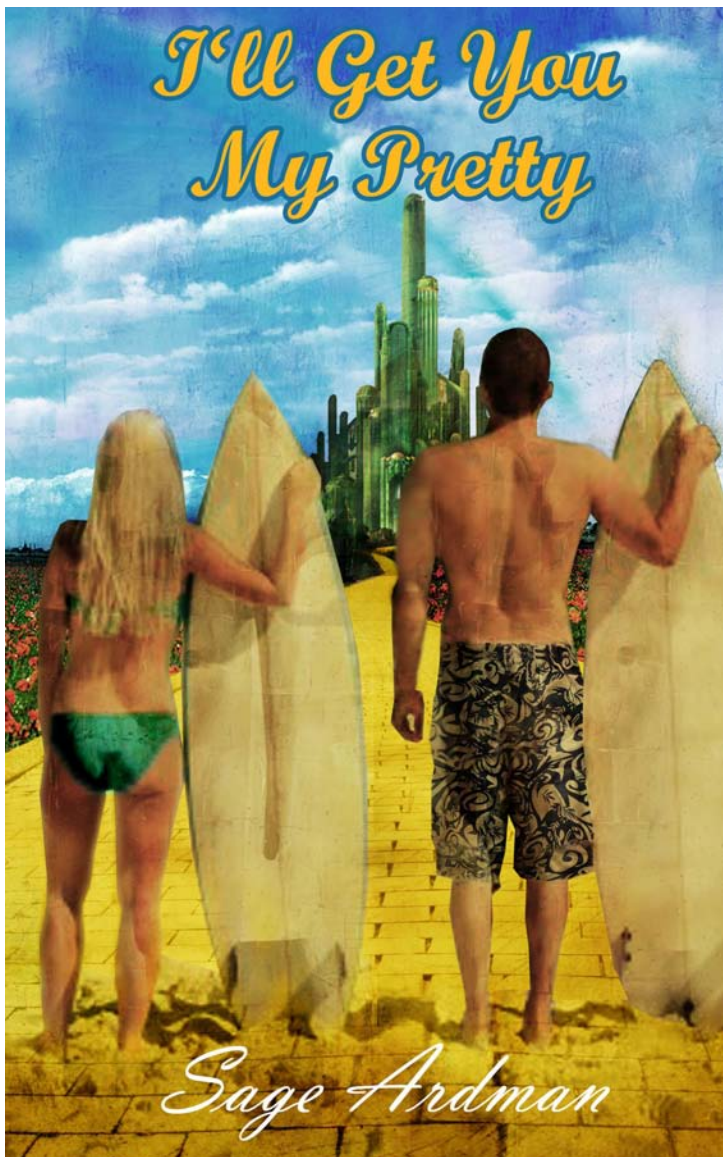


*I'll Get You
My Pretty*



Sage Ardman

I'll Get You My Pretty

(Previously published as: *A Good Little Girl Like You*)
(a free preview of the first fifteen chapters)

Sage Ardman

Westerley series #2

R.L. Ranch Press



Portola Valley, California

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I'll Get You My Pretty

Print ISBN: 978-09727514-45

EBook ISBN: 978-09727514-76

Book layout by: Steve Rubin

Cover art by: Diogo Landô

For more information, please contact: R.L. Ranch Press, 4119 Alpine Road, Suite A, Portola Valley, California, 94028. Telephone: 650-851-2927. Or visit rlranchpress.com.

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Warning: This is an erotic story and should not be read to little children before bedtime.

This free preview consists of the first fifteen chapters (about half) of my book, *I'll Get You My Pretty*, published in July, 2014 by R.L. Ranch Press, a division of RuLabinsky Enterprises.

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Acknowledgments



This book was influenced in many ways by Amy Lansky, my publisher, my critic, my best friend, my Glinda. Amy has inspired me to be my most romantic and has encouraged me to write these books.

My editor, Jena Roach, continues to wade through my rough drafts, holds me to a higher standard, and forces me to rewrite more than I sometimes would like.

I also want to thank the people who helped me write about those subjects I know nothing about. Maddy Schwarz gave me an understanding of gymnastics, Dmitry Nadezhin helped me with the Russian language, and Robert W. Hon taught me about surfing.

Diogo Landô did a great job on the cover art.

Quick! Name a popular book that deals with a young person thrust into a world of magic—a book that was instantly popular and translated into dozens of languages. Beyond being a publishing sensation, it inspired many other books and movies. No, I'm not talking about *Harry Potter*. I'm referring to a different book that appeared one hundred years earlier: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. L. Frank Baum wrote the book and really deserves most of the credit for what followed. But the movie screenplay which inspired most of us was written by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf. The songs were by Herbert Stothart and Yip Harburg. To everyone who had a hand in creating *The Wizard of Oz*, thanks.

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Chapters 16-32 are not part of this preview

Dedication

To Wizard of Oz fans everywhere.

One



Friday, September 7

There's a storm blowing up. Rebecca Moore stared at the monstrosity with dread. It hung in front of her and seemed to stare back, laughing, taunting, and challenging her to action. Evil incarnate, it even had her name on it. Unable to run away, she clenched her jaw and lunged for it. Her grip was so tight that she thought, no she *wished*, it would tear apart. No such luck.

Rebecca stepped into the changing room to put on the most hideous bridesmaid dress, ever.

It serves me right. She had been too busy at work to get involved in dress selection. All the messages and photographs they had sent her got filed directly without being read. She had planned to go through it all, but each new business trip pushed Kay's wedding plans further from her mind. Now she was stuck.

Gaudy pink, verging on orange, the dress was as subtle as a baboon's butt. Plus, there was way too much of it—billowing chiffon down to her calf. Given that there were two other bridesmaids, both taller than her, Rebecca would be lost in an endless sea of nauseating pink.

Admittedly, the real problem with the dress was that it clashed badly with her red hair. Her long locks fell to her shoulders in great waves that usually looked good. But not tonight. Not with this dress. Even her freckles were embarrassed.

At times like this, Rebecca turned to her favorite movie, a classic from her childhood, *The Wizard of Oz*. She had a habit of quoting from the movie, dotting her conversation with appropriate lines. Her friends tolerated this tendency and patiently waited for her to outgrow it.

But Rebecca knew. She knew the universal truth of *The Wizard of Oz*. Nearly every occurrence in her life had a parallel somewhere in the movie. She could narrate her existence with it, and this moment was no exception.

There's a storm blowing up. The warning from Professor Marvel—the movie's traveling fortune teller—rang out in her head, accompanied by a dramatic flourish of violins. Of course, this wasn't a real disaster, merely a minor annoyance. Still, she imagined a tiny, pink funnel cloud, its swirling vortex dotted with flashes of red hair. She even imagined a miniature Miss Gulch—the movie's antagonist—flying around it on a bicycle.

Wait until Kay sees this. Her best friend had wanted her bridesmaids to wear these dresses, but she couldn't possibly want *this* much garishness. There was only one way to find out—Rebecca teased up her hair for maximum shock value and stepped out of the changing room.

When she returned to the main area, the other two bridesmaids were also swaddled in pink. Rebecca had met them only minutes before and had forgotten their names amid the annoyance of the dress. So she went with her first impressions and thought of them as Bubbles and Alien Girl.

Bubbles was a dark Mediterranean beauty with an overabundance of both enthusiasm and breasts. She definitely looked the best in this dress, although she would probably look good wearing a garbage bag. Alien Girl was tall and gangly thin. Her hollow eyes rarely made contact with anyone and gave off a somewhat catatonic look. She

was either a genius or mentally ill. Or, as Rebecca first suspected, from another planet.

Everyone froze when Rebecca returned from the changing room. She had their complete attention, something she never wanted when she was young. Back then, her safest strategy was to hide from her older sister to avoid contempt and ridicule. Things were different now, and she didn't mind that everyone turned to look. Everyone except Alien Girl, that is, who continued to stare in the mirror, clearly more interested in her new, human form.

The shop assistant approached cautiously. "I'm sorry, dear. We have to do something about your hair." She walked away with a purposeful stride. Good. Justice would be done.

While they waited for an acceptable solution, Kay Samson emerged from the changing room in her bridal dress. Her white satin off-the-shoulder Vera Wang gown cut a path through the sea of pink. She stared at her red-headed bridesmaid with an expression that alternated between horror and laughter. Laughter won in the end, and she let out a nervous giggle. "Sorry about that, Rebecca. We sure picked the wrong color for you. I didn't know anything could be so hard to look at." Rebecca nodded in peaceful agreement.

The shop assistant bustled back into the room and proudly showed off her solution: three hats that complemented the dresses but clashed even worse with Rebecca's red hair. It didn't matter. She hid her clashing curls under the hat and turned to the mirror. She'd definitely need to change into a different dress after the ceremony.

Now that her hair was hidden, Rebecca could see that the dress didn't look so bad after all. Her round face and hazel eyes were more noticeable, too. All in all, she seemed

somewhat cherubic—almost cupid-like. But the god of love wasn't something she wanted to dwell on right now. Her own love life was nothing to be proud of.

Rebecca and Quentin had been dating for the past year and were going nowhere. A former business school classmate, Quentin was smart, handsome, and well-mannered. Okay, *mostly* well-mannered. Except for those times when he was awkward and nerdy. He claimed to have mild Asperger syndrome, and that explained his difficult side. But since most people didn't notice those difficult moments, the two of them were considered "perfect" for each other. Too bad they weren't.

The two of them started as friends in business school. He was so cute and smart and considerate that she was fooled into thinking he'd be a good lover. Sadly, the fires never caught. All she got was a momentary flash of kindling, leaving behind a cold, damp pile of unlit wood.

Quentin seemed to have no idea what Rebecca wanted from him. She had tried to explain her desires, but he couldn't get it. The guy simply didn't do passion. He was content to park himself in the boyfriend cubbyhole of her life, mostly ignoring her and occasionally filling a need. One of those needs was to accompany her to Kay's wedding, so nobody would think she was a lonely workaholic. But Rebecca knew how lonely she felt, even when she was with Quentin. The lack of attention, the insincere compliments, the disconnect. She hoped she wouldn't catch the bouquet.

Just as Rebecca pondered all of this, Quentin arrived. His work day was done and, precisely at the planned time, he was there to take her home. He gave her a little buss on the cheek and issued a perfunctory hug, then stepped back to admire the dress. "Nice."

"You should have seen it when my hair was out." She took off the hat and let her hair fall.

Quentin looked at her for a second, then shrugged. "Looks the same to me." Kay and Bubbles chuckled.

"Don't you see how this dress clashes with my hair?" Rebecca held out a lock.

Quentin stared at her and fidgeted, clearly struggling to answer the question. Rebecca wondered if he even knew what "clash" meant. Few men did.

She offered a hint. "My red hair looks bad in this pink dress."

He brightened, finally able to understand the conversation. "Oh, come on! You always see red and pink together. Everything on Valentine's Day is red and pink."

"I am *not* a Valentine."

"Well then, if your hair looks so bad, why don't you dye it?"

Rebecca and Kay stared at each other for a second before bursting into laughter. "You're kidding, right?"

"Hey, you can dye it back after the wedding, can't you?" More laughter followed that.

Rebecca tried to explain. "Not happening, Quentin. It's not that simple."

"Dye the dress?"

Kay wiped away a tear of laughter and put a hand on his shoulder. "Give it a rest, Q."

Two



Saturday, September 15

“Please! Your ego is out of control.” The two women stared at O.E. with disappointed looks.

O.E. Orton was at a party with his longtime friends, Dan and Constance, as well as Dan’s new wife, Kay. They had married just last night and still had that newlywed luster of love. O.E. had to admit he was jealous—he’d never find someone like Kay. But what did he expect when he focused more of his energy on money than on love?

Four years earlier, at age twenty-nine, O.E. had rocked the business world by selling his tiny software company to a consortium of banks. He walked away with half a billion dollars, and many business schools started to include him on their list of remarkable success stories. Since the sale of his company, he learned to invest, spent his money lavishly, and showered women with gifts.

Mere hours before tonight’s party, O.E. got the long awaited news. His careful investments had done well and his wealth had doubled. O.E. Orton was now a billionaire. So naturally, he wanted to tell everyone he saw. He was just explaining to Kay and Constance how women loved him because he was a rich business genius and how they would love him even more now that he was a billionaire.

Well, Kay wouldn’t. Even Constance was unimpressed. To be fair, they weren’t repulsed by the news of O.E.’s even more massive fortune. In fact, Kay seemed happy for him,

excited to tell her friends that she now knew a billionaire. The part that seemed to bother her was his suggestion that women would want him because he was O.E. Orton, the rich business whiz kid. She obviously disagreed.

Kay tried to explain. "Don't you get it, O.E.? No woman wants to hear how brilliant and rich you are when she first meets you. It makes you seem shallow and conceited. You've got to stop showing off."

Constance hammered the message home. "I agree. You'd do much better with women if, instead of telling them how much money you've made, you told them how much money you've given away. Maybe we should have another discussion about charity." She leaned toward him and smiled.

O.E. didn't want to have a discussion about charity with Constance, especially now that he was a billionaire. She'd milk him dry. At first glance, the rich heiress seemed like the last person to care about charity. But Constance was different—she had dedicated her life to helping people. While most of her family and friends cared only about clothing, cars, and drinks, Constance was a lawyer—a public defender—who tried to find justice for poor people. He didn't know of any other person who had such a strong conscience. When Constance Westerley talked about charity, most of her friends and family ran for cover.

Kay laughed at Constance's suggestion. "That's it! Give all your money away, then you won't be able to boast about it anymore." She folded her arms and nodded as though she had just solved all his problems. "Sorry, O.E. Nobody wants to hear you brag."

Dan jumped in to assist his friend. "You can brag to me all you want. But don't expect me to respect you in the

morning.” His attempt at a joke was greeted with groans, then the four of them fell silent.

Kay suddenly lit up and broke the silence. “Maybe you should try being unknown and poor.”

O.E. chuckled. “Sorry, I like being known. And being poor sucks—I’ll stick with rich.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I mean you should hide your name and the fact that you’re rich. Then you won’t be able to flash your enormous ego.” Her lip curled devilishly. “Do you think you can woo a woman if she doesn’t know who you are—if she thinks you’re a surf bum? Look, you’re already dressed for the part. Can you live it?”

O.E. smiled. He was wearing his usual outfit for this party: surfer duds. Board shorts, a loud tank top, and flimsy sandals. His shoulder-length blond hair completed the casual look. At any other party, this look might fit in. But not here. This party was a Westerley.

Most people had heard of the Westerley family—old money with its fingers in construction, banking, and energy. Some people also knew about the swanky parties they threw every few months, the fabled “Westerleys.” They were always held at St. Joseph’s Church, the same place where Dan and Kay had married last night.

It might seem strange to have two parties at the same place, two nights in a row. But the wedding *had* to be there. Unlike O.E., who was just a friend of the family, Dan Avery was a pure-blood Westerley on his mother’s side—he couldn’t get married anywhere else. In fact, this particular Westerley was intentionally scheduled for the night after the wedding, so that it would extend the celebration into a weekend-long bacchanalia.

Westerley parties were always split between two rooms. The main cathedral was home to the older, stuffier, and

richer crowd. They milled about the tastefully decorated cathedral in gowns and tuxedos. The music was a string quartet; the food and alcohol arrived on silver platters. Older Westerley partygoers came to see and be seen, to refresh connections, and make new ones. Also, a surprising number of new business ventures got started here between drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

The alternate Westerley party was for the younger people and was held in the church's recreation hall. Decorated with mirror balls and lasers, this party offered two bars and many tables with food. A live rock&roll band played in a back room; their music wafted through the building. The only thing that the two parties had in common was expensive clothing. Well, except for O.E. Orton's outfit.

O.E. hated the pretension of Westerley parties, but he liked to come and see his friends. He also liked to wander through the main cathedral in his surfing clothes, just to annoy the stuffy, overdressed Westerley snoots. They could kiss his billion-dollar ass.

Perhaps I really am a surf bum. Although managing his money took most of his time, he still did go surfing. These days, he went in style, flying on his private jet to his secluded Malibu beach house. But when he was out on the waves, he was no different than anyone else, and that's when he was happiest.

He gave Kay a proud smile. "Of course I can attract a woman without flashing my fame. It'd be easy—just look at me. Who wouldn't want a piece of this?" O.E. puffed out his chest and posed.

Kay and Constance laughed at his pose, so he fell back in his chair. "All right, explain it to me. Why should I hide my name?"

“Because I think you’d be more successful if you did. You’d find someone who cares about *you*. A person, not a legend.” Kay leaned forward, her eyes boring into him. “How would you like to make a little wager, O.E.?”

“You want to bet that I can’t get a woman to go out with me who doesn’t know who I am? You’re on! Too bad everyone here already knows me.”

Kay patted him on the shoulder. “You’re in luck tonight. My friends and relatives are all here—a whole new crowd of people for you to meet.” She chuckled and shook her head. “You’ll have no trouble spotting them. They’re the ones dressed like the help.” Everyone laughed at Kay’s admission that she had married into a vastly more well-to-do family than her own.

“But seriously, you’d love Suzanne, one of my bridesmaids. She’s hot and always looking for fun. I bet you could bring her to Malibu without even trying. Just lose your ego, your name, and your money.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You know, not everyone has heard of me. Why do I have to change my name?”

“Well, *I* had heard of the famous O.E. Orton when we first met. And as soon as people find out who you are, they expect things from you. I say you need a new name.” She cocked her head to the side. “What do those initials stand for anyway?”

O.E.’s stomach knotted up. He hated those names and had buried them years ago. He was O.E., nothing more.

It took a few seconds before he could grunt out the answer. “Oscar Ezzo.”

“Ezzo?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Fine, then introduce yourself as Oscar Ezzo. Drop ‘Orton’ completely. Everyone can still call you O.E. Just lose the bravado and the billionaire boast.”

O.E. grinned defiantly. He welcomed a challenge like this, and looked forward to showing Kay Samson what he was made of. Their first encounter hadn’t gone too well, but they had gotten past that and were friends now.

“You’re betting me that I can’t do it? Ha! Watch me. What are we betting?”

“Well, I don’t imagine that I have enough money to interest you, so it will have to be something else. Why don’t we each pick our terms? What do you want from me if you win?”

What wouldn’t I want from her? Kay was alarmingly gorgeous: a cute face, sparkling green eyes, blonde pixie hair, and a bombshell figure. O.E. forced himself to stop thinking about all the inappropriate things he wanted from his best friend’s wife and focus on something attainable. He rubbed his chin, then gave Kay a big smile. “If I win, you have to come surfing with me at my beach house in Malibu. You can bring the big guy along, too.” He nodded at Dan. “I’m going to teach you how to surf.”

“You have a beach house in Malibu?” She paused for a second, staring across the room, then turned back to look at O.E. “Okay then. Here’s the bet. Dan and I are leaving soon for our honeymoon. We’ll be gone five weeks. While we’re gone, you have to find a woman to surf with you in Malibu without telling her who you are or how much money you have. And this can’t be someone you pick up on the street and whisk out there. She has to know you and like you enough to fly there with you. If you can do that, we’ll stop on our way back from the honeymoon and have ourselves a surf party.”

“Have you seen my Malibu beach house? This is not a poor person’s home.”

“So?” Kay shrugged. “Tell her it’s someone else’s place and that they let you use it occasionally. I don’t care how you do it, but if she knows she’s dating O.E. Orton, you lose the bet. Stop talking about your Ferrari and your Mercedes and your fancy jet. Be modest for a change, and leave the bank book at home.”

This is the sort of challenge I can really enjoy. “So all I get to use is my charming personality and incredible good looks?” He gave Kay a plastic smile. If this were a movie, a gleam of light would have flashed from his teeth. “Easily done. But what are your terms? What if I lose?”

“Well, I need to ask for something so valuable that you’ll be motivated to win the bet.”

“You want me to win the bet?”

“Like I said, I think you might find someone good this way. I’m not trying to punish you, I want to help.”

“What then, a million dollars?”

Kay laughed. “You wouldn’t even notice a million dollars if it went missing, would you?”

Constance interceded. “He gives me a million dollars every year for charity. And you’re right—he doesn’t even notice it’s gone.”

“You give a million dollars to charity every year? Nice. *That* should be your opening line when you pick up women.” Kay smiled, then raised a questioning eyebrow. “Why do you give it to Constance?”

“I can’t be bothered to decide what’s the right thing to do with that much money. But Constance is a pro. So I just give it to her and let her deal with it. You happen to be sitting next to the queen of charity.”

Constance blushed.

Kay faced him with a crooked smile. "All right then. I'm going to be wicked here and make you give even more money to Constance if you lose. Let's make it something you'll notice." She covered her mouth with her hand and looked down for a second. "How about a hundred million dollars—ten percent of your wealth?"

O.E. winced and Constance dropped her jaw. Dan had to cover his mouth to keep the laughter in. Everyone stared at Kay with disbelieving eyes. "That's an awful lot of money. Why should I give away so much?"

Kay flipped her hand. "Like I said, it gives you a real incentive to win the bet. I actually believe you could do better without the attitude, and I figure that it takes a serious amount of money to force you into this."

