night had fallen, and the moon was hovering huge and full above them. He looked so beautiful sitting there bathed in moonlight, and she couldn't help but yearn for things she knew were wrong. Could they really make a friendship work without acting on their attraction, or was she kidding herself? "What are we doing here, Tony?"

"What do you mean?"

Samantha looked him directly in the eye. "You know exactly what I mean."

Tony took her hand, and she shivered at his touch. "I think you are an incredible

woman, Samantha. I've only known you a day, but it's long enough for me to know that there is something very special about you. I know you have come into my life for a reason. I just need some time to sort out my situation. I'm not asking you to sit around and wait for me, or be the other woman, or anything scandalous like that, but I do need you in my life." He lifted her chin so their eyes met. "We need each other. I'd really like to give this friendship thing a try."

Samantha knew how complicated and painful this situation could end up being for everyone involved, but he was right—she needed him. She had finally found someone who actually understood her, someone she felt she could really talk to. She'd just have to find a way to keep her hormones in check. For everyone's sake.

"Let's just take it one day at a time and see how it goes, okay?" she offered.

His face lit up with a smile that rivaled the glow emanating from the moon above. He covered her hand with his. "Thank you."