O.E. gaped at Kay, eyes wide. How could she so blithely demand that much from him? Did she think she could get anything she wanted merely by asking? The woman had some serious *cojones*—he *was* impressed.

Then again, she was right—he could afford it. And he had been wondering what to do with all his amazing wealth. He'd already bought every big boy toy he'd ever wanted: houses, cars, and even a personal jet. His financial advisor suggested that he was rich enough to buy a small island, and they had jokingly debated whether King O.E. would be a benevolent or dictatorial ruler. Still the money piled up.

He simply didn't know what to do with it all. Why had he been blessed with so much money? Too many philosophical questions invaded his thoughts these days. *Why me?* or, lately, *Where is she?* Maybe a huge charitable contribution *would* be appropriate.

Wait, am I nuts? A huge charitable contribution would *not* be appropriate. Jeez, what was he thinking? He would

give his money to charity when it damn well pleased him, not when Kay Samson goaded him into it. Also, he had no intention of losing this wager. He knew he was attractive and in great shape—all he had to do was find someone who didn't know who he was. It'd be easy.

Kay continued her argument. "Face it, O.E. You'd survive very nicely on nine hundred million dollars. You'd probably even get your name in the news for a donation like that. And there are all sorts of tax breaks for that kind of charity, too." She leaned back and smiled, as though challenging him to accept.

Me, a famous philanthropist? He'd like that. Then he'd not only be the famous business whiz kid, he'd also be the famous humanitarian. Could it be his destiny? For a tiny fraction of a second, it sounded appealing. Strangely, his reasoning brain continued to toy with the notion, evaluate it, even respect it. He wondered if he was becoming delirious.

Why am I considering this ridiculous bet? Did he have too much to drink? No, this lapse in judgment was more likely caused by an insufficient amount of alcohol. Regardless of the cause, he was slipping fast.

Ultimately, O.E.'s foolish pride won the battle. Something deep inside him needed to prove himself to Kay, to show her that he could do anything he set his mind to. He wanted to show off to his old buddy Dan, too.

Fine! I'll do it. He would hide his fame and money and still find a woman to come with him to Malibu. So there.

O.E. sat a bit longer, eyes unfocused, wrestling with what he was doing. He needed a few seconds to convince himself that he wasn't going crazy. Finally, he looked at Dan. "You weren't kidding when you said she was a killer."

He threw his hands in the air and let them collapse in his lap.

He turned to Kay. "I accept your bet. One hundred million dollars for Constance to donate, if I can't bring a woman out to Malibu who doesn't know who I am." He shook hands with Kay, then wagged a finger at her and Dan. "But you're going to lose, so you two better get ready for some surfing lessons when you return from your honeymoon."

He pursed his lips and turned to look at Constance. "And don't you get your hopes up too high, either." Constance glanced at the ceiling. Her tight smile seemed to be holding back a laugh.

Kay stared at O.E., her mouth formed in a circle. "You know, I really didn't expect you to agree to this, but I'm glad you're taking it seriously. I honestly think it will help your love life to stop boasting so much."

Dan stood up and held his hand out to Kay. "I think we've done enough damage here—it's time to go." He looked around to Constance and O.E. "Early flight to Tahiti tomorrow. We'll see you next month." Dan shook O.E.'s hand and gave Constance a hug.

They were about to leave when O.E. pulled Dan aside. "Listen, Dan, can I borrow your place while you're gone? I can't bring a woman to my home, it screams wealth. Yours is more modest. And most importantly, it isn't mine." He shot a wry smile. "I can honestly say, 'I'm house-sitting for Dan Avery,' and nobody will figure out who I really am. Get it?"

Dan quirked a smile. "Why not?" He reached into his pocket and handed over some keys. "Don't anger the neighbors, and try and keep your bodily fluids off the artwork."

O.E. grinned. "It's a deal."

Kay gave them both hugs. “Have fun, O.E. I actually hope you win.”

After they left, Constance regarded O.E. “As much as I’d like to see you lose, I have to admit that I hope you win, too. Go get her, Oscar!”

Oscar! Ouch. He frowned at the mention of his name and experienced his first pang of regret at having accepted the bet. It didn’t matter either way. Now he had something new to do, and dammit, he was going to do it. O.E. got up from the table and laid a tiny grin on Constance. “Watch me.”

Three



Last night's wedding was a total embarrassment. First of all, Rebecca had to wear that unfortunate pink bridesmaid dress. Even with her hair hidden, the outfit made her feel like a court jester. But the most embarrassing moment was due to Quentin's behavior.

Her difficult boyfriend was more than just awkward, he was downright annoying. While she was standing in the receiving line, he teased her in front of everybody. First he made a big show of hugging her, telling everyone that they were a couple. Then it got worse. Quentin pulled off her hat and put it on his own head, acting like an impetuous child. She tried to get it back without causing a scene, pleading with him to return it, but he was too wrapped up in his own stunt to notice her distress. It took her minutes of clashing, with him and the dress, before she finally retrieved the hat and hid her hair.

After that, Rebecca escaped from the receiving line and changed into a dress she had brought for the reception. With the pink problem behind her, she faced the more important issue: her so-called boyfriend. She pulled Quentin to a quiet place so they could talk.

Although mad enough to break up with him immediately, she relented when he begged for another chance. They agreed on a trial separation. It helped to be able to ignore him for the rest of the evening. It helped even more to come to the Westerley party tonight without him.

Since tonight was her second visit to St. Joseph's cathedral, she knew the way to the recreation hall and went there directly. Soon she was with the rest of Kay's friends and younger relatives. Free from the pink dress and the pathetic Quentin, she could finally relax.

Rebecca's Westerley attire, bought just for the party, was a forest green satin cocktail dress with a cowl neck, a low scoop back, and ruching along the front. She didn't normally buy new dresses for parties, but Kay had warned her that this was no average party. Besides, it felt good to dress nicely and wear a color that didn't wage war with her hair.

Wow. Look at them. Her fellow bridesmaids were working the crowd like a team. Bubbles, Kay's high school friend, was dressed in a scandalously skimpy outfit. She had managed to pour herself into a tight micro-miniskirt, impossibly high heels, and a top so low cut that it dared her abundant breasts to stay put. Rebecca watched her troll for rich Westerleys, flirting with every passing male victim.

Alien Girl, Kay's friend from university days, hovered nearby in an even more shocking outfit: her bridesmaid dress. Bubbles seemed to be pleased with the awkwardness of the situation—Rebecca overheard her mention that she had been a bridesmaid and saw her point to the dress as proof. Could it be the case that poor confused Alien Girl didn't have anything else to wear? Or had she suffered a mix-up in signals from her orbiting mother ship?

Rebecca tried to get away without being noticed, but Bubbles spotted her and dragged Alien Girl along for a bridesmaid reunion. "Hi, Becky!"

The nickname "Becky" was not one that Rebecca enjoyed hearing. That's the name her older sister, Lauren, had always called her. When they were young, Lauren had

taken care of Rebecca when their parents were gone. And since their parents were nearly always gone, that meant Lauren literally raised Rebecca. Only three years older, Lauren didn't like the situation either and made her feelings known with an angry stream of hurtful, childish abuse. One of her typical taunts was "Little Becky, ugly goose." As a result, little Becky preferred to be called by her full name, all three glorious syllables of it.

Rebecca turned to Bubbles with a partial smile. She didn't like having to correct people. Perhaps someday she'd get over that and let people call her what they liked. But not tonight. "Can I ask you to call me by my full name: Rebecca? I've never liked Becky."

Bubbles bubbled. "Sure, thing." She nodded her head. "You look super cool in that dress by the way." Rebecca exhaled and let her smile grow wider.

She's okay, but I really didn't come here to play bridesmaid again. Rebecca looked around for a more familiar face. One of them was standing by the bar: Alice Scott. Slender and six feet tall, Alice sported slacks and a loud blouse. She spotted Rebecca and sauntered over. Rebecca met her half way.

Alice, Rebecca, and Kay had been MBA students together. As job offers came in, they discovered that all of them were going to work for car and truck companies. The three women thought this was immensely funny and instantly dubbed themselves "The Road Warriors."

Curiously, four months after their graduation, Alice was the only Road Warrior still working in the automotive industry. Kay lasted seven weeks at her job, and Rebecca made it out the door even faster. Her job lasted less than one week, thanks to an unfortunate encounter with the company's obnoxious CEO. Even now, with a much better

job, she was still skittish about powerful people like him, which included many of the people who were at Kay's wedding, and even more of the people who were at tonight's Westerley. Kay promised that the evil CEO who had fired her wouldn't be there. Still, Rebecca kept looking around to see if anyone else would recognize her from that painful day.

Alice gave Rebecca a bear hug. "Now that's a much better dress than the monstrosity you wore last night." She pointed at Alien Girl. "Can you believe she's still wearing it?"

Rebecca laughed. "Hey, Alice. Unlike you, some people actually enjoy being part of a wedding."

"For which I'm eternally grateful. You folks did a fine job."

"You don't know what you missed. You could have been a bridesmaid if you wanted."

Alice held up her hands with a look of horror. "Good thing I didn't want. I saw how much fun you had being a bridesmaid." She grinned. "So let's talk about something else. Aren't you leaving for Russia soon?"

Don't remind me. Rebecca worked in the International Relations group at a textile company called Ultra Threads. As a languages expert, she assisted with deals in many European countries. She was busy, busy, busy—in her three months of work at Ultra Threads, she had already been to Europe six times.

"Russia's cold." She shuddered. "And I'm going back on Thursday."

Alice nodded. "On the road again. Gonna beat up some Russian businessmen?"

Rebecca laughed. "Yeah, that's it." She stared into space, and her lungs deflated. "I wish." She wondered how Alice

might handle some of these negotiations, and it amused her to imagine the tall woman overpowering them with her commanding attitude.

But Rebecca knew that Alice didn't want to hear about a boring work trip to Russia. She changed the subject to something much closer to Alice's heart. "So, did you finish working on your car?"

Alice brightened. "Yes, yes! It's finished. I totally forgot to tell you." She hopped up and down. "Come outside and see. The car practically growls at you. It's so *awesome!*" She sang "awesome" in a soprano voice.

Alice loved cars. Her father had taught her to work on them when she was young. Of the three Road Warriors, Alice was the most trash-talking, tough-swaggering, motor-loving woman. She spent her weekends tuning engines and welding body parts.

"Well, that's taken you long enough. You've got to show it to me."

"Sure. Let's see if anyone else wants to come." She looked around the room, turning slowly to scan for others who might care. "I see Quentin isn't here. It's about time you left him back ho—"

Her voice cut off, mid-word, and she stood still, staring behind Rebecca. "Wait a minute." She held her hand up to signal something important. "Don't look now, but Tarzan is heading our way."

Alice, you horny girl. She was always drooling over the latest hottie. The only thing that could tear her away from a car was a man. Someday, Tarzan *would* swoop down and scoop Alice up in his arms. But until that day came, she would have to make do with her imagination.

Rebecca giggled. “Ooh! Is he with Jane?” It was supposed to be a joke, but Alice didn’t respond—her stare only grew larger. This was serious. “Can I look yet?”

“No, don’t! You’ll ruin it. Besides, you’re the target here. This guy is definitely checking you out.”

He’s looking at me? That was unexpected. Alice was the one who usually got all the attention, her height acting like a beacon to draw men in from across any room. Since when did a jungle man pay any attention to a diminutive woman like Rebecca? “You’re joking, right?”

Alice was probably exaggerating, turning some disgusting creepster into her version of Tarzan. Her eyes darted back to look briefly at Rebecca. “I’m serious! Be cool, and act like you’re talking to me.”

“I *am* talking to you.” Rebecca was itching to turn around and look at this supposed ape man who was stalking her across the urban jungle. She no longer had the ability to be cool.

Alice kept her face toward Rebecca, but her eyes wandered. “Yep. As I expected.” She nodded and gave Rebecca a shadow of a smile.

Stop playing games with me. “What? What! Tell me already.” Rebecca gritted her teeth.

“He’s circling around. Keep facing my way, you’ll see him soon.” Alice attempted to act casual, but she had a bad poker face and gave off countless tells—her mouth working, her fingers twitching. Something big was about to happen.

Rebecca pictured a scruffy jungle man, swinging by on a vine. She held her breath and waited for the truth to emerge—it had to happen soon.

The first thing she noticed was the golden head of hair, flowing in waves down to well muscled shoulders and arms.

He had a sculpted jaw and wore a hint of a smile. A smile for her.

“Whoa,” she muttered under her breath. He seemed like he should be somebody famous, perhaps a movie actor or a model. Tall, trim, and tan, he showed off his rugged good looks in a tight-fitting tank top. Loose shorts hung from narrow hips, revealing a fine physique. Even his legs were striking, covered with a light dusting of blond hair. So hot. She let her jaw go slack.

Tarzan, indeed. With his eyes on her, he turned his head to face Rebecca directly, holding his stare for longer than the standard three-second threshold of unspoken interest. Rebecca stared back at him and felt her heart leap, no doubt caused by his X-ray vision that burrowed into her heart and gave it an X-rated jolt of electricity. At least it felt that way.

This is a rare thrill. As Alice had predicted, a strange man had come all the way across the room to check her out. She thanked the heavens that Quentin wasn't around to spoil things.

Rebecca hadn't fully registered the situation yet, so she stood there, quietly admiring him. His incredible body already made the evening a success. Even if he walked away right now, she'd have had enough of a thrill to provide hope for an exciting future.

Rebecca smiled at the mystery man, her chest pounding so hard that she worried he would hear it. She half expected him to notice her overwrought state and begin to laugh. But instead of making things worse, her smile seemed to encourage him. He returned a smile that was practically lustful, and his dark gray eyes sparkled. He was coming closer to her, now only a few feet away. Rebecca began to realize that this was not a fantasy.

But of course this was a fantasy—it had to be. What were the chances that this jungle stud would choose her in a room full of beautiful women? Her college boyfriends were never much to look at, and even Quentin, who was quite easy on the eye, couldn't compare. Rebecca still found it surprising when handsome men noticed her.

Little Becky, ugly goose. Her sister had told her over and over that no good-looking man would ever consider dating an “ugly goose.” And although she knew her sister was wrong, the words still bubbled up occasionally. She wasn't an ugly goose, but she wasn't a beautiful swan either. Rebecca wished she had a smaller butt, bigger breasts, and skinnier legs. She also wished her mouth wasn't so tiny. And those freckles still made her feel like the little girl Lauren had picked on. The list went on. But ultimately, she accepted herself—she was what she was. Nobody's perfect.

I am attractive. She repeated her usual affirmation and tried to clear her head of thoughts about her sister. Just because no super hot guy had ever targeted her before, didn't mean it couldn't be happening now. Her body bathed in the glow of Tarzan's smile. He had to be real—could a delusion feel so good?

Oh my God. This guy is so built. Rebecca's heart drummed in her chest, and she waited for him to look away and move on to someone else. But he stayed focused and slowly closed the distance between them. Every molecule in her body vibrated, aroused by the energy of his heated eyes. Then, like a flower bursting forth from the spring soil, her smile began to bloom. Tarzan's smile also grew wider, and he continued his approach. Rebecca's heart was already still. Now she stopped breathing as well.

In an instant, the spell was broken. Bubbles threw her trampy body right in Tarzan's path, flashing her tiny gift

wrapping. “Well hello! Looking for someone?” She slithered around and even gave out a little Marilyn Monroe squeal.

I have had enough of you. Rebecca wanted to rip the clothes off her, but Bubbles would probably like that. She scowled and took a few steps back to get out of the way. These two were in a league of their own, and Rebecca didn’t want any of their flying hormones to get on her dress.

Tarzan regarded Bubbles, and his eyes took in the terrain. “Possibly. . .”

Rebecca deflated. He was hooked, his attention now fully on the undulating body in front of him.

Bubbles ran her hand up his arm, shamelessly attacking him. “Did you know I was a bridesmaid yesterday?” This seemed to be her primary topic of conversation tonight.

Bubbles pointed her chin at Rebecca and even Alien Girl who had drifted over. “In fact, you’ve got all three bridesmaids here.” She was clearly unthreatened by the presence of other women—none of them were as scantily dressed as she was.

She pointed to Alien Girl’s offensive pink dress. “If you’d been at the wedding, you would have seen this outfit on all of us.” She turned her full frontal charm back on him. “But you weren’t, I’m sure. I would have remembered someone as studly as you.”

Can she be any more transparent? Tarzan seemed to ignore the slobbering compliment and gave Rebecca a partial smile, laced with a touch of smirk. “A bridesmaid, eh? Too bad they made you wear that dress. Clashes with your amazing red hair.”

Rebecca’s eyes shot wide open. *Did he really just say that?* A man who had color sense? Something was wrong with this picture. There had to be a catch. Rebecca stood there and stared, too flustered to think of something to say.

Bubbles played her eyes from Tarzan to Rebecca and back again, as though realizing that his focus was elsewhere. She tugged on his arm and jumped between them. "I'm Suzanne. Want to dance?"

He pulled back to look at her, his smile slightly less bright, but still strong. "Ah, Suzanne, of course. I believe Kay mentioned you." He held out his hand. "Let's dance." They strolled away toward the music. But in a parting gesture he glanced back at Rebecca just as they disappeared around the corner.

As if. Women like Bubbles would always have their way with hunky guys like that. She tried to put him out of her mind and turned back to Alice. "Not bad looking. But he does seem like a loser." It helped to put him down, convince herself that it could never amount to anything. Besides, who wore sloppy surf clothes to a fancy party like this?

Alice bugged out her eyes. "Not bad looking? Did you see those muscles? What a fine piece of meat!" She shook a hand in front of her face. "Whew! But you're right—he probably works at the shore selling beer." Her eyebrows bobbed up and down. "Ask me if I care."

Rebecca thought for a bit. "Maybe he's a lifeguard." She sighed. "I'd let him give me CPR."

"Hell, I would too." Alice turned to Alien Girl, trying to draw the woman out. "What about you?"

Upon being called back to the planet's surface, Alien Girl's head turned sharply in a simulated human response. "Well, of course, I'd let him save my life. Why wouldn't I want someone to save my life?" She was obviously confused by the silly things earthlings like to say.

Rebecca knew it would be impossible to engage this woman in mere mortal trivialities. "Yes, you're right. I'd let anyone save my life." *But I'd prefer him.*

Alice wasn't as forgiving and pressed further. "But don't you think he's hot?"

Alien Girl turned to look, but Bubbles had dragged Tarzan far away by then. She turned back, unenlightened. "I didn't notice. I thought he was a bus boy."

He's certainly not a bus boy. Tarzan's breathtaking body was burned into Rebecca's mind. She exhaled and turned away. "I think I need a drink."

Alice bounced on the balls of her feet. "No! First come look at my incredible car. Then we can get a drink."

"Sure. Show me your toy." She followed Alice out to the parking lot.

Alice's car had indeed undergone a complete makeover. It had new side and front panels, which gave the car a completely different look—the look of an animal. The car now sported wild stripes on bulging, sinewy side panels, and gleaming teeth where the front grill should be.

Rebecca admired the car as Alice expounded on its lines, aerodynamics, handling, and overall magnificence. It had everything a creature like Alice could ever want. "Hop in! We'll take a drive."

"I don't know, Alice. For some reason, I want to go back inside."

"Hoping to get yourself a taste of Tarzan?"

Definitely. "No. . . Well maybe. . . Oh, I don't know!"

"Go back in there and drag him home by his long blond hair. He's all yours. But I expect a full report when you're done with him." Alice got in her car. "I'm going to run *this* bad boy around the block for a bit. I'll be back soon."

"See you later. Drive safely."

"Ha! Driving safely is for weenies. I'm flooring it." She zoomed off.

Four



Rebecca went back inside and got a gin and tonic. She sat at a table with her back to the room and nursed it for as long as she could, trying not to think about her brush with the muscle man. She had nowhere else to go, and nobody bothered her there. A few moments of calm in the middle of the noisy crowd—just what she needed. Still, Tarzan’s smile was seared into her brain.

Who am I kidding? He wasn’t coming back for her—he’d gone off with Bubbles. They were probably at a motel by now. Rebecca slumped in her chair and stared at the ceiling, a dazzling array of lights sparkling across the festive hall. Her eyes took it all in, unfocused and lost in a mild alcoholic haze. When she got to the bottom of the glass, she tossed back the last drops and lowered her head.

“Good thing I missed the wedding. You look much better in green.” The voice was deep and soft, but it jolted her because she knew who it was without even looking up. She inhaled sharply and raised her eyes to see Tarzan standing there, smiling like the king of the jungle.

Rebecca’s heart couldn’t decide whether to beat faster or just give up and stop. She forced herself to act normal. “Who taught you about color?”

“My two older sisters. Both of them dedicated to making my life miserable, one way or another.” His gray eyes twinkled. “What are you drinking?”

Rebecca raised her tumbler. “Gin and tonic. What about you?”

“Straight bourbon. I’d go fetch drinks for us, but I can’t seem to stop looking at you. So I’m going to have to insist that you accompany me to the bar.” He held out his hand.

This guy is putting major moves on me. Rebecca gave him a look of guarded excitement. She understood why he had danced with Bubbles, but now he was back and that was completely unexpected. It didn’t make sense. Gorgeous and smooth, he even knew about color.

She narrowed her eyes and looked up at him. “I’ve got to say, you are much more polished than I would expect from a jungle boy.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Jungle boy? I’m a surfer, can’t you tell?” He held his arms out, floating them up and down as if trying to balance on an imaginary surfboard.

Rebecca got up and watched him pretend to surf. As she walked around him, his eyes tracked her every step, exciting her with his rapt attention. Finally, she nodded. “Okay, surfer dude. I get it. Sorry about the jungle reference, but you sort of reminded me of Tarzan with that long hair.”

He dropped his arms. “In that case, I’ll take it as a compliment.” His gaze wandered shamelessly, all over her body. “Ever surf?”

“Never.”

He nodded his head. “Then I’m going to have to teach you.”

Rebecca chuckled. “Just like that? We meet at a party, and suddenly we’re going surfing? I *am* impressed. Did you offer to teach Bubbles how to surf?”

“Bubbles?” He smirked. “Do you mean Suzanne?”

“Yeah, I thought the name fit her.”

His smirk grew into an appreciative grin. “It does. And that’s why I didn’t offer to teach her to surf. Fine eye candy, but way too trumpy. You know, too much makeup, a tiny

little skirt, hair sprayed into perfection. There's a certain desperation in that kind of look that I can't stand." He shook his head. "You may have noticed that she and I lasted for only one dance. Women like her are always throwing themselves at me."

Oh you poor boy. Anyone could see that he was handsome, but she wondered why he felt the need to state it. She tried to act indifferent. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

He gave her a sly smile. "Yes you did. I saw the look of jealousy when 'Bubbles' launched herself between us. And I saw something else in your eyes, too. You're attracted to me."

She figured that his self-centered attitude was a typical result of being so beautiful. But she didn't want to play the doting female just yet. Perhaps in another minute.

"I *might* be attracted to you. But just because you spend all day bodybuilding and surfing doesn't make you God's gift to women."

"It doesn't?" He leaned closer. "What works for you? I hope you're not one of those gold diggers who only wants to date a rich and powerful Westerley."

Rebecca frowned. "You have nothing to fear on that front. I make a nice living, and I don't really like the so-called 'rich and powerful.'"

He arched an eyebrow. "What's wrong with rich people? I thought everyone wants to be rich."

Go ahead, tell him. She didn't like to talk much about her first job. And there wasn't a whole lot to say—it lasted less than five days. But somehow she felt compelled to mention it. Perhaps it was his warm, comforting voice or the incredible power that seemed to flow from him. Also, she figured that a surf bum wouldn't care about the incident and certainly wouldn't know any of the players involved.

Rebecca couldn't say why, but for some reason, she felt safe telling him.

"Some manipulative jerk screwed me over a few months ago. Cost me my job." Suddenly worried, she decided not to say any more about it.

Tarzan snapped to attention. "Really? Who would mess with you?"

"Nobody you know." Rebecca took a breath and changed the subject. "I heard you mention Kay before. How do you know her?"

"I barely know her at all. Just met her once or twice through Dan. He's the one I know—we went to school together as kids." He stepped back and stared at her some more. "You're the bridesmaid—how do you know Kay?"

"I went to business school with her."

"A businesswoman?" He let out a brief but nervous chuckle then got serious. "You have an MBA?"

He makes it sound like a bad thing. Was he threatened by powerful women? Perhaps the beach bum couldn't handle someone like her. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'm impressed. I was in business once. But I'm happier now."

"Hey, I enjoy business. I do international relations at Ultra Threads. What about you?"

"I don't have a job."

"Really? What do you do for money? Are you one of those trust-fund kids?"

He wrinkled his nose and regarded her for a few seconds. "Never had a trust fund. But I get by just fine without working. I grew up among all these rich Westerleys—they, uh, help me out here and there."

Help him out? Did his Westerley connections give him enough to live on? From the stories she had heard about

that family, it was certainly possible. "So you freeload off your Westerley friends?"

He darkened. "I am *not* a freeloader. Believe me, I will never ask you for any money." He tried to smile but it faded under its own weight. "Look, I think we've started off badly. Why don't we back up and try again? I'm Oscar. Oscar Ezzo. My friends all call me O.E."

The name reminded her of *The Wizard of Oz*. She laughed and started to sing the chant from the Wicked Witch of the West's guards, her voice deep. "Oh Ee Oh. Ee Ooooooooo Uh."

O.E. stared at her with a growing grin. "Very impressive. I haven't heard that in years. And yes, you've found out my secret: I'm a Winkie guard."

"Winkie?"

"Aha! You know the movie but you haven't read the book. The Winkies were the people who lived in western Oz, and since the Wicked Witch was 'of the West,' she had Winkie guards. Those soldiers chanting 'Oh Ee Oh' were Winkies."

Rebecca pressed her lips together and nodded. "Very nice. I'm Rebecca Moore." They shook hands. "You don't seem like the guard type. More like a lion."

"You think I'm the Cowardly Lion?" He shook his head. "I'm many things, but not a coward." Then he brightened. "Now I might be the Wizard. Did you know we have the same first name? In one of the later books, they reveal that his name was Oscar Zoroaster blah blah blah. It goes on for nine names. But his first name was the same as mine. And his first two initials were O.Z."

"You don't look very much like a wizard."

"Well, maybe I'm not, but I'm not the Cowardly Lion." He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

“And I’m no heartless Tin Man either. I hope you can feel my heart pounding for you.”

She could feel two hearts pounding. Even breathing was difficult when he held her like that. Rebecca swallowed. In order to lighten the mood, she continued with the Oz talk. “So you’re the Scarecrow?” She reached for his blond hair “Is this straw?”

He let go of her and stepped back. “Apparently so. The way I’m messing things up with you makes me feel like my head’s stuffed with it.” He smiled.

“Looking for a brain?”

“My brain works fine, thank you. I’ve already taught you something you didn’t know about Winkies. And I bet there’s plenty more I could teach you, too. I can surf, I know when colors clash, and. . .”

Rebecca flopped her arms haphazardly like the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, then in a goofy voice, cut him off with one of the Scarecrow’s lines. “Some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don’t they?”

O.E. let out a deep laugh and beamed at her. “Nice! You *do* know your Oz. I’m very impressed.” He nodded slowly, showing how impressed he really was. “Okay, I’ll be the Scarecrow. So what about you? Good witch or bad witch? Or are you Dorothy, looking for a home? Most of people here tonight have found a home at the bar. Come on.” He took her hand and led her away.

He’s a little pushy. But Rebecca followed him without hesitation. Part of her couldn’t believe that he was coming on to her so strongly. Another part of her couldn’t believe that she was falling for an egotistical freeloader. Still, he was powerfully attractive, and they did share a love of all things Oz.

Rebecca and O.E. stood at the bar with fresh drinks and toasted to the bride and groom. O.E. tossed his drink in one gulp and reached out to touch a lock of her hair. “I’ve got to ask you something. . . Is that your natural hair color?”

Nosy, isn’t he? Most men were much more discrete when attempting a pickup. This guy seemed to spit out whatever was on his mind. Rebecca gave him a half smile and involuntarily reached up to touch her hair. “Yes, it is.”

O.E. sucked in his breath. “It’s beautiful.” He spoke in a heated whisper. “Dance with me.”

It wasn’t a question, so Rebecca decided that there was no choice to make and went with him to the dance floor. He was a pretty wild dancer, and she enjoyed watching him fly around. The band was covering a recent K-pop song that had everyone in the room shouting along with it. She let it all wash over her—the tune, the volume, and even O.E. with his stunning build and unmistakable desire.

The song ended, and he took her hand to lead her from the dance floor. Half way down the hall, O.E. stopped and leaned one hand against the wall, blocking Rebecca and bringing his face inches from hers. She stared into his piercing gray eyes and nearly melted. Was this a kiss coming? Things were moving fast. Too fast. She steeled herself and propped her hands on her hips—she was not going to make out with O.E. here in the hallway.

His eyes bored into hers. “Have dinner with me.” Dinner was a nice progression—much less aggressive than a make-out session in front of everyone. Still, his demand left her few options.

This train is barreling down the track. Part of her was delighted at his certainty and his insistence. But another part was appalled at his unsuitability. The poor surfer probably dined at burger joints. And he was so positive

about everything, never asking, just demanding. Dance with me, have dinner with me, all women love me. O.E. might be nice to look at, but his attitude needed some adjusting. “I don’t know. . .” She gave him a level look. “Why should I have dinner with you?”

He didn’t even have to stop and think. “Because I’m a great kisser.”

Where have I heard this before? She was reminded of the professor she had gone out with during her undergraduate days. Well, perhaps “gone out” wasn’t quite right, since they never went out anywhere. They just had sex, every time she saw him. Mostly in his office, sometimes in a motel. He also boasted about his ability to kiss.

And the professor *was* a good kisser. Certainly better than the language nerds she’d gone out with before him. Those boys were well versed in romance languages, but knew nothing about romance. The only thing they offered her was a basic introduction to sex. The professor did the rest. He taught her how to kiss right and how to make love. And all of them taught her one very important lesson: men could be dishonest and manipulative. They could actually be comfortably married and still carry on an affair with a student thirty years younger than themselves. Rebecca thought at the time that the professor was deeply in love with his top student. But the opposite was true. She was the only one who had fallen in love. He simply had a mistress for a year and a half.

O.E. is not the professor. Well, he certainly didn’t look much like the professor and seemed much more honest. But he did have the professor’s smooth talk. She squinted at him. “Excuse me? I didn’t know we were ready to make out. I *am* impressed. You’re pretty sure of yourself.”

“Yes, I am. Completely sure. Of both of us.” His smile warmed. “Look, Rebecca. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m attracted to you. You have a pretty face and a nice body. And I know you’re attracted to me, too. I can see it in your smile.

“Forgive me for being direct, but I can’t stand the whole ‘dating’ routine. So I figured I’d release some of the usual tension by bringing up that rarely mentioned thing: the question of the kiss at the end of the evening. Will I make the first move? Will you? Will we stand there in awkward silence as our faces draw closer, wondering who will finally dive in for that kiss? And then, of course, the big question—will the kiss be any good?” He shook his head and frowned. “So many questions, so much uncertainty.” His eyes bored into hers again, and she slid away from him on the wall, trying to make sure he wouldn’t take the kiss too soon. At least he was honest—the professor would never have been this direct.

O.E. pressed his case. “You’re a businesswoman, so let’s get down to business. Let’s have that kiss, right now. I’ll give you the best kiss you’ve ever had in your life. If you don’t agree, I’ll leave you alone. But if you do agree that it’s a kiss like no other, you have to go out to dinner with me on Monday. How’s that?”

Sounds wonderful. But she couldn’t seem too eager, so she laughed lightly. “Oscar Ezzo!” She said his name didactically like a scolding parent, but her head swam as she spoke the words. O.E. might be a huge mistake, but he bristled with a level of excitement that she had never experienced before. If she agreed, would he kiss her right there in the hallway? She felt a little embarrassed, but she couldn’t deny that she wanted to grab that chiseled jaw and kiss that arrogant mouth.

And she was free from Quentin, so why shouldn't she should go for this? Quentin was handsome and secure, but totally passionless. O.E. was much more handsome, far less secure, and already appeared to be significantly more passionate. Not the worst combination.

She even thought back to the professor and wondered how he stacked up. The professor was certainly less attractive, offered no security at all, and his passion was a manipulative deception. Because of her bad experience with him, she had been willing to settle down with Quentin. But perhaps she had made a mistake when she'd sacrificed passion for honesty.

O.E. is a total stranger. Except that he wasn't. He was just someone new, from Dan's side of the wedding party. What could possibly go wrong? Other than everything.

Let go. She obeyed her inner thoughts and plunged into the deep end of the trouble pool, her heart pounding. "Show me."

O.E. broke into a hungry smile. He reached up with both hands and gently held her head. His forehead touched hers. Some people came down the hall, brushing against them as they passed, and that broke the mood.

"Not here." His deep whisper sent a surge through her body. He pulled back and took her hand, continuing down the hall away from the music. Stopping at a door, he pulled her inside and closed the door behind them.

The noise of the party dulled considerably in the dark, empty room. Faint streetlight came through high windows and lit up neat rows of desks. They were in a classroom, the walls covered with children's artwork. He left the lights off and held her shoulders, his hundred watt eyes providing all the illumination they needed.

Rebecca wondered why she felt safe, alone here with this tall, powerful stranger. Somehow, she wasn't afraid—he wouldn't hurt her. But he could easily overpower her, seduce her. After a year with Quentin, she found herself strangely excited by such a possibility.

One of his hands worked its way slowly across her shoulder, then softly up her neck. Rebecca shivered as his hand caressed her, and she bent her head away, giving him more neck to enjoy.

Is this really happening? She felt tingles run through her body where his hand touched her. He let go of her to pull a wayward strand of hair out of the way, then returned to her neck. Curling his hand around the back of her head, he held her securely. His other hand roamed down to the center of her back and gripped her more firmly, pulling her to him. She relaxed into his powerful embrace.

O.E.'s sinewy body held her captive, and she never wanted to escape. He was so much more muscular than she'd ever imagined a man could be, it didn't seem real. She had to be dreaming, which was fine, as long as she didn't wake up yet.

With his lips close to her ear, he whispered, "These kisses don't count." His mouth dove down and gently kissed the base of her neck. More little kisses followed, inching upward, closer to her ear. Excited tremors erupted with each advance.

He was close. His next kiss would be on her ear, and she would lose control. Not that she was in any kind of control at this point—that had been left at the door. Still, she wanted to grab some of it back.

As he was about to lunge for her ear, she leapfrogged his slow buildup and turned to face him, her lips intercepting his, ready for that promised kiss. Their mouths collided.

O.E.'s eyes popped wide when their lips met. He slid his hand from her head down to her shoulders, wrapping his arm around her to pull her in. At first, his lips glided along hers, feeling the landscape of her mouth. Then he kissed her lightly with an occasional nip at her lips. She breathed in his musk, a crisp earthy scent, with a touch of citrus.

His tongue ran softly along her lips, seeking passage. Rebecca let her mouth fall open to invite him in. As his tongue slipped past her lips, her head filled with explosive sounds.

Rebecca nearly swooned at the sensation and wrapped her arms around his head to pull him into a deep, exciting kiss. The room faded as their tongues engaged each other—exploring, tasting, hunting, and playing. O.E. held her tight, and she thrilled at the feel of his solid body. Their mouths attacked as ragged breathing filled the silent classroom.

Damn, he's good. She had to admit that he might be right—this could be the best kiss she'd ever had. One of his hands caressed the side of her face as he continued to explore her mouth. His raw, muscular body held her close.

The kiss went on for minutes, but it could easily have been hours—she couldn't tell. Finally he broke away, short of breath, his face hovering close. "You must have dinner with me."

Although breathless and completely convinced, she pretended otherwise. "How do you know?"

O.E. gave her a huge grin and pulled back. "Are you joking? That was a great kiss! And now that you know what awaits you at the end of the evening, how can you refuse?" He let go and gave her a smile that did not permit any refusal.

That was indeed an awesome kiss. Rebecca needed to know more about this amazing man. "You said that you

used to be in business. I'm thinking you were a salesman, and I bet you were good at it."

"I've sold a lot of things in my life, but if I can make this sale, it'll rank right up there with some of my best." He reached out and put his hands on her waist, arching back and staring at her deeply. "I'll tell you what, no pressure. I hate high pressure sales tactics. So I won't make you decide now. Dinner, Monday at 7:30. Top of the Park."

Rebecca chuckled. "I've heard about Top of the Park. Super fancy and awfully expensive. Can you afford it?"

O.E. froze, looking like an animal in the middle of the road, trying to decide which way to run. He chewed on his lower lip. "You're right—the place is a bit pricey. Maybe someday I'll be able to take you there." He looked away briefly, then brightened. "I know! Alimentary. It's a great little place on Grand Street—quiet, good food, and still undiscovered." He let go of her and stepped back, staring at her like a fox that hadn't eaten in weeks. "Even if it wasn't the best kiss you've ever had, say it was and come to dinner with me. But if you don't show up, I'll understand." He folded his arms. "See? No pressure. But I promise you'll love the food, and unless I'm mistaken, I haven't promised you anything yet that I couldn't deliver."

Such an ego. Still, if dinner was as good as that kiss, she'd die before dessert. Suddenly, she wanted more promises from him. Rebecca's heart was still beating hard, and she gave him a small smile. "All right, O.E. I'll be there."

"Good. Now how about your phone number in case I need to reach you?"

Rebecca pulled a business card from her purse. "Are you going to give me *your* number?"

O.E. had a pained look, crestfallen. He shrugged and shook his head. "Sorry, my phone's no good. I have to get a

new one tomorrow. I'll call you and give you my number when I get it." He gave her a bashful smile.

He doesn't even have a working phone. Rebecca rolled her eyes, suddenly unsure that she was doing the right thing.

Five



The first thing Rebecca noticed when she came home from the Westerley was that the television was on. She briefly considered that there might be a burglar inside, but then she recognized Quentin's favorite sports channel. The announcer's voices were annoyingly familiar, shouting as though they were reporting the end of the world, instead of merely the end of a game.

Quentin was indeed there, standing in the living room by a large cardboard box on the coffee table. He pulled smaller boxes out of it and counted. She grabbed the remote control and turned down the volume. Quentin kept counting, "Fifty-seven, fifty-eight, . . ."

What is he doing here? He was not supposed to come waltzing into her apartment anytime he wanted. Did she have to explain "trial separation" to him? At this point, she wondered if it would be better to explain the term "permanent separation."

"I thought we were going to be apart for a while?"

Quentin waved his hand to cut her off. "Rebecca, please. I'm trying to count." He kept pulling out the little boxes and stacking them on the table, muttering the tally.

Oh no you don't. Not only was he barging back into her life, he wasn't even apologetic about it. Typical, insensitive Quentin.

She watched him count, staring in disbelief. "I don't want you here, Quentin. Go home."

He stopped counting and tapped the number into his phone before turning his attention to her. "I know you're mad at me." Then he mumbled, "Although I still don't understand why." She wondered if this was his idea of an apology.

Apparently it was. He gave her an all-is-forgiven smile and pointed to the big box. "Anyway, I had this sent here a few weeks ago, so I came over to pick it up. I was just looking through it."

Her curiosity won out over her annoyance. "What is it?"

He picked up one of the smaller boxes and opened it, giving the contents a bigger smile than he ever gave her. Inside were two plastic-wrapped lollipops. "It's my new business, Executive Lollipops. They're the latest craze. I'm going to make a fortune on this."

Another of his ill-considered business schemes. This idea was the worst one yet. Quentin was intelligent, which appealed to her, but he lacked common sense. Did he really think he could get rich selling lollipops to adults? She doubted that very much.

He continued his pitch, more excited than before. "I'm going to take them to local shops and get everyone to sell my lollipops. Look at this huge sucker!" He pulled out a larger package and showed her an immense lollipop, as big as his head. It had green and brown swirls in it and looked like it belonged to Willy Wonka. "The green is mint, and the brown is chocolate." He held it closer to her. "Go on, try it!"

I'm in a relationship with a child. Rebecca looked at the lollipop and frowned. After O.E.'s powerful kiss, Quentin seemed like a helpless schoolboy. The lollipop didn't help his image one bit.

Rebecca suddenly thought about *The Wizard of Oz* and couldn't resist a quip. "Are you going to call your company 'The Lollipop Guild'?" She started to sing the Munchkin chant from *The Wizard of Oz*. "We represent... the Lollipop Guild... the Lollipop Guild... the Lollipop Guild."

Quentin watched her with a straight face. "Not a bad idea." He started pulling out boxes and counting again, now humming the Munchkin tune.

Do not ignore me. "Hey! We agreed to take a break here. Stop camping in my living room, and go home!"

"But I like it here, and I like you. We're great together." He held the huge lollipop out to her. "Here. Take the lollipop. It'll make you feel better."

Rebecca took the lollipop and stood there, holding it away from her body with a straight arm. Finally, she tossed it on the sofa and turned back to him. "You think we're great together? Prove it. Kiss me, Quentin."

"What has that got to do with lollipops?"

"Bzzzzz! Wrong answer! You're supposed to forget everything you're thinking about and kiss me when I say that. Now let's try it again. Kiss me, damn it!"

"Well, okay." He reached down to take the lollipop off of the sofa and put it back in the box. Then he stepped close to Rebecca and gave her lips a peck.

"That's not a kiss. *This* is a kiss." She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him in. But as it turned out, that wasn't a kiss, either. No explosion, no reaction. The chemicals didn't even change color when they mixed. She let go of him and flopped down on the sofa.

Quentin stood there, eyes narrow, clearly having difficulty deciding what to do next. "Uh, do you want to have sex?"

Do I what? Rebecca started to laugh, a hysterical cackle that got a little out of control. Quentin had a hurt look on his face, so she forced herself to stop. He couldn't be more of a loser if he tried.

Rebecca wiped a tear from her eye. Why had she kept going out with Quentin for so long? Was it the safety of an honest man, or was it the fear of never being able to find someone better? Given her limited experience with men and her childhood insecurities, she wondered if she had settled for the easy route.

In high school, Rebecca was a complete loner, dedicated to her gymnastics and language studies. Anything to get out of the house; anything to show her sister and her parents what she could do. After high school, she allowed herself to form relationships, which taught her about love and trust. Make that *mistrust*.

She settled down with Quentin after having been burned by her professor. Quentin restored her faith in men—he was decent and devoted. But devotion was no longer good enough. Now he was holding her back.

“No, Quentin. I don't want to have sex. I want something else—I want my key back. I'm sorry, but we're done.”

Quentin stared at her. “You're breaking up with me? You kissed me and now you're dumping me?” He squinted his eyes. “Who is he?”

Nice to know he's not completely stupid. It was just as well that he suspected another man, because she was ready to admit it. “Someone who kisses better than you, that's for sure.”

“You're already making out with someone else! And now I have to have a kissing contest with him?”

It wasn't *all* about the kissing. But she'd already tried unsuccessfully to explain what she really wanted. No point in starting that discussion again.

She went for direct, something he'd understand. "No, you already lost the kissing contest. I'd like my key now."

He frowned at her for a few seconds, but she stared him down. A huge keychain emerged from his pocket and he fidgeted with one of the keys. After it was free, he slapped it down on the coffee table. He quickly gathered the smaller boxes into the large box and hefted it up into his arms. "I'll be back for the rest of my stuff." He walked out the door.

It was that easy. Rebecca knew he'd give up without a fight—there was no fight in him. That was the main reason she needed to break it off. That and the kiss. And what a kiss! Her heart started to beat faster, just thinking about O.E. and his lips.

Is that all I care about? Kisses? Was she leaving someone secure, responsible, and safe because of a kiss? She couldn't be that much of a fool. Nothing about O.E. seemed secure, responsible, or safe. In some ways, this was a really foolish move. Foolish but so right.

The truth was far from simple. Both O.E. and Quentin were bad choices, neither one of them right for her. But Quentin had no surprises left, no spark. She knew as much as she needed to know about him—he wasn't the one.

O.E., however, was a complete unknown with all sorts of strikes against him already. The ego. The freeloader attitude. Then again, when was the last time she felt so excited, so desired, and so wonderful in the arms of a man that gorgeous? Never, that's when. Just the thought of his solid embrace made her shiver. Without a doubt, this particular bad choice had plenty of life left in it.

O.E. was raw, exciting, and powerful. And no matter how ridiculous it might be to go out with him, it couldn't top the insanity of this past year, wasting her time with Quentin.

I'll get you, my pretty. A wicked thrill surged through her as she cried out for her Winkie guard.

Six



Sunday, September 16

Rebecca sat down to lunch with Alice at their regular place. They ordered and then got down to business. “I finally dumped Quentin last night, and I’m happy about it.”

Alice pounded the table and smiled. “Way to go, Rebecca! That boy was a complete loser.”

How embarrassing. Did everyone hate Quentin? She felt an inexplicable pang of remorse and jumped in to defend him. “Oh, I don’t know if I’d go that far. Quentin wasn’t actively bad.”

“No, he was just passively good. Girl, you weren’t getting anything from that boy. You might not be willing to call him a complete loser, but I am. I’m proud of you—how long did you put up with him, anyway?”

Rebecca hung her head. “It’s been a year. We started back in business school.”

“Was he upset?”

“Strangely, no.”

“I rest my case—complete loser. So how’s Tarzan? I’m assuming that he came back and carried you off to his jungle hut. Did you dance the Watusi?” Alice threw her arms out to the side and shook them back and forth, her tongue wagging like a dog. “I’d choose Tarzan over Quentin any day of the week.”

Mmm. Me too. Rebecca would also choose Tarzan over Quentin, any *night* of the week. Was she losing her sense of

perspective, or was it merely the contrast with Quentin that made O.E. seem so appealing?

She gave Alice the facts. "I don't know much about him. His name is Oscar, but he likes to be called O.E. We're having dinner tomorrow night."

Alice narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean you don't know much about him? Didn't you two make out at the party?"

"Hey! I never said that."

"No, you didn't. You never told me anything when I got back from my drive—where you'd been, how you got that dreamy look on your face, or why your mouth looked like it had been put through a blender."

"Ouch. Was it that obvious?"

"Only to me, but I know better than most. So, did you boink him?"

Yeah. You'd like to hear about that. Alice was a horny dog, who expected everyone else to be as horny as her. And although Rebecca *was* feeling it, she needed to retain some semblance of dignity. "Jeez, Alice. Give me a break. We danced and then we kissed. Once. Just one kiss, all right?"

Lunch arrived, and Rebecca tried to forget that one kiss. But it wasn't going to happen anytime soon. And Alice wasn't going to forget about that kiss either. She waited patiently while the food was served.

The waiter walked away, and Alice plowed on. "One kiss, huh? So on the basis of one mind-melting kiss, you dumped Quentin. Excellent! Give me more about jungle boy—dish!"

Rebecca shook her head. "He's got an ego the size of Jupiter. Do you know what he said? He said that he would give me the best kiss I've ever had in my life."

Alice leaned back and smiled, clearly not put off. “And. . .”

And it was all that, and then some. Rebecca tightened her mouth—her lips tingled just thinking about the kiss. “It was pretty damn good.” She looked up at Alice and smiled. “Although I may need another to be sure.”

Alice hooted and drummed on the table. “Tell me more!”

“Well, let’s see. . . He doesn’t work, likes to surf, and has a serious problem with modesty. If he wasn’t such a fine looker and a good kisser, I don’t think I could take very much of him.”

“Ugh. Self-centered boys, thinking they run the world.”

“Don’t they?”

“Some do. Others only think so.”

“Yeah, O.E. seems more like the wishful-thinking type.”

“So tell him to shut up and jump his bones. I mean, seriously? What’s a stud boy like that good for, anyway?”

A very good point. Perhaps Rebecca needed an attitude adjustment—something more like Alice’s. O.E. would be a fabulous lover, and that would be the end of it. Still, it sounded so crude when she put it that way.

“Thanks, Alice,” she said sarcastically. “That’s helpful.”

“You came to me for serious relationship counseling? You’re in the wrong place, honey. I only give out sex tips. What you do with them in the morning is someone else’s department.”

“Sorry, but if I can’t stand dinner with him, I’m not letting him near my bed.”

“Fine! Give him my number and I’ll do it.”

“Oh, Alice. I knew I could count on your for some sisterly advice.”

Alice grinned. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Seven



Monday, September 17

Alimentary was a small restaurant, busy for a week night, with spicy aromas floating in the air. Rebecca stepped up to the reception table while scanning the restaurant for O.E. She was a few minutes early, and he wasn't there yet. "I'm meeting someone for dinner, a Mr. Ezzo. Did he make a reservation?"

The maître d' looked at his list. "Sorry, I don't see anyone by that name. Do you want a table for two?"

Of course he didn't make a reservation. He'd probably never been there before—just saw it on somebody's list of trendy restaurants, along with Top of the Park. Was O.E. even aware that people needed reservations at a place like this? She shrugged and accepted the maître d's offer of a table. He consulted his list to see if he could seat her.

As he scanned his reservation book, Rebecca glanced down and noticed the letters "O.E." written on the list. "Wait." She pointed to the page. "I see the name—it's O.E."

She was amazed that he would use his initials even when making a dinner reservation but she was beginning to suspect that very little about him should amaze her.

The maître d' brightened. "Well of course." He raised one eyebrow and smiled at her. "I didn't know what his initials stood for. Right this way." He led her to a table in the back, a relatively private booth. The restaurant was larger than she thought, elegant and well lit.

O.E. seems like the sort who would be a regular at fast food restaurants. Not this upscale eatery with interesting looking plates of food on every table. It took her by surprise.

He arrived a few minutes later and spotted her instantly. He was casually dressed, but not as sloppy as he had been in his surfer duds. A black, button-down dress shirt hugged his torso loosely, still managing to showcase his powerful build, broad shoulders, and sinewy arm muscles. The shirt was tucked neatly into faded jeans, which revealed a trim waist and a tight backside. As he sauntered up to the table, she tried to remind herself that he was just a beach bum. But thoughts of O.E. as a beach bum didn't do much to quell her excitement. It only led to thoughts of him in his beach wear, and worse, him *out of* his beach wear.

He looks wonderful. Rebecca had to admit that O.E.'s appearance exceeded her expectations. He had put his hair back in a pony tail and even wore fancy shoes and a shiny black belt. This was probably as dressed-up as he got. Did he even own a jacket or a tie?

O.E. gave her a delighted smile as he came to the table. His gray, piercing eyes never left hers as he approached, wiping away any thoughts of a poor beach bum and reminding Rebecca why she had agreed to have dinner. She stood up to greet him.

O.E. took her hands in his and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "Rebecca, it's nice to see you. Sorry I'm late. Were you waiting long?"

Hello, Mr. Considerate. As self-centered people went, he had a winning personality. And even though his kiss was brief, she felt a tingle on her lips, a thrill in her heart, and an

unusual pleasure at simply being here with him. She replied with a parched mouth. “No, I just got here. You’re not late.”

The waitress came over, handed them menus, and took their drink orders. Rebecca studied the menu. At one point, as she read the offerings, she looked up to see O.E. watching her with glimmering eyes, his menu closed on the table. “I can tell you eat here often. What’s good?”

“I’m having one of the house specials tonight: spicy ragout of lamb. The stew is awesome.”

“Which fish do you recommend?”

“Skip the salmon—the sauce is plebeian. Get the bluefish—they do it right.”

There’s no room for doubt with this guy. He knew the menu cold and had an opinion about everything. Rebecca narrowed her eyes. “You really know this place. Do you come here often? I mean, this isn’t super expensive, but it isn’t the most budget-oriented restaurant either.”

O.E. opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and smiled. “Just because I don’t have a job, doesn’t mean I can’t afford to eat here. I have enough money for now. When I need more, I’ll go back to work.”

“That’s an interesting idea. You work until you have enough money, then you quit and coast. How long since you worked?”

O.E. paused before answering. “Four years. But please, Rebecca, don’t worry about money. I can pay for anything you want. In fact, if you like this place, maybe I’ll hire the chef to come cook for us.” He gave her a twisted smile.

Rebecca snorted. “Oh please! Is there anything you think you can’t do?”

“Very little—hardly anything at all. Well, I suppose I can’t give birth or become a wet nurse, but I’ve managed to accomplish nearly everything else.”

There's that raging ego again. It made Rebecca feel like she was a little child, dominated by an older sister who insisted on telling her what to do. Of course, there was a huge difference between Lauren and O.E.—Lauren hated her, but O.E. seemed quite attracted. Still, his overwhelming ego made her feel insignificant.

The waitress brought drinks and took their dinner orders. O.E. seemed overly friendly with the woman, but Rebecca assumed that it was just his usual playfulness. She needed to let it pass.

They raised their glasses, and O.E. offered a toast. “To us.”

Yeah, well, maybe. Rebecca was mildly put off by his flirting with the waitress. That didn't seem like the sort of thing one should do on a first date. Then again, O.E. wasn't the sort of man she ever expected to be with on a first date.

Why was she letting him bother her? Wasn't this all about a new adventure with an exciting man? She managed to let it go and looked up into his thirsty smile. “Sure. To us.” Rebecca tapped her glass with his.

She sipped her drink and set it down. “Can I ask you a question, O.E.?”

“Anything.”

“Don't you worry that you won't be able to find a job when you run out of money?”

O.E. chuckled. “Always the MBA, eh? Look Rebecca, I'm doing fine with my money and my life. Believe me, I've got enough for a while. As I mentioned, I've got some friends who help me out occasionally.”

This worried her. A guy who leaned on his rich friends and then spent carelessly—the worst kind of leech. Rebecca curled her lip. “How much money have your friends given you?”

"I told you, I've never taken their charity. Just occasional favors. Sometimes I do some work for them. For example, I'm staying at Dan Avery's place right now while he's on his honeymoon."

"He doesn't mind?"

"Of course not. He's not using it, and he's happy to have someone keep an eye on it."

"Where do you normally live?"

He worked his mouth. "I have a couple of other places where I stay. I manage pretty well. And I have friends all over the world." He looked away. "Can we *please* change the subject? I promise I'll never ask you for any money—you're safe with me. Why is this so important?"

"Because I'm a self-sufficient woman, and I believe that people should be responsible. You worry me, O.E.—no place to live and no job. You could end up on the street. Doesn't that scare you? Your lifestyle seems a little irresponsible."

O.E. squinted at her. "Maybe it's *you* who has the wrong lifestyle. You worry about money too much, work yourself too hard, and get overly involved in other people's affairs." He leaned back and smirked at her.

A heavy silence enveloped them, so O.E. tried again. He sat up straight and took a deep breath. "I mean, look at you. You're a successful businesswoman. I bet you think that the man you marry must be just as successful as you, and if he isn't, then he's not worthy." He leaned in close. "Now I'm not saying this isn't important, but I bet it's the most important quality you look for in a man. It probably prevents you from enjoying yourself with someone a little less successful." He tilted his head and regarded her.

Now wait a minute. Rebecca reeled from his assessment. It hurt badly, because it hit so close to home.

Had he been dumped by other women who also wanted successful men? Or was this merely a standard speech that he used to sell his carefree existence? She didn't want to believe that he might actually understand her, that he was telling her something she needed to know. That would be painful, especially coming from a self-centered man like him.

She stared back for a few seconds with narrowed eyes and tight lips. Then she exhaled, letting her body relax a bit. Even if he was being difficult, he was still a catch. "All right. Point taken. I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone."

"Good. Truce." He raised his glass. "To peaceful coexistence, even between two people who think the other one doesn't know how to live."

Rebecca smiled and drank to O.E.'s toast. "So, just for fun, what would you recommend I do to be more like you? Not that I ever want to be like you, of course."

"No, of course not. One person like me is enough for this world." He raised his chin and turned his head sideways, a picture of haughtiness. "Oh, where do I begin?" He was about to speak when dinner arrived. After the waitress left, he finished his thought. "Tell you what. Let's eat first then I'll explain how you can be more like me."

As if I would ever want to be more like him. Rebecca laughed. This was going to be an amusing discussion. When he was done, she'd tell him how to be more like her.

Rebecca took a bite of her dinner. "Wow, O.E.! This is good."

"I told you the bluefish was good. Would I steer you wrong?" He scooped some ragout onto his bread plate and offered it to her. "Try the lamb. It's one of the best in the world."

Rebecca tasted it. "Very nice. You really are a man of superlatives. Best kiss ever, best lamb ever. I'm afraid to ask what else you do that's world class."

Oops. Did I just say that? Rebecca blushed at the sexual innuendo she had just dropped into the conversation. O.E. grinned lasciviously. She braced herself for an ego-loaded response.

His answer surprised her. "Then don't ask. Think of this as step one in your path to being more like me. Let the superlatives wash over you, and enjoy them."

She sighed in relief, glad he had restrained himself from taking advantage of her gaffe. Enjoying superlatives seemed like a good idea—some of the things he said did make sense. She leaned back and admired his gorgeous body. "And step two?" She knew where this would lead and suddenly felt the urge to banter with him.

O.E. put down his knife and fork, eyes focused on her. "Learn to surf."

Rebecca shot out a laugh. Once again, his answer was far from what she had expected. "You really are full of surprises."

"What's so surprising about that? You saw me dressed for surfing, and you already told me that you've never done it. It's a no-brainer that I'd offer to teach you."

"Okay, where do you go to surf?"

"Malibu."

He goes to California to surf? Rebecca's head snapped up, and she stared at him. She pictured him driving across the continent, a surfboard strapped to the roof of a beat-up car. "You go all the way to Malibu to surf? Isn't that a little far?"

"There's no place closer that's any good. If you want to go to Hawaii or Australia, I'm game. The surfing is even

more intense there. But Malibu is nice, easier to get to, and better for beginners.”

Rebecca sent him a quizzical look. “You fly across the continent to go surfing? I *am* impressed. Next thing you’ll be telling me that you have a private jet.”

“Of course. I keep it parked at the airport.” His deadpan delivery made it clear he was joking. “But I don’t have a hot air balloon or an amphibious car.” He gave her his best poor-me pout and then smiled.

Wise guy. She could play along with this. “I see. And which will you be buying next, the balloon or the car?”

O.E. rubbed his chin, clearly interested in the thought-provoking question. “When I get near water, I want to surf, not drive. I think I’ll take the balloon.” He nodded his head, the decision was final. “Besides, the Wizard of Oz has one. Why shouldn’t I?” Then he took Rebecca’s hand and stared warmly into her eyes with another award-winning smile. “We’ll go for a ride when I get it.”

Rebecca laughed lightly. “It sounds like fun. I like the idea of floating in the air. More fun than surfing, I bet.”

O.E. inhaled sharply and flashed a look of fake shock. “Nothing’s more fun than surfing!” This was clearly a serious topic for him, not one to be treated lightly. Still, his assertion made her think of so many possible replies.

She couldn’t resist. “*Nothing* is more fun than surfing?” She eyed him with mock surprise and a lewd smile.

He waved his hand to admit defeat. “You’re right, I misspoke. Sex with you would be much more fun than surfing.”

Talk about direct. She had wondered when he would pounce on that subject—he’d had plenty of opportunities. Still, most men were discrete and danced around the topic with tact. O.E. blurted out whatever he was thinking at any

moment in the conversation. He was frank and jarringly honest. For a poor, unemployed, and homeless man, he exuded a level of confidence that seemed out of place.

She teased him—there was no other way to respond. “You are such a dreamer.”

“Well, you’ve got me there—I *am* a dreamer. I’m not going to deny that I’ve dreamed of making love to you. Don’t tell me the thought hasn’t crossed your mind either.” He held up a finger before Rebecca could answer, then went on. “But more to the point, I dream of taking you surfing. It’s an earth-shaking thrill that you cannot believe until you do it. I recommend it to everyone, and I’d love to teach you.”

He took a few seconds to run his gaze up and down Rebecca. His eyes had such heat that they burnt away her clothes and made her feel naked. Naked, but worshipped. She bit a corner of her lip.

He leaned closer. “I couldn’t help but notice that you have a fine athletic body. What’s your sport?”

Rebecca gave him a shy grin. “I used to do gymnastics. I specialized in balance beam.”

O.E. gave her a satisfied smile and nodded slowly. “Excellent! You should be a natural on a surfboard.”

“I’ve heard otherwise. A friend of mine tried it and failed miserably. They’re actually very different sports. The balance beam doesn’t move on you—it’s always in the same place when you put your foot down. A surfboard is all over the place.”

“Yeah, but sticks are much wider and coated with wax so you don’t slip.”

“Sticks?”

“Sorry, slang for surfboards.”

“Of course. Still, I doubt my gymnastics would help that much. And I haven’t done it since high school.”

“Yeah, I did a lot more surfing back in school. But I still do it when I can.” He shook off his own apparent dismay. “Hey, you may not be an instant surfer, but you’ve got balance, and you’re in shape. It will help you immensely.”

Rebecca’s head was swimming with the food, the alcohol, and the man. She even considered the idea of learning to surf.

After dinner, the waitress brought the check with a large helping of enthusiasm. “Mmm. I see you licked the plate again, O.E.” Her emphasis was on “lick.”

“It was great, Yvonne. Give the chef a squeeze for me.” He watched her saunter away.

“She seems to like you. Former girlfriend?”

“Nah. But she’s cute. I like to tease her sometimes.”

He’s telling me about other cute women on our first date? This was not a promising development. Of course, they had made no promises to each other, so what did she expect? She’d already put up with his frank attitude. More of the same was no surprise.

O.E. pulled out a few twenty-dollar bills from his pocket. Rebecca cocked her head.

“No credit card?”

“You know what they say, ‘cash is king.’ And sometimes it gets you a discount.” He started to peel off the bills. When the last bill hit the table, he knitted his eyebrows and looked at the check more closely. Then he exhaled and sunk his face into his hands.

I saw this coming. He was out of money. His promise to never ask her for any was already a lie. She should have been more annoyed, but something about him seemed so helpless that she decided to offer.

“What do you need, O.E.?”

"I feel like a jerk. I'm twenty dollars short. Let me talk to Umberto—he'll let me pay next time I'm here." He started to stand up.

Rebecca reached out and took his hand, keeping him seated. She grabbed her purse and tossed a twenty-dollar bill on the table. If they continued to go out, she was increasingly certain that this would turn into a pattern.

"I promise to pay you back."

"No. It's all right. I can afford it."

"You're too nice to me. This will never happen again."

"Let it go, O.E. I don't mind." Although, in truth, she did. Especially when he'd been flirting with the waitress. She wondered how much of her money was going toward the tip. Not that the waitress didn't deserve a tip. Of course she did.

Rebecca didn't want to be petty about the money. Her annoyance wasn't really about that, anyway. The problem was the entire package, which had some wonderful parts to it, but several annoying parts, too. Maybe she really needed to loosen up a bit, but she was having trouble with that right now.

They got up from the table and started to leave. As they walked past other tables, a woman's voice called out. "Hey there, O.E.!" Two fairly attractive women were having dinner. Both of them waved and gave him snarky little smiles.

Is this the siren cry of a former lover? Or did every woman, even mere acquaintances, salivate over him? Rebecca realized that O.E. was gorgeous enough to elicit desire wherever he went. Totally not what she was used to in a man.

He paused briefly at the table. "Well, well. I didn't know you two knew each other."

The woman who had called out his name narrowed her eyes. “Turns out we have more in common than we thought.” They both giggled.

Make that two former lovers. Did she really expect that someone like O.E. wouldn’t have women hanging all over him? He even admitted to her, when they first met, that women threw themselves at him. Now she could see it in action.

O.E. seemed a bit uncomfortable. Nice of him to notice that he was on a date with someone else. “Right. Well, I’ll leave you two alone. Later.” He escorted Rebecca the rest of the way out of the restaurant at a brisk pace.

Standing on the sidewalk, O.E. tried to explain. “I’m sorry I didn’t introduce you to those women. It was a bit awkward.”

“I understand, O.E. We’ve both had other lovers.” Although he’d clearly had many more.

He wrapped his arm around her waist. “Thanks for understanding, Becky.”

Did he have to use my least favorite nickname? She really wasn’t in the mood. Normally, she’d be able to calmly ask him not to call her that. But suddenly, after his flirting, his caginess, his ego, and his inability to pay for dinner, the nickname managed to aggravate her. Her mood was shot. Not even one of his kisses could help him now.

Rebecca pushed away and furrowed her brow. “Please don’t call me Becky. Just because you shorten your name down to single letters, doesn’t mean I like to do the same.”

He seemed to sense her anger and narrowed his eyes. “What’s wrong with Becky?”

“I hate it, and all other nicknames. I’m Rebecca, and that’s the way I like it.” She needed an apology from him, something to smooth her dander.

Unfortunately, he didn't respond very apologetically. "Perhaps that should be your next lesson in being more like me. Get used to nicknames. Becky, Becca, Bec. Bex, Bexy. Rebby, Reb. Come on! Nicknames are fun."

Most people respected her request for a full name. Instead, his pushback lodged even more quills into her skin. She made a fist and clenched her teeth. A long moment passed.

"Okay, I get it. Rebecca. My apologies." He lightened the mood with some *Wizard of Oz*. "Don't forget, I'm the Scarecrow." He took on the Scarecrow's goofy voice. "I'm not bright about doing things."

His Oz reference was the perfect response. Rebecca lightened a bit and took a few breaths. "Okay, apology accepted." They started down the street while she quietly stewed. Sadly, his apology wasn't really enough.

Who am I kidding? It suddenly dawned on Rebecca that she was giving him entirely too much leeway. Sure he was phenomenally good looking, well built, and could kiss her numb. But how long would that last, when he drooled over every woman he met?

And what else did he have going for him? The poor moocher leaned on all his friends and had already leaned on her, too. With no job and no home, he'd be needing more soon. Was she so thrilled with one kiss that she'd let this guy take her for a ride? What if he robbed her? She suddenly didn't trust him anymore.

Rebecca stopped and turned to O.E. She tried to give him a warm smile, but it came out more like a grimace. "I'm sorry, O.E. You're a very attractive man, and your kisses are memorable. But we have no future together. I just broke up with a difficult boyfriend. Now I feel like I'm taking up with another one. I need someone who I respect, who I think is

amazing. And I'm afraid I don't think you're very amazing." She took a breath. "Let's not waste our time. I really think this is going nowhere."

"Hey! I've got much more in me than one kiss."

Rebecca frowned. "It's not enough. We're so wrong for each other. I mean, the kiss was great, but if we continue any further, I'll end up in bed with you."

"And this is a problem because. . ."

All right. I deserved that one. Rebecca didn't have the energy to explain all of the reasons why it would be wrong to end up in bed with O.E. Even his magnetic attraction couldn't compete with her disappointment at that moment. She stood tall and looked at him like he was a cute puppy that she had to put down.

"I wish I could live on your kisses, but I need more. I'm really sorry, O.E." She turned and left him on the street.

Eight



O.E. watched Rebecca walk away and scowled. He had really blown it with her. Hiding his name and his wealth was one thing, but not being able to buy dinner was unforgivable. And running into two of his ex's at once was truly unfortunate. He had to admit, this bet was really crimping his style.

He liked Rebecca. More than he expected to. Her long red hair and pretty face made his heart melt. Cute freckles, sparkling hazel eyes, and a tight little mouth that he still longed to kiss. He was getting excited just thinking about her face and her fine body.

And not a molecule of air in her head—this impressively tough woman knew what she wanted. Too bad she didn't like his poor nobody act. Then again, she had also told him that she didn't like powerful, rich men, either. He couldn't win. And her nickname issues seemed to come out of nowhere. He wished he understood her better.

O.E. got into his luxury sedan and realized that he couldn't have shown her this car. In fact, no woman could see any of his cars if he wanted to act poor. He dialed his personal assistant, Frank Downey.

“Hi, O.E. What can I do for you?”

“Frank, I want you to get me another car.”

“You already have three in the city, plus one that you keep in Malibu. How many cars do you need?”

“You're going to laugh at this. I need a beater. Something that looks like shit. Preferably rusted, badly

painted, and dented. But it needs to run well—I don't want any breakdowns in it."

"It's a little early for Halloween, isn't it?"

"Just find me a pathetic-looking car. Then get it overhauled so it runs well. Okay?"

"Sure thing, O.E." They hung up, and he wondered what to do next.

I should just tell her who I am. That seemed to be the main problem. All he had to do was mention the famous businessman and his billion dollars, then she'd be impressed. If her issues with rich people surfaced, he could easily distinguish himself from whoever had messed with her before. After all, she *was* attracted to him. All he needed to do was clear the air of his poor, homeless, and jobless persona.

There was one tiny problem. If he told her the truth, he would lose the bet. He lusted for Rebecca, but she certainly wasn't worth a hundred million dollars. Kay's stupid bet was messing up his chances with this delightful woman.

He could still win the bet by finding some other woman to come with him to Malibu. Just keep looking—there are millions in the city. Except he had his heart set on Rebecca. She was smart, beautiful, not a gold digger, and even loved *The Wizard of Oz*. It surprised him how very much he wanted her. But he had to face facts, Rebecca was gone. Or at least out of the picture until this bet was over.

With Rebecca gone, he had to find someone who didn't know who he was, and the clock was ticking. It was easy at the Westerley when all of Kay's friends were there, ignorant of the famous O.E. Orton. But with the party over, who was left? He could call up Suzanne, the scantily-clad bridesmaid, but her cloying attitude annoyed him. And all of the other women he knew were unacceptable because

they couldn't be fooled. He needed to find a stranger, and there was only one way to do that as far as he could see.

Nightclubs. He winced at the thought. And on a Monday night, no less. The choices would be meager.

Please, anything but that. He hated the whole pickup scene—the phony conversations, shouted back and forth in a noisy room. It was no way to meet someone good. But for a hundred million dollars, he'd be satisfied to meet someone bad. He just needed to meet someone.

He went home to his penthouse condominium, observing it through Rebecca's eyes for the first time. He had the entire top floor of a luxury building overlooking the park. Would she approve, or would she think it was too much? Would she call him an obnoxious rich boy, or would she suddenly want him and his money even more? But the question that O.E. really wanted to know was why he was thinking so much about Rebecca.

His housekeeper, Emeline, had left notes for him about the food she had prepared and about missed calls. Emeline was a good woman, and she worked hard trying to keep up with O.E.'s whims. Now that he was a billionaire, he should probably give her a raise—she deserved it.

O.E. changed into more dressy clothes—no nightclub would let him in with jeans, even on a Monday. Soon he was at a club, standing at the bar, surrounded by flashing lights and pounding music. He downed a shot of bourbon and let it percolate its warmth through him. Then he wandered around to choose his prey.

Well hello, gorgeous. Farther down the bar, a dark-haired beauty sat like a statue, staring straight ahead. Her red sleeveless blouse was tight enough to draw men's stares, and her fitted black miniskirt revealed an irresistible tangle of crossed legs. Long, delicate fingers played with an empty

glass. As he walked by, he noticed that her facial expression never changed, an opaque mask that hid her thoughts. He kept on walking to the other end of the bar, acting disinterested.

O.E. turned and watched her for a few minutes, hoping to catch her eye or figure out whether she was available. But she just sat there barely moving. Her elbows were on the bar, her gaze studiously avoiding anyone or anything. The seat on her left was vacant and the person on her right ignored her—a beautiful woman, all alone in a crowded nightclub. Inconceivable.

O.E. wandered back and made his play. “You’re lost in thought. What’s on your mind?”

She turned quickly and looked at him with big eyes. “You shouldn’t be talking to me.” Was that fear he saw?

“Why not? You seem very serious, very beautiful, and very much like someone I’d enjoy talking to. What’s bothering you?”

She belted out a single laugh and looked at him nervously. “Well, I’ll give you credit for noticing my discomfort. But you lose all of those points, and even more, for trying to help.” She looked around briefly, and her eyes flashed. Then she quickly dropped her head and looked away from O.E. “Quick, get out of here! He’s coming back.”

“A jealous boyfriend?” That was no surprise, especially from a woman who looked like every man’s wet dream. But boyfriends come and boyfriends go. O.E. knew he could compete with the best of them and relished the chance to try.

No need to panic, my dear. O.E. wasn’t afraid—after all, he was just talking to her. If she wasn’t available, perhaps she had some friends. Here in this anonymous club, he could grow a new network of acquaintances and find his

partner for Malibu. With a smile on his face, O.E. turned casually to begin his new life with people who had never heard of O.E. Orton.

Expecting to see her boyfriend's face, O.E. was momentarily confused to find his field of view blocked by a huge fist flying toward him. Before he could react, the fist grew even larger and connected solidly with his jaw. He heard a crunching sound and felt pain rip through his head as he staggered backward. Grabbing onto a chair for support, O.E. looked up at the all-beef boyfriend, now scowling at his competition.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

O.E. tried to answer, but his jaw hurt so much that he could only grunt.

The bartender ran over and started to lecture the angry hulk. "God damn it, Zack! I keep telling you to stop punching people. Do I have to call the cops?"

"Fuck off, Ike. That guy was hitting on Nora."

He turned back to O.E. "Don't let me see you around here again, fuckwad, or else I might have to kill you." He narrowed his eyes and gave O.E. the once-over. "Now since your legs are still working, I suggest you use them." He roared at O.E., "Get out!"

I'm going, I'm going. O.E. didn't have to be told twice. He stumbled through the nightclub, tasting blood. He made it to his car and collapsed into the driver's seat, twisting the rear view mirror to examine himself. His jaw looked bruised, darkness had spread over one side. But this was much more than a bruise—he could feel a stabbing pain whenever he tried to open his mouth.

Shit. Shit. Shit. He wanted to shout it out, but speech was impossible right now. Instead, he drove himself to the hospital.

By the time he got there, his eyes were watering from pain. He had to pantomime getting punched in the jaw in order to explain his situation to the nurse.

She looked up at him in his party clothes and exhaled. "Have a seat and fill out this form." She handed him a clipboard.

It took an hour before they called him into an examination room, and by then his whole head was throbbing. The E.R. doctor, a young woman, smiled at him. "Good evening, Mr. Orton. I see you got into a fight."

O.E. grunted, his only means of communication at the moment.

After a short examination, some much appreciated pain medication, and a long wait for X-rays, the doctor made her diagnosis. "First the good news: your jaw suffered a minor fracture and should heal in two weeks. Now the bad news: we're going to have to wire it shut during that time. I'm going to check you into a room for the night, and we'll have a surgeon take care of it in the morning. Is there someone you'd like to contact?"

O.E. moaned and let his head drop. He shook it back and forth to tell her, thanks but no thanks. He was on his own. This night was turning into a colossal failure.



Tuesday, September 18

The next afternoon, after uncomfortable surgery, O.E. sat in a hospital bed with his jaw wired shut. The pain killers were doing their work, and his head felt like it was securely wrapped, ready for shipment. All he had to do was write Rebecca's address on his forehead and throw himself into a mailbox.

See what you've done to me. This was all her fault. Or perhaps it was all Kay's fault for making that damn bet. But, if he thought about it enough, he realized that it was nobody's fault but his own.

Much to his relief, he was actually able to talk through his permanently gritted teeth, and although the words came out muffled and distorted, he was able to make himself understood if he spoke carefully.

O.E. didn't really want to talk to anybody, but when his phone rang and it was from Dan Avery, he took the call.

"Dan."

"Hi, O.E. I forgot to tell you about the cleaning people who come to my place every Tuesday. They're coming soon, so if you're seducing anyone, you might want to get dressed."

O.E. spoke slowly. "Not there now—in hospital. Broke jaw. Wired shut."

"Oh no! That sucks. What happened?"

He offered a terse explanation. "Bar fight."

Dan chuckled. "Over a woman?"

Pretty good guess. Why else would he be in a bar fight after making that stupid bet? O.E. grumbled.

"So did you get the girl?"

"No. Lost two in one day. Getting rusty."

"Really? Your jaw's wired shut, and you have no prospects? Hmm, this may affect the betting pool on you. I'll call Constance and let her know." He sounded entirely too happy.

"Smart ass. I'm down, not out. Tell Kay her bet's a royal pain." Dan agreed, and they hung up.

A nurse came in to offer a straw-fed meal. She had a nice figure and a pretty face—he thought about asking her out. Too bad there wasn't a bottle of bourbon on the menu.

I really should let it go for once. He could barely talk, so how was he going to put the moves on this woman? And besides, he looked like hell, wrapped in gauze and baling wire. He decided to lay there and be happy, simply admiring her.

Then, a strange thing happened. The nurse was standing next to him, explaining which of the meal items could be eaten through a straw, and when he looked up at her face, he saw Rebecca. She didn't look anything like Rebecca, but he still imagined her there—that kissable little mouth and that hair, redder in his imagination than in reality. He no longer wanted this nurse, the woman from the nightclub, or anyone else. He wanted Rebecca. He had to get her back.

Slowly, he mumbled to the nurse. "Can I ask a favor?"

"Sure."

"Can you call someone?"

"Of course. Who should I call?"

O.E. got up and grabbed his wallet, pulling out Rebecca's business card and handing it to the nurse. "Tell her I'm here."

The nurse picked up the phone, and O.E. panicked. He took the phone out of her hand and quickly hung it back up. "Wait!" She leaned closer. "Just say I'm O.E. Don't say Orton."

"Hiding something?"

These games are making me nuts. Now he was manipulating the nurse, too. "Don't use last name—she doesn't know it." He gave her his best puppydog look, knowing full well that he appeared more like a muzzled Rottweiler.

Nine



Tuesday, September 18

Rebecca sat in her supervisor's office, staring at him across his desk. Mark Danforth used to work in the group with her, but thanks to a very successful deal with a Latin American country, he recently got promoted to run the group. Now he thought he was the only one at Ultra Threads who understood international negotiations.

Smug idiot. Rebecca tossed the letter she'd been reading onto his desk. "You can't bribe people in the Czech Republic, Mark."

"Sure you can. Everyone wants more money. You deal with Russians all the time. Don't they demand a little extra on the side here and there?"

"It varies from country to country. People in unstable countries, like the Latin American one you're so famous for, expect bribes. Everything is so uncertain for them that they need satisfaction up front. Russia is much more stable, so you don't bribe them up front, you just give them a little extra at various stages to speed things along. And the Czech people don't want it anywhere—they expect a fair deal. If you bribe them, they become suspicious that the deal is bad." She threw her hands out and shook them. "You've got to know the culture."

"Sorry, Rebecca. But the Czech deal is very important—we can't afford for it to fail. I think we should add a little

extra on the side to sweeten your offer. That way, there won't be any hitches."

"Trust me. The deal I wrote has no hitches in it. If you add a bribe, they're going to reject it. Please don't do that."

Mark scowled. "Hey! I'm the boss here—I know what I'm doing. You just stick to deal writing, and I'll polish them so they get signed." He waved his hand toward the door. "Anyway, aren't you on your way to Moscow for a little pow-wow? Maybe you should wear some sexier outfits—tilt things in our favor."

Offensive bastard. She considered reporting him for sexual harassment. Then they would fire him and she might get to run the group. She could certainly do a better job than Mark.

But Rebecca knew it wasn't that easy. Reporting his comment wouldn't do a thing to him and would only make her position in the group worse. If she'd learned anything from her first job, it was that the world worked that way.

Rebecca didn't need any more of this today. She got up and gave him an icy stare. "Don't you ever tell me how to negotiate—I know these people better than you ever will. And don't treat me like a sex toy either. This company has an ethical code of conduct, you know." He'd never change, but she needed to push back a little.

As expected, her anger had no effect. "Yeah right. We both know that international deals require extra measures. Spare me your ethics lecture."

Rebecca clenched her fists and turned away from him. Best not to even give him the satisfaction of seeing her seethe. She left his office and returned to hers.

When Rebecca got back to her desk, the phone started to ring. She took a second to calm herself before answering. "Rebecca Moore."

"Ms. Moore, my name is Barbara Angelo, a nurse here at Barnaby Medical Center. I'm calling to tell you that someone you know is here, a man who calls himself O.E."

Oh no. Poor O.E. "In the hospital!" Rebecca cried out. "What happened? Is he all right?" She worried that her rejection of him was somehow related to this.

"He's fine. They want to watch him tonight, but then he'll be going home tomorrow. I believe he got into a little trouble at a bar last night."

"Is he there? Can I talk to him?"

"Well, that's going to be hard because they had to wire his jaw shut for a few weeks. He can talk, but not very well. That's why he asked me to call."

O.E. had his jaw wired shut? She blurted out a laugh, then realized that this wasn't supposed to be funny so she muffled it quickly. So the big-talking egomaniac couldn't talk. This was perfect. More than perfect, it was cosmic, perhaps even divinely inspired. She struggled to keep from giggling while the beauty of the moment overtook her. "I'm sorry, but I have to tell you that O.E. with his jaw wired shut is somewhat amusing."

The nurse snapped back. "Hey, there's nothing funny about it. This cute guy's got his jaw wired shut. He can barely eat!"

This cute guy? It seemed that O.E. was already able to put his moves on the nurse, even without talking. Rebecca took a deep breath. "I'm sorry—you're right. I *would* like to see him. What room is he in?"

"He's in C-402. Fourth floor. Visiting hours are until eight tonight."

"Thank you for calling me, Ms. Angelo. Tell O.E. that I'll come by after dinner." After she hung up, Rebecca

considered the situation. The poor egomaniac couldn't talk. This was something she needed to see.

Hours later, Rebecca wandered down the halls of the hospital, reading the room numbers. When she got to his room, she knitted her brow. Every other room in the hall was a double, but his room was private. How could he afford that?

O.E. sat in bed, a few patches of gauze taped to the side of his face. When he saw her, he got out of bed and came toward her. They met with a careful hug, then reestablished a medically safe distance.

"Hi," he mumbled through gritted teeth. He got back in bed and waved her toward a chair.

Rebecca sat down and looked at him. "Are you all right, O.E.? Are you in pain?"

"I'm okay. Got pills." He shook his head. "Feel stupid."

Poor man. He seems so sad. Perhaps she could cheer him up with a little *Wizard of Oz*. "So you really are the Scarecrow. No brains." She grinned at him, and he smiled back, nodding at her assessment.

A nurse came into the room. "Good evening, O.E. One last snack before bedtime." She said the word "bedtime" with a sing-song voice that almost made her seem interested in O.E.'s bed. Rebecca watched carefully as the nurse offered a variety of liquid nourishments. O.E. sampled each one and managed to finish a few of them under the watchful eye of the smitten woman. Finally, she left the room.

When they were alone again, Rebecca turned in her seat to face him. "Seducing nurses?"

O.E. grunted the words, slowly and carefully. "She's nice. Feeds me."

“So what happened at the bar last night? Did you get clocked by a woman?”

O.E. rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Her boyfriend.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened. “Are you the ultimate lothario or what? Do you realize that in less than two days, you danced with one bridesmaid, made out with another one, flirted with the waitress and two former girlfriends on our date, was inappropriate enough at a bar to get slugged by some woman’s boyfriend, and now you’re in the hospital with nurses drooling by your bedside. Damn, O.E., you are a heartbreaker!”

He needs a heart. Suddenly, *The Wizard of Oz* was again relevant, and she paused with a smile. “You know what? You’re not the Scarecrow. Brains aren’t your problem at all. How does the line go? ‘Anybody can have a brain. That’s a very mediocre commodity.’” O.E. pointed at her and nodded his head, a big smile on his face.

Rebecca went on. “I know what you are. You’re the Tin Man, a heartless cad. What you need is a heart.”

O.E. gave her a tight smile and motioned with one finger for her to come closer. She got up and sat on the edge of his bed, leaning in close. “What?”

He quoted the Tin Man’s first words. “Oil can.” Then he lifted his arm and bent it at the elbow, making a creaking sound as he swung it back and forth.

Both of them started to laugh. Rebecca picked up a juice box and aimed the straw at O.E.’s head, pretending to oil his frozen jaw. This made him laugh even harder, which sounded pretty funny through his closed mouth.

O.E. calmed himself and stared at Rebecca with sparkling eyes. “Thanks for coming. Makes me happy.”

I'm happy to see him, too. Rebecca didn't expect this. She figured she'd pay an obligatory visit, then walk away. It would be easy—they had already ended their brief relationship, if you could call it that. But something stirred in her, and she wasn't so sure about him anymore. Was it his great body and handsome face, appealing even when plastered with bandages? Was it his kiss, even though he didn't seem like he'd be able to do that again for a while? Was it her concern for the poor injured man, helpless enough without a home or a job, now even more helpless, laying here in a hospital? Or did their *Wizard of Oz* banter lift her spirits and remind her that they seemed to have a special connection?

Rebecca smiled at the Tin Man. "You're welcome, O.E. Is there anything you need?"

A strange woman's voice called out from the door. "He needs a swift kick in the head." The woman giggled and swept into the room.

Tall and thin, her flowing brown hair fluttered behind her as she breezed in. She wore a long brown and gold bohemian skirt that looked as if it had been hand made in India. Her black knit top had long sleeves and a scoop neck, but she wore absolutely no jewelry. She arrived at O.E.'s bed and plopped a huge handbag down on the floor.

"Oh wait!" She smiled at him and delivered her punch line. "It looks like that's already been taken care of."

One of O.E.'s lovers? It didn't seem likely. This woman was just as amused with his situation as Rebecca. Not only that, she actually seemed interested in Rebecca and quickly turned to offer an outstretched hand.

"Hi. I'm Constance Westerley." They shook hands.

“Rebecca Moore. I’m a friend of O.E.” She regarded Constance for a second. “Westerley? Are you related to Dan Avery?”

“Yes, we’re cousins.” Constance turned her attention to the patient. “Hey there, Mr. Big Talk. Dan tells me you can’t talk anymore. I had to come see for myself.” She leaned closer and examined his head. “Yep. Looks pretty bad. I see guys in jail who look better than you.”

O.E. muttered. “Thanks. Now two women are happy to see me like this.”

Constance turned to Rebecca with a conspiratorial smile. “So you’ve already abused him for this?”

What woman wouldn’t? Rebecca had indeed figured out the essential O.E.—Mr. Big Talk. Known to women all over the city. She smiled with a shrug. “I couldn’t resist. The big talking O.E. without a mouth? It’s nearly perfect.” They laughed.

Constance gave Rebecca a serious look. “So, are you going out with him?”

“No. I realized right away that it wouldn’t work out.” She wondered what to say about it, not wanting to air all of her reservations. “He’s strange, you know. So self-assured yet no place to live.”

Constance quickly turned to look at O.E., then turned back with a smile. A warm, almost loving smile.

Rebecca shuffled her feet. “I know I shouldn’t fault him for that, but it’s weird, especially considering all the bragging he likes to do.” She shuffled her feet again. “I’m being hard on him. I don’t mean to be doing that. I guess I still like him enough to offer some sympathy, though.”

O.E. waved his hands in the air to interrupt them. “You call this sympathy?”

Constance put her hands on her hips and stared at him with slitted eyes. "You should be grateful that she came at all, O. Ego." She turned back to Rebecca. "You know, just because he's a big talker, doesn't mean he can't follow through every once in a while. And for as long as I've known him, I have never seen him take money from anyone."

Wait, she's supporting him? Was Constance telling her that O.E. was worth a second chance? Rebecca wanted to like him, wanted to trust him. But with all that ego and nothing else to support it, she couldn't figure him out. Now here was Constance, assuring her that he wasn't a moocher—even going so far as to say that she admired the man.

Rebecca needed to know more. "How long have you known him?"

"Since we were kids."

She's known him for a long time. And she was a Westerley, someone who wouldn't put up with a thieving loser. Constance's recommendation carried weight. "And? Is there more to him than his big-talking mouth?"

Constance looked at O.E. with a half smile. "There certainly is. But you'd never know it, looking at him now with his jaw wired shut." She turned back to Rebecca. "Don't give up on him yet. He has a habit of surprising people."

Constance suddenly lit up and looked at O.E. "Speaking of surprises. . ." She grabbed her oversized handbag from the floor and removed a smaller bag. "Here, I think you'll like this. I know how you love *The Wizard of Oz*." Inside the smaller bag was a pair of ruby slippers. "I just got these at a party. Not my speed, but I thought they'd be perfect for you."

O.E. reached out and took the slippers. He turned them around for a while, then handed them to Rebecca. "She loves Oz, too."

These are gorgeous ruby slippers. Rebecca admired the workmanship; someone worked hard to make them. "They're lovely, Constance. Who gave these to you?"

"I got them at my women's group. We had a white elephant party to prepare for Halloween—everyone had to give some sort of witch's gift. I ended up with Wicked Witch shoes." She chuckled lightly.

"Your women's group throws Halloween parties?"

"Yeah, that's us. We're a bunch of spiritually curious women who like to explore alternative phenomena. You know, meditation, energy healing, out-of-body experiences, mediumship, all that stuff. We call ourselves the Witchy Women."

"Is this what you do for a living?"

Constance laughed and shook her head. "No, I'm a lawyer, a public defender here in the city. The Witchy Women are just my friends. I really need them sometimes, especially after dealing with some of these poor people, unfortunate enough to land in jail." She slumped her shoulders and exhaled. "They don't understand what they're up against. Some of them don't even know why they got arrested. I do my best to give them the sort of help that rich people get all the time."

She turned to O.E. "So, are you all right?"

"Yes, thanks. Love the slippers. Giving them to Rebecca."

"Sure." She turned to Rebecca and gave her a hug. "Welcome to Oz." She walked to the door and stood there, facing him. "It looks like you're in good hands. I hope you feel better soon." She left.

My own ruby slippers. Rebecca hugged them to herself as she watched Constance leave. Such a friendly, caring woman. And she'd known O.E. since childhood! Rebecca wanted to know more. "You've known her your whole life?" O.E. nodded his head. "Were you ever lovers?"

O.E. shook his head and frowned. "No. Don't be jealous."

"I'm not. Just surprised. She seems to like you a lot."

"There's a surprise. A woman who likes me!"

Even with his jaw wired shut, he loves to tease. Rebecca groaned. "I didn't mean it that way. I . . ."

O.E. cut her off. "Don't worry, I know. She's nice." He reached out and took her hand. "I like you more." Rebecca blushed. "Come visit me? Bring the slippers. We'll watch *Wizard of Oz*."

Rebecca looked at O.E. and inhaled suddenly. He might be a loser, but he still had animal appeal even with his head messed up. And they did have an easygoing rapport and shared a love of Oz. Perhaps they could get along. It really helped that Constance Westerley, the rich hippie lawyer, thought well of him. Rebecca decided to give him another chance. Although she didn't know if they had a future together, the present already seemed brighter. And when she thought about his kiss, the present seemed very bright indeed.

We won't be kissing like that for a while. Still, she couldn't deny his magnetism. And he might be less obnoxious without his big mouth. She accepted his offer. "I'd like that. I have a business trip coming up in two days, but I'll be back on the weekend. I might come over on Sunday. You're at Dan's place, right? Where is that?"

O.E. took a pad of paper and wrote the address.

So carefree. Could she ever be that relaxed, not even worried about where she was living, hopping from place to place? Rebecca doubted it. And she never imagined herself being attracted to someone like that, either. She always thought she needed a man who was more like herself—serious, capable, independent.

Like Quentin? She laughed inwardly when she realized that her interest in Quentin might have been safer, but was no less wrong than her interest in O.E. She decided to let it go—stop trying to fix it. Who cares where he lives or how poor he is? He made her feel good, even when he couldn't talk.

She stood up and leaned over his bed, giving him a light kiss on the forehead. "I guess you won't be giving me any world-class kisses for a while."

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, giving it a little kiss. "I have my memories."

Rebecca backed away from him until their arms were fully stretched out, their hands still clinging to each other. She gave his hand a squeeze and let go, stepping away from the bed. "Get some rest, O.E. Feel better." They smiled at each other and she left the room, hopping unaccountably, every few steps as she walked down the hallway.

Ten



Wednesday, September 19

O.E. left the hospital and moved into Dan Avery's place. Now that Rebecca had this address, he had to start using it. What if she showed up unannounced, ready to tear off her clothes and jump him?

I can dream, can't I? What was more likely, but still wishful thinking on his part, was that she would come over for a visit and then stay a while. The place needed to look like he really did live there.

Dan had a decent home, convenient to many upscale restaurants and clubs, and in one of the best parts of the city. But his three story brownstone sat right at street level, too close to the chaotic city life. O.E. vastly preferred to be forty stories higher.

And Dan had very little help, just an occasional cleaning service. O.E. had Emeline to manage his place, which made everything much easier to handle. He should have asked her to deal with this place, but instead he had given her the month off. He laughed at the lifestyle that he'd grown accustomed to. Nobody cleaned up after him when he was young.

O.E. got settled and was finishing lunch when Warren Benson, his financial advisor, came for a meeting. Warren was a good advisor and had made some very profitable decisions. He wanted to review some accounts and get O.E.'s

opinion. This could have been done by e-mail, but Warren liked to meet in person, so O.E. invited him over.

Warren entered tentatively, looking around as if he expected to be thrown out at any moment. At a height of 6'7", he was usually the tallest man in any room and towered over O.E. by a full six inches. In addition to being tall, he had a solid girth that was hard to ignore. The man had a seriously imposing presence, especially when he wore a nice suit. Unfortunately, he sometimes seemed a little awkward. Like right now.

Warren fidgeted and turned to his boss with one eyebrow arched. "Why aren't you at home?"

Certainly not because I like this place better. O.E. waved Warren in and pointed to the sofa in the living room. They sat down, and O.E. explained his situation through a clamped mouth. "Broke my jaw. Wired shut."

Warren's mouth dropped. "You're kidding! Are you all right?" He got up and reached out toward O.E.'s jaw.

O.E. snapped his head back and brought his hands up to defend against the big man's touch. Warren was a fine businessman, but there was no telling how much damage he could do if O.E. let him play doctor. "I'm fine." He waved Warren back to his seat. "Taking time off. Living here." He frowned at Warren and pointed to the man's briefcase. "Let's do this."

Warren laid out a stream of papers, and O.E. grunted his opinion on each transaction. They had to actually talk in detail about one of them, a Japanese currency deal. But in the end, O.E. deferred to his advisor's opinion. His jaw ached from talking so much.

When the business was done, O.E. gathered all of the papers from the coffee table and handed them back to Warren. He needed a break from his usual life, and so did

his hapless advisor. Warren worked night and day. Something had to be done.

Two can play this game, Kay Samson. Inspired by the bet, O.E. decided to apply a similar tactic to Warren. The man really needed to settle down and have a life.

He gave Warren as big a smile as he could manage. "Tell you what. Give you bonus. Quarter million dollars. But. . ."

Warren's eyes bugged out and he cut off O.E.'s announcement. "Gee, thanks, O.E. That's a great bonus!"

"But!" O.E. held up his hand. "Two things."

Warren folded his arms. "Okay. What?"

One finger went up. "No calls for a month. Vacation time now."

Warren smiled. "Okay, that's easy."

This part won't be. O.E. knew how hard his second request would be for the quiet, sensitive man. He held up two fingers. "Find a woman."

"You want me to find a woman for you?"

O.E. wanted to laugh, but all that came out was a snort. "No!" Whatever made Warren think that O.E. needed help finding a woman? "Not me. For you!"

"I have to find a woman for myself? To date? To marry?"

Yeah, you have to marry her and have five kids. Why did Warren always turn anything to do with women into a task of epic proportions? Was he afraid of women? He had been dating someone very pleasant for a while, so it couldn't be that. But in the past few months, since they broke up, Warren had become a much more quiet man. O.E. wanted his old financial advisor back, and if he had to force the guy to go out and find a new woman, then he'd do it.

"Jeez. Not rocket science. Relax! Just find someone."

“Why do you care about my personal life? I don’t see you looking for a woman, now that you broke up with Tanya.”

Ugh, Tanya. Ever since Tanya left him, many months ago, O.E. was wary of women. He’d been enjoying himself for a few years before that, taking advantage of his new allure. But every woman who threw herself at him was either childish or stupid. All they wanted was his body and his money. Of course, that wasn’t a problem: he had both. But he wanted someone with a few brain cells in her head. And he may have found her.

“I’m on it. Trust me.”

“Fine. But what if I can’t?”

O.E. smiled. There was something in the air about wagers and romance. The bet O.E. was currently facing was daunting, but he was beginning to realize that Rebecca might still be the one he would take surfing. Thinking about her made him happy, more than he normally would be. Sure, she was wary of him being a homeless and jobless pauper. And there was her sensitivity about the rich and powerful, which unfortunately meant him. But she was distractingly good looking and had a sexy athletic body. He still got excited, just remembering her adorable mouth and how hungrily she kissed him. Also, her constant *Wizard of Oz* references were a refreshing delight, grabbing his heart and his mind in places he didn’t even know he could respond to anymore. He longed to be with her, to take her to Malibu and beyond.

Warren had worked like a dog these past four years, and O.E.’s wealth had doubled. That seemed like it was worth a big bonus. But the man was so painfully reserved that he needed a kick start. If O.E. had to tie it to the bonus, then so be it.

He grunted out words that he knew Warren would hate to hear. "No woman, no bonus."

Warren gave a sad groan and stared at his hands for a few seconds. He fidgeted and looked up at O.E. "How do I prove to you that I've found a woman?"

Proof? What are you, a mathematician? It didn't have to be precisely documented. Poor Warren, he really was clueless. "Introduce her to me. I'll know."

Warren stood up, his huge frame seeming to fill the room. "Well, I'll do my best." The big man lumbered toward the door, shaking his head.

"Come on. Supposed to be fun."

Warren frowned. "All right, O.E. I'll try. Have a good month. If you need anything, give me a call."

What an awkward man. O.E. watched him go and pondered the guy's life. Warren was smart and capable. He had earned that bonus and would get it, regardless of his success with women.

But the man had no self confidence, no pride that he, Warren Benson, could do something, merely by putting his mind to it. O.E. wanted to light some sort of fire under him. He hoped the man didn't burn easily.

O.E. was still wondering about Warren when his new cell phone rang. The one he bought that didn't reveal his full name, so he could use it to talk to Rebecca. She was the only one who even knew the number.

"Hey. What's up?"

"I'm up. Well, I will be soon. Up in the air, that is. Like I told you at the hospital, I'm heading to Moscow tomorrow."

O.E. could gladly sit there and listen to her talk. "Tell me everything."

Rebecca chuckled. "You want to hear the saga? Well, let's see. . . I leave at 7:00 tomorrow evening, fly all night,

and get dumped in the Moscow airport around noon on Friday. I *will* sleep on the flight, thanks to the numbing effect of three gin and tonics. Still, I can assure you, the next day will be hell.

“Meetings start that afternoon. They run right up to a banquet dinner and continue after that until the middle of the night. I’ll get back to my room around 3:00 in the morning and pass out. The good news is that I’ll still have twelve hours to get to my plane on Saturday afternoon, so I’ll finally have plenty of sleep.”

She paused briefly. “The bad news is that the return flight is the longest afternoon on record. It departs soon after lunch and gets home before sundown. We’re talking about ten hours of setting sun! That’s hard to sleep through. Even worse because I’ll already have slept enough. So I’ll probably sit there and stare at the sun for the entire trip.

“I’ll get home Saturday afternoon, nicely tan on one side of my face. For the first time since I’ve left, I’ll be released from my trip adrenaline and collapse until Sunday. Now doesn’t that sound wonderful?”

I’ve done things like that. O.E. thought about the squeezing he had done when he was selling his software, years ago. Endless flights squeezed in a coach seat. Interminable banquets, squeezed between some of the most boring people who had ever walked the Earth. And dreadful meetings, trying to squeeze money out of reluctant clients. He had real sympathy for Rebecca, and he ached to give *her* a squeeze.

“Sounds great. Who translates?”

Rebecca laughed. “I do. I speak Russian fluently. That’s why they send me.”

Damn, woman. You are amazing. Wasn’t it enough that she was sexy and sharp? A former gymnast and a lover of

The Wizard of Oz? Now she was such a language expert that she didn't need a translator in Russia. O.E. took a few seconds to find a suitable response. "Say something in Russian."

"All right." Rebecca rattled off a Russian poem. When she finished, she explained it to him. "That was 'Rain Flogs My Face. . .' by Bella Akhmadulina—a poem about the uncertainties of a new relationship. I thought it would be appropriate."

"How un-Russian."

"What? You thought they only wrote about war, snow, and vodka? They lust for each other plenty."

O.E. chuckled. "Your meeting. . . old dumpy guys, or young blades? Any women?"

"Old and dumpy for the most part. All male, too."

"Horny toads?"

"Mostly not. Occasionally I get an obscure Russian idiom for sex, followed by laughter. I'm familiar with most of their euphemisms by now, so I can sling it back at them. But I have to tell you that I don't need to go to Russia for sexual abuse—I get it right here at home. I see it at my current job. Also, the CEO at my first company did a major number on me. All right here in the city."

"CEO. . . The manipulative jerk you mentioned? Tell me."

Rebecca groaned. "I don't know if I want to go there, O.E. It's a pretty sensitive thing with me. I'll tell you about it someday. . . Maybe." She paused, and O.E. could tell she was reliving something unpleasant. "Come to think of it, maybe not. Forget about it."

That must have been bad. Rebecca didn't seem like the type to avoid a discussion, so if she didn't want to talk, it

must have been pretty grisly. O.E. wasn't going to forget about this, but he decided to drop it for now.

The conversation wound down and they made their goodbyes, bon voyages, and best wishes. At the very last minute, just before she hung up and almost like an afterthought on her part, Rebecca promised to come by Sunday evening and bring dinner. Then she was gone.

Oh my God, she likes me. She had actually made a date with him. O.E. was tingling all over. He fist pumped the air and gave thanks for his second chance with Rebecca. By talking less, he had won her back again. He couldn't wait until Sunday night.

Kay Samson might be right: he really *should* shut up.

Eleven



Sunday, September 23

Back from a successful trip to Russia, Rebecca walked into Alimentary to pick up dinner for her and O.E. She inhaled the savory scents and waited for the maître d' to finish making some notes.

“How may I help you?”

“I have an unusual request. I had dinner here recently with someone named O.E.”

The maître d' smiled. “Of course. And how is he?”

Sexy and built. No, that was not the answer she needed to give right now, although it was the first thing that popped into her mind. “Not very well. He broke his jaw and had to have it wired shut.”

The smile vanished. “Oh my. I'm sorry to hear that. Will he be all right?”

“Yes, he'll be fine. But right now, he's recovering at home, and I'm bringing him something to eat.” Rebecca grabbed a menu from the host desk. “So here is what I'd like. I want an order of your spicy lamb ragout, to go. But I want you to purée it into a liquid so he can drink it through a straw. Can you do that?”

The maître d' winced. “You want us to blend a meal? I can't do that—it will destroy all of the character!”

Spare me from your precious character. She knew he would balk at the suggestion. And he was right—what restaurant wanted their meals to become baby food? But he

was going to have to swallow his pride if he expected O.E. to swallow his cuisine.

She pressed her case. "It's the only way he'll be able to eat it, and we both know he likes your food very much. I'm sure that he'll forgive the lost character, given the circumstances."

The maître d' puckered his lips and stood up straight. "Very well. And what would you like to eat? I assume we won't have to blend your dinner, too." Rebecca ignored his attitude and made her selection.

Soon, she was standing at the door to Dan Avery's place, a take-out bag of food in her hand. Still unsure how far she was willing to go with him, she had dressed as casually as possible. Sneakers, a loose, blue and teal green cable knit sweater with cropped sleeves, and a baggy pair of black jeans. The outfit broadcasted a we're-just-friends message that she knew O.E.'s good fashion sense would hear. She also knew that he would probably ignore the message. She'd be okay with that, too.

What do I want from him? She had been looking forward to seeing him for days and had thought about him during her entire business trip. When she woke up this morning, back in her own bed, she even fantasized about finding him next to her. But now, standing before his door, a small sense of reluctance reemerged. There was something vaguely unsettling about O.E. For example, the mere fact that he was so desperate for housing that he was willing to take a month at Dan's place. What would he do after that? Would Dan let him stay or would he be out on the street?

As much as O.E.'s approach to life annoyed her, she knew that as soon as she saw him, she would fall under his spell. The man was so captivating. She remembered that

kiss and involuntarily touched her lips, still able to feel the heat. Before she could deliberate further, she rang the bell.

O.E. opened the door and beamed at her. He was dressed casually, too—barefoot, with shorts and a torn T-shirt that closely followed the lines of his tall and, let's face it, super muscular frame. That square but broken jaw was no longer bandaged, and she could see the bruise on his chin. Other than that, he looked pretty much the same as when they first met. He looked amazing.

Rebecca took a few seconds to slow her heart. She tried not to think about his lips—she would take this one step at a time. Good thing she hadn't dressed up.

O.E. wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her into the living room. As if it would protect her, she raised the bag of food to show him. He sniffed it and smiled. "Smells good."

"Your favorite: spicy lamb ragout from Alimentary."

O.E. frowned and dropped his head. "Can't chew it."

"Oh come on, O.E. I already figured that part out. I had them blend it for you."

O.E. lit up and threw his other arm around her, giving her a hug. "You're the best!" She hugged him back, burying her face in his chest and inhaling his crisp lemon scent. This guy was so ripped that she could feel his muscles flex as he held her tight. Suddenly, O.E. let go of her and took the bag of food. "Right this way!" He crossed the living room and entered the kitchen.

Rebecca followed, exploring Dan's place as she went. The living room was spacious but simple, warmly lit with two sofas wrapped around a large coffee table. Artwork adorned the walls, but she couldn't stop to examine the pieces because O.E. had left the room. She followed him and was surprised to see a clean and well-organized

kitchen, not a dish out of place. Say what you want about O.E., at least he was a neat houseguest.

He pulled containers of food from the takeout bag, and sniffed at their lids with his eyes closed. "Heaven!"

"The maître d' was horrified at the thought of blending a meal. He insisted that I apologize in advance."

O.E. turned to her and gave a nod. "You did good." He took out a plate and a bowl, some silverware and a straw. When the table was set, he opened a cabinet full of liquor. "A drink?"

I'm ready for this. Rebecca knew drinks would be on the menu, and no longer worried where it might lead. "Some red wine is fine." Her cautious side couldn't resist the urge to ask, "Are you sure you should drink when you're on pain medication?"

"Done with meds. Doesn't hurt much." He hoisted a bottle of bourbon. "Use this for pain." He took out a glass and nearly filled it. Then he poured a full glass of wine for Rebecca and raised his drink to toast.

Rebecca touched her glass to his. "To your health, O.E." They drank, then sat down.

O.E. poured his dinner into the bowl, raising it to his nose and breathing it in. "Wonderful!" He set the bowl down and watched her finish plating her dinner. She took her time, enjoying the searing waves of heat coming from his gaze.

When she was done, he picked up the straw and took a long draw of the liquid lamb. Eyes closed, he leaned back in his chair and moaned. "Thank you so much." They kept eating and finished dinner in relative silence, the loudest sound being the rattle of liquefied lamb ragout echoing up the straw as he sucked the last drops from the bottom of the bowl.

O.E. got up and pulled more bottles from Dan's liquor cabinet. "After dinner nip?" He placed a bottle of gin on the table and found a bottle of tonic water in the bar fridge.

"After all those women you've chased, I'm pretty impressed that you still remember what I drink."

He leaned close to her and spoke carefully. "Never forget the taste of your kiss."

How does he do that to me? Her mouth tingled at the thought, and she inhaled sharply. She stared at him with uneven breath. Part of her wanted him badly, a sexual urgency that she couldn't deny. Another part of her was suddenly afraid. Dinner was over, would she be dessert?

"I don't. . . I mean, um. . ." What was wrong with her? Alice would never hesitate at a moment like this.

O.E. must have sensed her unease. He held his hands out to the side. "Don't worry. Can't kiss tonight. And no sex either."

Relief that they weren't jumping into bed was followed immediately by disappointment that they weren't jumping into bed. "No sex tonight?"

O.E. spelled it out. "Not while mouth like this. Wait till week from Tuesday. Then, who knows?"

That's not the way it works. Since when did a guy need to open his mouth during sex? Even grunts could be done through a wired jaw. His ban didn't make sense. "Why? So you can talk me into it?"

"Not talk. Other things." He took her hand. "You're special. Don't want first time to be like this. I want you. But want to do it right."

She was relieved. Yet with the sexual tension gone, she suddenly longed for it. The thought of making love to him appealed more than ever, and his insistence on doing it

right made it seem exquisite. “Wow, O.E. That’s kind of romantic.”

He smiled. “We’ll still have fun. Watch Oz movies, snuggle. Okay, Rebecca?” He spoke her three-syllable name carefully, taking extra effort to speak it clearly. She had a sudden epiphany.

This has gone on long enough. The time had come to let go of her rigid rules, for his sake, and perhaps even hers. “O.E. I must be going crazy, but I’m willing to let you shorten my name. I can see how hard it is for you to say ‘Rebecca,’ so I’m going to let you use a nickname.”

His eyes widened. “You don’t mind?”

“I guess not. I’ll even let you choose. Just not Becky.”

O.E. paused for a bit, his head tilted to the side. “How about Bec?”

“B-E-C-K?”

“Shorter: B-E-C. Fits you.”

Rebecca laughed. “Sure, go ahead. Just for you.”

He smiled. “Thank you, Bec.” Shockingly, the nickname didn’t hurt at all.

Now why didn’t I do that before? Letting him use a nickname somehow brought him even closer to her. She stared at his face and felt that familiar thrill. Those lips, reminding her of what they could do; those gray, shimmering eyes, promising her everything. She roamed over his muscled torso, flexing under a thin shirt, and realized that she had never been with a man who was this well built. Her sister had assured her that the ugly goose would never get a man even half this handsome, but those long-ago words held no threat anymore. Too bad she had to wait nine more days before anything else could happen.

O.E. defused the sexual tension. “Watch *Wizard of Oz*?”

I'd love to do that. She could relax now. Suddenly, they were old friends able to share favorite movies and intimate moments. She thawed under his warm gray eyes.

Rebecca pulled out the ruby slippers Constance had given her. "Look what I brought. Let's watch your favorite movie." She poured herself a gin and tonic.

"Yours, too?" He gave himself another healthy shot of bourbon.

"Yeah, it's up there at the top." Rebecca raised her glass. "To the Tin Man. I hope you find a heart."

"To Dorothy. Hope you find home."

She smirked. "There's no place like it." They drank.

Wow, talk about nostalgia. Rebecca hadn't watched *The Wizard of Oz* for many years, and it was much different this time. Instead of watching fretfully, afraid of the evil witch, the terrifying wizard, and the other dark characters, she enjoyed each scene like a visit to an old and cherished friend.

They laughed together at their favorite quotes and discussed the acting, the scenery, and the emotions. When they got to the part in the movie where Dorothy gets the ruby slippers, Rebecca put hers on. Whenever the characters danced down the Yellow Brick Road, Rebecca and O.E. got up and skipped around the room. And when the Winkie guards chanted "Oh Ee Oh," Rebecca joined them with gusto.

At the end of the movie, O.E. turned to Rebecca and wiped the tear that was falling down her cheek. She could see his eyes glimmering as well, and it alleviated her own embarrassment.

The credits ended, and they turned to look at each other. The simple, chaste mood of the movie permeated the room, and something about O.E.'s rugged but ragged

appearance made him seem like another farm hand. Any sexual urgency she may have felt before was washed away by the youthful joy of a classic old movie.

Rebecca stood up. "I think I'll go home now. I do have work tomorrow. I hope you don't mind." She was feeling good about him—he hadn't been egotistical once tonight. Would he do something outrageous to keep her from leaving?

Much to her relief, he stood up and nodded his head. "Of course."

She gave him a hug and started toward the door. "Goodnight, O.E."

"Come again, Bec. Lots more Oz movies." It was one of the sweetest offers she'd ever had from a man who clearly wanted her body.

Twelve



Tuesday, September 25

Rebecca looked at the e-mail message and smiled. It was from “HeartlessTinMan,” and she was amused that he had created the account just to talk to her.

From: HeartlessTinMan

To: Rebecca Moore

Subject: Movie night

Are you free tonight? It’s my turn to take you to dinner. Then come back for another Oz movie. I’ve got everything from the recent “Oz: The Great and Powerful” all the way back to the silent movie, “Patchwork Girl of Oz” (the only one that L. Frank Baum actually worked on). “Patchwork” is a total snoozefest, but it’s something that no true Oz fan should miss.

I really worried that it would be awkward being with you and having my jaw wired shut. But I have to say that it was great fun, and I had a wonderful time. And, of course, watching “The Wizard of Oz” was a special treat, something that most of my friends don’t care much about. It’s a real thrill to

watch it with a true devotee.

Anyway, since I'm food challenged, I propose a soup restaurant, the appropriately named "Liquid Lunch," on 28th Street, just a few blocks from Dan's place. Meet me there, tonight at 7:00.

Am I being too pushy and self-centered? I know I do that, and I'm trying to repent. If you prefer a different dinner choice, feel free to make a suggestion (as long as they make liquid meals).

I look forward to seeing you.

— O.E.

Such a sweet note. Rebecca read the message again and again, warming herself with his words. They were so sweet that she momentarily forgot they came from the man who boasted about everything yet actually had nothing. Was she really falling for a homeless, unemployed man who couldn't even afford dinner? Maybe.

Liquid Lunch was noisy, even where they were seated in the farthest back booth. O.E. couldn't shout out his order like everyone else so he raised his menu to the waiter and pointed. When he tried to ask if the soup had solid pieces in it, Rebecca had to intercede.

"My friend is recovering from jaw surgery and has his mouth wired shut. He needs a purely liquid meal. Can you make this one with just broth, or even better, blend the solid pieces so he can get it past his teeth?"

O.E. smiled at the waiter and showed off his hardware. The man snapped his head and stared with wide eyes at O.E.'s face. After a second, he looked down at his order pad and scribbled something. "I'll tell them. It should be fine."

They watched him scamper away, and O.E. gave her a smile. "Thanks, Bec."

They leaned back in their seats and gazed at each other. Rebecca felt a relaxed lightness, a release of the usual tension during a date. She didn't have to say anything to O.E., and he wasn't able to say much back. They sat for a few minutes in peaceful silence, wrapped in each other's consideration.

When the soup arrived, they were so deep in their silent meditation that they started to eat without any further words. O.E. offered her a taste, merely by motioning to his bowl. Rebecca tasted his soup and nodded approval, refusing to break the mood by speaking. Then, O.E. removed the straw from his bowl and pointed it at hers, asking to try some. She pushed her bowl closer to him, and he dipped in for a taste. After he took a sip, his eyes closed briefly to show her that she had also chosen well.

When they finished dinner, they sat back and gazed at each other, unwilling to spoil the mood by speaking. Rebecca leaned forward, her elbows on the table, her head on her hands. O.E. did the same, and their faces hovered, a hand's width away from each other. His blond hair fell forward, and he smiled at her with an almost loving look. Rebecca reflected his happiness back and added hers to it.

At the same moment, they reached out a hand, grabbing each other across the table. Their fingers wove together inches above the napkin dispenser. Warmth from his hand spread through her entire body in an exquisitely

slow slide. She let out a quiet moan. His eyes flared, but he said nothing.

I must be horny. Even his touch is exciting me. Rebecca's lips parted, and she breathed heavily. She was about to say something, but O.E. raised a silencing finger to his lips. He held it there for a second, and then moved his finger to her mouth, stroking her lips lightly and entreating her to avoid words. Her lips warmed from his touch, and the heat made her almost dizzy.

Still holding hands across the table, O.E. started to caress and she responded enthusiastically. They played with their fingers, their palms, their wrists. They swirled their hands in an ever-changing pattern of embrace. He stroked each finger, then two or three at a time, alternating light skims with firm grasps, lacing and unlacing their fingers. She played with his hand, sliding their skin against each other on both the front and backs of their hands. Fingers twined in and out, working in every way from hearty handshakes to tickling flicks.

Their entwined hands were getting Rebecca surprisingly aroused. She looked around the restaurant to see if anyone was watching, but nobody seemed to care. O.E. held her hand so powerfully, so forcefully, so seductively. His hand circled down to her wrist and roamed farther down her arm before returning to her palm and fingers, his grip alternating between taut and tender. She let her hand follow his lead, and they chased each other for a long time.

After minutes of tangled arms and hands, their breathing had grown ragged. She grasped him solidly and felt a jolt run up her arm through her body. It left her quivering in its wake. With this much energy built up, the extremely light brush of fingers that followed drew a little

cry from her. She didn't know if she could endure another second without the warmth of his hand.

They launched their hands at each other, interlaced fingers, and clutched tightly in the strongest handclasp yet. A shudder ripped through both of them as the dance of their hands reached a quivering finale.

Did I just have an orgasm from playing with his hand? Certainly not a full orgasmic experience, but it had the same sort of excitement and a familiar peak. They had just experienced something more climactic than she could ever have imagined possible from simply touching hands. Rebecca let an accidental moan slip out. She stared at him, finally breaking the wordless spell. "What was that?"

O.E. flashed a mischievous look. "Something good."

She pulled her hand away and held it to her chest, blushing and looking around to see if anyone had noticed them. The restaurant seemed to be functioning normally, oblivious to their erotic play. "Let's get out of here."

O.E. nodded, dropped some money on the table, and stood up. He offered his hand to her. Before taking it, she considered how wonderfully intense even one of his hands could be. Imagine two hands. Imagine. . . Her imagination was more than she could handle at the moment. She suppressed the thoughts, and they left the restaurant.

For a few minutes, they walked hand in hand down the street, quietly looking at the storefronts, the people, each other. Then they were back at O.E.'s borrowed lodging. He motioned to the door with his head, a silent invitation to continue the evening.

Yes, I want you. Rebecca wondered if he would lift his sex ban, now that they'd had such great foreplay in the restaurant. She was certainly in the mood.

Feeling flirty, she threw her arms around him, and they embraced, holding tightly on the doorstep. She pulled back a bit and kissed his closed lips. For a while, they let their lips graze. Then Rebecca reached out to hold his head and intensify the connection. Unfortunately, she touched him on a sensitive part of his jaw and he winced, snapping his head away.

Well that killed the mood. He tried to smile at her, but his pain was evident. "Oh God, I'm sorry, O.E." She would have to watch out for that.

"It's all right." He stood there with his hand on his jaw. After a deep breath, he took her hand, clearly trying to restore the blissful feeling. But it was gone, somewhere over the rainbow, far, far away.

He made one last attempt to recover the evening. "Come in?"

"Maybe I should go."

"Don't worry. I'm fine."

"I . . . I'm not worried." She gave him a quick hug and stepped back again. "I'm not worried for myself, that is. It's you. I don't want to hurt you."

He reached around her waist and pulled her close, his gaze intense. "One more week. Can you wait?"

I can barely wait another minute. With his arm wrapped around her, she nearly lost herself in his embrace. But he needed time, so she would have to find a way to keep her libido in check for one more week. She gave him a thin smile. "Sure, I can wait."

Thirteen



Thursday, September 27

Rebecca came home from work and punched a few pillows. Every part of her life was conspiring to annoy her, from her work to her family. She needed someone she could vent to.

Good thing Quentin wasn't around anymore—she could never blow off any steam with him. He had a surprisingly short attention span, and often glazed over when she discussed unpleasant subjects. Sharing your bad day with Quentin was like talking to a block of wood.

O.E. seemed like the type who would actually discuss her day, rather than keep quiet. Too bad he had to keep mostly quiet. Still, if he said two words of comfort, he'd be ahead of Quentin.

Call him, already. She briefly considered sparing him from her woes, but then thought—why not? If he expected to ride with her, high in the air, he would have to deal with her lows, too. She dialed his number, wondering if he'd avoid her by playing his I-can't-talk card.

"Hi, Bec."

"Hi, O.E." She paused to take a noisy breath. "Mind if I blow off some steam with you?"

O.E. spoke economically through his wired jaw. "Sound unhappy. What's up?"

"Where do I begin?" She groaned. "I had to deal with two people today who I wish I'd never have to see again."

O.E. gave her a sympathetic grunt and let her go on. “Unfortunately, they’re both pretty permanent parts of my life, so I’m stuck with them. One is my supervisor, Mark, who is a total and complete jerk. The other is my sister, Lauren. She’s coming to the city in a few weeks and expects me to be happy about it.” She wailed a desperate cry. “I can’t even begin to tell you how much they annoy me. How much better my life would be without them.”

“Tell me.”

“Who do you want to hear about first?”

O.E. chuckled. “Start simple. Mark.”

“What makes you think Mark is simple?”

“Boss gone someday. Sister problem forever.”

That’s really true. Rebecca laughed at his analysis, which already made her a little less upset with Mark. “I guess you’re right. But he’s more of a pain right now. I have to endure his stupidity every day. Lauren rarely shows up.”

“Wrong. Sister bothers you even when gone.”

Amazing. He really gets me. In a few well chosen words, O.E. showed remarkable understanding of her situation. Rebecca exhaled. “Okay. Let me tell you about my supervisor. He heads the International Relations department at Ultra Threads. Like everything else, clothing manufacturing has gone global, and our group makes deals with foreign companies. We’re pretty busy.

“Anyway, Mark thinks he knows how to negotiate with anyone in the world. The big turkey once got a major project going in Latin America, and that got him promoted to department head. Now he thinks he’s God’s gift to international negotiations. Unfortunately, his attitude keeps causing trouble for the rest of us.

“Since I know a few Slavic languages, I handle eastern Europe. But today, Mark ruined a deal I was making with

people in the Czech Republic. He rewrote my cover letter, offered them a bribe, then sent it out. A bribe! That's so insulting. I begged him not to do that, but he thinks he knows better. Now they're going to reject the deal, and I'll get the blame."

O.E. offered a suggestion. "Competing with you."

Rebecca paused. "Why would he compete with me? He's the boss already."

"Threatened by you."

"I'm no threat to him."

"Thinks you want his job."

That's ridiculous. Or was it? She couldn't deny that she'd like to run the department—maybe Mark sensed that, too. O.E. seemed to have real insight into people. "I probably *should* have his job. He sure can't do it."

"He knows that. Wants to make you look bad."

"Damn, O.E. You might be right. How do you know so much about this stuff?"

"Used to do business. I know people. Is he sexist?"

It's like he comes to work with me every day. Rebecca exhaled loudly. "The worst. He's a total pig. There's another woman in our group who had a baby last year. Now she only works part time. He's always accusing her of slacking off and threatens to fire her."

"Bet she works plenty hard."

"Yeah, she does." Rebecca laughed. "I think Ultra Threads needs you to come in and do an evaluation."

"Doing it now. Does he touch you inappropriately?"

"Well. . . He shakes hands with men but hugs women."

"Uh huh. Can I beat him up?"

Rebecca visualized O.E. knocking Mark to the floor, and it brought out an involuntary giggle. "Maybe you

should." She took a few seconds to calm herself before going on. "What can I do about this?"

"Document everything. Send him e-mail. Tell him bribe is wrong."

"I already went to his office and said that."

"Send e-mail too. Then you have a record. Office visits are off record."

Who is this man who avoids any thought of work yet knows it so thoroughly? Whoever he was, he certainly was nothing like the underhanded jerks she encountered so often at work. She recognized the value of his suggestion and found herself surprisingly less upset.

"You're right. Thanks, O.E." Rebecca took a few breaths. She would deal with Mark's mess when she had to, and wouldn't let him upset her.

Her thoughts drifted to her sister, the bigger problem in her life. Rebecca wasn't sure she wanted to share all of her issues about Lauren, and even felt a little guilty making him work so hard to talk. But she decided to try—he might have something useful to say. If his advice about Lauren was anywhere as accurate as his advice about Mark, she would be delighted.

"Do you want to hear about my sister now?"

"Hit me." Rebecca laughed at the expression, particularly appropriate after someone had done just that to him, only a week ago.

"There's just the two of us in the family. Lauren's three years older. And she always put me down. Criticized my actions, clothes, and appearance. She used to call me an ugly goose. . ."

O.E. cut her off as loudly as possible through gritted teeth. "She lies!"

“Yeah, I know. But she used to chant that all the time when I was young. ‘Little Becky, ugly goose.’ God, I hated that. Any act of kindness from her was merely a setup for her do something mean.”

Rebecca grunted. “You remember that horrible pink bridesmaid dress from the wedding? Well, the funny thing is that it wasn’t the first time I wore a ridiculous pink dress. The first time was when I was a kid.” She exhaled noisily.

“I remember the day Lauren suggested that we make a dress from leftover pink gift-wrap paper, cut and stapled together. It was supposed to be some sort of peace offering on her part, an attempt to act nice. But I knew better. When the paper dress was finished, she forced me to put it on, then grabbed my real clothes and wouldn’t return them. She teased me about my homely face, my stupid red hair, my childish outfits, and whatever other ammunition she could use, constantly chanting, ‘Little Becky, ugly goose.’” Rebecca sniffled. “She chased me all over the house and swiped at the dress. When she’d managed to rip it to shreds, she wandered off. I can still remember crying on the kitchen floor in my underwear, shreds of pink paper everywhere.”

O.E. moaned lightly, an offer of sympathy. “No parents?”

“They were never around. Mom worked all day in a supermarket, and Dad worked all night in a tannery. Most of the time, they were either asleep or gone. So Lauren ruled most of my youth. If she wanted me to wear a pink paper dress, I did.” Rebecca paused, then managed to chuckle lightly. “I’ll tell you one thing: pink is *not* my color. It took me years of therapy to get over her abuse.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Well, I mostly did.”

O.E. spoke carefully. "No. You still hate her. If you believed in your beauty, you'd pity her."

There he goes again. Rebecca inhaled sharply at his analysis. "Who are you?"

"Someone who believes in your beauty."

"I don't know if you mean it, or whether you're just trying to seduce me, but it's really nice."

"I mean it, and I *will* seduce you. Five more days."

Rebecca was strangely aroused by his words. No vague promises, no pretending. This was a straight up proposition. Mark your calendars! Tuesday, October 2: sex with O.E.

Rebecca understood the mating dance that went on between men and women and had heard some choice lines in her life. O.E. didn't play that way. Unlike the professor who lied constantly to her, O.E. was glaringly honest. Sure, he was a financial train wreck, his life messed up in all sorts of ways. But he seemed completely up-front about his feelings, and it somehow relaxed Rebecca. It actually made her feel attractive, more attractive than other men and years of counseling had ever made her feel.

"You're wonderful, O.E."

"Thanks, Bec. Forget your sister."

"I can't. She's coming to town next month for a medical convention. She wants to have dinner with me and show off her new boyfriend. She'll probably heap some more abuse on me, too."

"You need to bring a boyfriend. I volunteer."

Having him there would help her immensely. It would make her feel safe and maybe even help her push back the ugly-goose attitude. After all, could an ugly goose snag a hunk like O.E.? Maybe she'd take him shopping first, dress him up so he'd look even finer than he normally does. That would show Lauren. She nearly giggled at the idea.

But would they still be together in two weeks? This relationship was certainly building up fast. The future was anyone's guess, especially with someone like O.E. "It's not until October 12. Will we still be going out then?"

"Are we going out now?"

Rebecca laughed. He had a point. Just what was their status? Some days she lusted for him more than anyone she'd ever met. Other days, she puzzled over his unstable life and his overwhelming ego. Today, she was surprised by his amazing insight into people. Why couldn't he apply that to himself?

"That's a good question. I want to say, 'yes.'"

"Good! Mouth will work then. I can tell her off."

"Don't make trouble for me, O.E." *No, check that. Make all the trouble you want.* What could be more fun than watching O.E. lay his ego on Lauren? The collision would ignite a galactic fireball, powerful enough to destroy at least five planets.

"I'll try to be good."

Rebecca chuckled. She had a sneaking suspicion that his idea of good was not the same as hers. And that was just fine. "All right. Come meet my sister next month. If you want to, that is."

"I want."

"Thanks, I appreciate it, O.E. I think it will really help me." Rebecca took a moment to let relief bathe her. She longed for his embrace, but settled for his promise.

"I'm going to go now. Thanks for listening."

"Call any time. Nice to hear your voice."

"It's nice to hear yours."

"This isn't my voice. Wait till Tuesday." She wasn't sure she could.

Fourteen



Friday, September 28

Rebecca and Alice sat at the bar and clinked their glasses. “To the Road Warriors. We ride again! Well, minus one founding member.”

Alice pulled out her phone. “Let’s call her up!”

“No. Come on! She’s on her honeymoon. Probably in bed with Dan right now.”

Alice laughed and waved the phone about. “Even more reason to call her up. She’s the only one getting any.” She squinted at Rebecca. “Unless you’re getting some Tarzan action, that is.” She howled like a jungle woman, inviting all the animals into her bed.

I’m getting Tarzan, but still no action. Rebecca blushed, embarrassed by her lack of progress. Alice wanted juicy details. Unfortunately after nearly two weeks, they’d still had only one kiss. Alice was going to be disappointed.

Rebecca summarized. “I’ve been seeing him. A little.”

“A little? How little?” Alice smirked and leaned closer. “Or should I say, how little *is it*?” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“I don’t know yet. Haven’t seen it. We’ve been together a half dozen times, taking it slow while his jaw heals.”

Alice snapped her head and stared, waiting for further information. When none came, she prompted. “Jaw heals?”

“Well. . . he broke his jaw in a bar fight and got it wired shut. Now he doesn’t want to sleep with me until he gets the wires out.” Rebecca wondered why O.E. was so intent on

waiting for his jaw to be unwired. He had made lewd comments about licking and sucking and eating, but she had a hard time believing him. The men she'd known didn't use their mouths that much in bed.

Alice arched an eyebrow. "And when do the wires come out?"

"Tuesday." Rebecca clamped her legs together just thinking about it. "He's invited me over for dinner, but we both know what's really cooking."

Alice burst into a huge smile. "Excellent!" After a few seconds, the smile slipped discretely off of her face. "So. . . bar fights? Who is this guy?"

"I'm still not totally sure. A friend of Dan's, I know that much. In fact, he's staying at Dan's place while they're on their honeymoon."

"No place of his own? Take that poor boy home and tuck him into bed!" Alice bounced in her seat, and let her tongue hang free.

Tempting, but dangerous. "Hey, I said I want his body. I don't want him to move in with me. There's something about him that I don't quite get." She looked down briefly. "He's mysterious. No place of his own. Floats around with no job and no money. He's got a huge ego but is also surprisingly sympathetic and easy to talk to. And wow, wow, is he ever hunky. I can't believe how drop-dead irresistible he is."

Rebecca paused and chuckled. "Get this. After our first dinner date, I broke up with him. I just didn't think he was my type."

"Not your type? Just what *is* your type? Big muscles and a dick are usually sufficient. Mystery men don't need brains."

“He got a little too deep under my skin during that date. It bothered me.”

Alice peered at her. “So what made you take him back?”

“When he broke his jaw, I visited him in the hospital. Turns out he’s much more pleasant with his jaw wired shut—doesn’t brag so much. I started to like him more. We went out to dinner a few times, had dinner and a movie at his. . . well, Dan’s place. And we’ve had some nice phone calls.” Alice’s face grew brighter with each of Rebecca’s revelations. “But like I said, we still haven’t progressed past that first kiss.”

Alice blew out her breath. “Look, girl, I need to explain a few things to you. When you go over to a man’s place and spend the night watching movies, you can do more than kiss. His jaw may be wired shut but his penis works fine, doesn’t it? Mouths are optional.”

“I told you, he wants to wait. Says he wants to do it right.”

Alice smiled and nodded her approval. “So what else do you know about him?”

“Not much, yet. He’s unemployed but seems to understand the business world pretty well. He claims to have done business once but gave it up.”

Alice smirked. “And he likes to get in bar fights.” She gave Rebecca a thumbs up. “This is not the Rebecca I’ve come to know. I think I like this one better.”

Rebecca blushed and looked down. “You’re right. I’m being crazy here. I wish I knew more about him.”

“Then we *have* to call Kay.” Alice started to dial her phone. Rebecca reached out to stop the call, but Alice pulled the phone away and kept dialing.

Am I afraid to find out more? Rebecca suspected that Kay would know O.E., and Dan certainly would have

something to say. But O.E. was such a strange man. She wondered if they'd tell her something she'd be sorry to hear. One part of her was reluctant to spoil the mystery behind the man.

After a few seconds, Alice brightened. "Hello, Kay. Did I catch you having sex?" She waited a second and frowned. "Well why not?" Her laughter echoed through the bar.

"Yes, the Road Warriors are drunk again. I'm here with Rebecca, and we miss you. Hey, do you mind if I put you on speaker? Rebecca and I have some things to discuss." She pushed a few buttons and set the phone on the table.

Rebecca called out. "Hi, Kay. How's the honeymoon?"

"It's beautiful here. I don't know if I'm going to be able to come home."

Alice plowed on. "Listen, girl. Rebecca has a problem. She met this guy at the Westerley party, a friend of Dan's. It's getting a little intense, so we need some background on the boy."

There was a hesitation on the line. "Uh, I don't know all of Dan's friends, so I may not be able to help. What's his name?"

Rebecca spoke up. "Oscar Ezzo. Calls himself O.E. Do you know him?"

"Oh my God." Kay muttered it quietly, but they heard it loud and clear.

Oh my God? That's not what I wanted to hear. Either Kay wouldn't know him, or she'd be happy to hear the name. But "oh my God" was definitely the wrong response. O.E. was certainly an unusual man, and Kay probably knew that. But how bad could he be? Sex offender? Professional assassin? Porn star?

She steeled herself and ventured forth. "So you *do* know him. Is he a total loser?"

Kay started to speak quickly, almost nervously. "No! He's nice. Well, I think. I hardly know him. I mean, we danced once or twice at Westerleys, but that's about it." She paused and took a breath, then went on more slowly. "Not bad looking though." She giggled, a little more high pitched than normal. Something was wrong.

"His looks are not the problem. But did you know he hasn't worked in four years? Right now he's slumming at Dan's place. And get this! Two days after the Westerley, he got into a bar fight and landed in the hospital. This is not the kind of guy I normally fall for. Please tell me that I'm making a huge mistake."

"I probably should tell you to leave him, but it's not that simple. O.E. is actually quite reasonable. I . . . I kind of like him. And, of course I know he's staying at Dan's place—I knew that before he moved in." Kay paused. "How well have you gotten to know him?"

"Well, we've had a few dinners, talked quite a bit, and even had a really nice movie night at Dan's place."

"And?"

Why does everybody want me to have sex with him already? Not that she would mind one bit. If his jaw weren't wired shut, they'd have gotten horizontal long ago. "No, we haven't been to bed yet. I think that's why I wanted to talk to you."

"Here's the thing, Rebecca. By this point, you know him better than I do. There's not much I can add."

"But bar fights?"

"Look, he's got a bit of an ego on him. You must know that by now."

"Yeah, I got that much. He attacked me with it at the Westerley. Another reason why I think I'm making a mistake."

“Did he explain what happened in the bar?”

“Actually, I never asked. All he said was that some woman’s boyfriend clocked him on the jaw.”

“My guess is that his ego got him in trouble. He was probably being too cocky and got into a brawl. I wouldn’t put that much past him.”

She’s not telling me something. Why would she say “oh my God” just because he’s got a big ego? Obnoxious self-centered boys were laughable, but no cause for fear. What was it about O.E. that made Kay afraid to talk?

“You know, Kay, I want to like him, but he’s so outside of my normal comfort zone that it scares me. You seem a bit concerned, too. Should I be afraid?”

Kay spoke calmly. “No, Rebecca. I can definitely tell you not to be afraid. It’s just that he and Dan went to school together, and so did the two of us. I guess I thought it was weird, that’s all. Hey, maybe we should all get together sometime.

“As for safety, don’t worry. You’re tough, and O.E. is not dangerous. Well, at least not dangerous to others, but he does sound like a danger to himself.” In the background Kay spoke to Dan. “Hey, get this. O.E. is going out with Rebecca.” Dan’s laugh rumbled across the line.

“Huh? What was that about? What’s so funny about me and O.E.?”

Kay replied quickly. “No. Nothing. Sorry.” She slowed down. “There’s nothing wrong with O.E. Right, Dan?”

They could hear Dan’s reply. “A perfect gentleman. Loves to go surfing. Ask her if she’s gone surfing with him yet.”

Yeah, that sounds like O.E. Rebecca answered Dan’s question. “Not yet, but he’s offered. Am I crazy to fly to Malibu and surf with him?”

"I can't tell you what to do, Rebecca. All I can say is to follow your heart. You'll be perfectly safe with him, I can promise that. He's actually a solid guy." Her voice became far away. "Right, Dan?"

Dan assured them. "O.E. is harmless. In fact, he'll take very good care of her. Tell Rebecca that he's honorable and considerate. She has nothing to fear."

Kay came back on the phone. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Kay."

"I hate to cut you two off, but I'm told I have to go jump in the ocean. Is there anything else you need to know?"

Rebecca looked at Alice, and they shrugged their shoulders. "No. That's all. Thanks, Kay."

Alice hung up. "He sounds good."

Rebecca agreed. She knew that, deep down. Kay's nervousness was probably because she understood O.E.'s conceited side. She knew that he was definitely not like Quentin, not typical for Rebecca. But Kay's reassurances, as well as Dan's, made her feel much better. O.E. was gentle and safe, she could see that.

Rebecca let out a long exhale. "He *is* good."

"Don't forget hot! You've got to jump that boy."

Yes, I do. Rebecca thought about their hands making love across the table at the restaurant. She tilted her head and stared into space. "I guess it couldn't hurt."

Alice blew out an exasperated groan. "How many times do I have to tell you? It's not supposed to hurt! Jeez, Rebecca, do I have to explain everything to you?" She smiled. "Now go get yourself some of that hot jungle juice!"

Fifteen



Tuesday, October 2

“Hello, beautiful!” O.E.’s great and powerful voice blasted from the phone, waking sleeping bears in Siberia.

Rebecca winced and pulled the phone away from her ear. “Hi, O.E. It sounds like you got your jaw unwired.”

“Yep! Look out, world, my mouth is back.”

Too bad. The mouth is back. His first clear words in weeks were a boast. She flashed on the annoying, egotistical man who once told her she was living her life wrong. It saddened her that the quiet, considerate man she had known for the last two weeks might be gone for good.

This demanded action. She snapped her reply. “I see your attitude is back, too.”

He laughed, then lowered his voice to human level. “Yes, that too.”

Nice of him to notice. Perhaps there was hope. “So are you all better now?”

“I won’t really be at full attitude for another week. Still a bit sore, but grateful to have my mouth back. These past two weeks were torture! You have no idea.”

“You’re right, I have no idea. And I hope I never do. Are we still on for dinner tonight?” He had promised this all week, and both of them knew that it would include after-dinner activities. Did she still want it?

O.E. spoke slowly with far less ego. “Yes, dinner. Tonight. At my place. I can’t wait to see you.” The promise in

his voice made her shiver—yes, she still wanted it. She could handle Mr. Big Talk if she needed to.

Rebecca pushed back at him, partly to keep him in check, and partly for the fun of it. “You mean Dan’s place, don’t you?”

“Dan’s place, my place. Who cares? Tonight, it’s *our* place.”

Oh hell yes. His fearless certainty felt good, now that he was talking about something they could both agree on. She had spent the past week daydreaming about his hands, his mouth, and many other body parts.

“Mmm. Will you seduce me before I even step in the door?”

O.E. laughed. “Seems like I’ve already done that. Or maybe. . .” He spoke slowly, warmly. “It’s *you* who has seduced *me*.” He lightened the mood with a chuckle. “But honestly, you have nothing to fear—I’m harmless. I will only seduce you if you want to have the best sex you’ve ever had. If you don’t want it, just say the word.”

Rebecca belted out a single laugh. “Yeah. That’s the old O.E. talking.”

“What can I say? For the first time in two weeks, I get to speak my thoughts clearly. Thoughts like ‘I can’t live another minute without your body.’ Would you rather I pretend disinterest?” His voice shifted to sound more like an insecure teenager. “Gee, I don’t know. I kind of like you and all, but I’m still not sure if this is serious, and you might not like me, and, well, maybe I should wait because we’ve only barely met, and. . .”

“Okay, okay! I get the point. I guess I appreciate your honesty. But sometimes it helps to be a little discrete.”

“Discretion has never done a damn thing for me. But if you want me to act like some sort of *normal* man, pursuing

you in a *proper* manner, then try this. . .” His voice became serious. “Please come to dinner tonight at 7:00. After dinner, we can watch another Oz movie.”

And rip each other’s clothes off? And chase each other around the house? And have crazy sex? Rebecca expected him to say something outrageous, but he seemed to be done. “What should I bring?”

“Bring yourself—that’s enough. And bring that stunning mane of red hair. And your delightful little mouth. And those fine fit legs. And. . .”

“I get it!” She quoted the movie, her voice booming with authority. “The great and powerful Oz has spoken!” She giggled. “I’ll be there. See you later, O.E.” After putting down the phone, she shook her head, marveling at his lack of subtlety.

Rebecca was once again overwhelmed by his attitude and had to admit she liked him better when he was quiet. But even with his attitude restored, she couldn’t deny that he was absolutely right. Tonight she would bring her entire body to him. She tingled with anticipation.

Don’t forget what a loser he is. She couldn’t stop her mind from returning to the problems they faced. He had a dim financial future. He acted like a king, making everyone bend to his will. He lived like an ostrich, oblivious to the realities of the world. They had no real hope of ever working out as a couple. That seemed certain. But as Alice constantly pointed out, so what?

His kiss. The feel of his hard chest and arms, holding her tight. She exhaled, slow and a little rough, while the images played over and over. His long hair falling casually over that square jaw. His gray eyes staring out like an animal waiting to feast on her. And what about that near orgasm she had from touching his hand? Talk about intense!

That evening, Rebecca stood at the door of Dan's place in a little black outfit that begged to be removed. Her knit sleeveless top followed her curves perfectly with its V-neck dipping deep into braless cleavage. And since she didn't have as much cleavage as some, she filled the V with a silver necklace and further accessorized with silver earrings and some bracelets. Her tight miniskirt exposed bare legs, all the way down to three-inch pumps. The skirt managed to cover her laciest white panties—there was no point in pretending he wouldn't see them.

O.E. opened the door and scanned her outfit with a huge smile. He growled quietly and ushered her into the living room. A dark blue/purple cotton shirt hung on his flawless frame, loose but inspiring. A fine pair of tight jeans squeezed his backside nicely. His familiar citrus scent managed to emerge amidst the heavenly aroma of dinner.

He really did cook. She couldn't believe he'd prepared dinner for her, especially when they both knew what was really on the menu. He gave her a wide-eyed stare and wiped imaginary drool from his chin. She teetered on her heels, arms swinging idly at her side. Her cheeks flushed from his heat-lamp gaze.

"Damn! You look like a million. . . No make that a *billion* dollars!" He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close, giving her cheek an introductory kiss, a little something to start off the evening. She threw her neck back and took him in. Her breath was already heavy, their lips too close to ignore. O.E. reached up and lightly ran his finger over her lips. "God! Your mouth alone is worth a million dollars."

"Really? You'd pay a million dollars for my mouth?" She smiled as richly as she could.

“Actually, I would.” He pursed his lips, then looked away. “But I don’t want to ruin the evening with talk about money. Perhaps I shouldn’t have tried to put a price on your beauty. That was my fault—you’re priceless.”

He let go of her and stepped away into the living room. “Also, I hope you don’t mind if I keep calling you Bec. I really like it, and I think it suits you—quick and sharp, if you know what I mean. But if you want me to stop, I’ll understand. . . . Rebecca.”

Rebecca? Now it sounded strange when he *didn’t* shorten her name. She stood there and let the debate go back and forth in her mind. Everyone called her Rebecca—there were no exceptions. Then again, she had already granted an exception to O.E. Yes, but that was temporary, because of his jaw. But wait, she actually liked it when he called her Bec. Well, too bad—it was a rule! But who said she had to live by that, or any other rule?

Rebecca knew what to do, and she felt freer merely by saying it. She threw her arms around O.E. “You can keep calling me Bec.”

O.E.’s squeezed her back. “Whoa! I didn’t expect that. I’m very impressed.”

“And I, in turn, am impressed with the smells coming from the kitchen.”

He inhaled slowly. “Thank you. I hope you like spicy food. I’ve made a few of my favorite Chinese dishes. Hunan chicken and eggplant with garlic sauce. Come, let’s toast to our mouths—mine able to function again and yours as exciting as ever.” He wrapped an arm around her waist and led her to the bar.

O.E. pointed at the gin and tonic bottles. Rebecca nodded, and he mixed a drink for her, then made a neat bourbon for himself.

O.E. eyed Rebecca carefully as he handed the glass to her, never breaking contact. They continued to peer at each other, clinked their glasses in unison, and drank.

Kiss him now. Rebecca could feel the magic in the air. She set her glass down and reached out to touch his jaw, gingerly at first, in case he was still sensitive. He took her hand, held it firmly against his face, then kissed her palm.

Rebecca brought her other hand up to frame his rugged jaw. "So are you completely healed? How far can you open your mouth?"

O.E. glowed like a comedian about to deliver a punch line. "This far. . ."

He grabbed her and held her close, their lips an inch away for a fraction of a breath. Then he dropped down and landed on her mouth, his kiss soft and warm. Rebecca's eyes shot open. She grabbed him harder, clutching at his body as if it were a life preserver. His earthy, lemon scent filled her head.

They let their lips play for a long time, flying and skipping, heating up. Tongues came out to join the fun, raising the temperature even more. They fell under each other's spell, nibbling, sucking, and devouring.

Yes, still great kisses. This is going to be good. Rebecca wanted him, but the smell of food distracted her. She hesitated in his arms, releasing her grip ever so slightly. O.E. must have noticed, because he relaxed too and pulled back a few inches.

"I could strip you naked and eat you for dinner." His voice rumbled through her body. "But I've made something else to eat, so I'm going to save you for dessert. I've waited two weeks—I can wait another half hour."

He started for the kitchen. "I'll be right back."

She followed him in and admired the clutter—simmering pots and pans, torn bags, utensils and mixing bowls piled high in the sink. O.E. was running a full production here. The exotic smells that were hinted at in the living room were stronger than ever, intoxicating her with a spicy thrill. “You really cooked dinner!”

“Of course. I didn’t have to slave in an office building all day, like you. So I figured I’d slave in the kitchen instead.” He opened the lid on a small pot. “Check out the rice. It’s flavored with fermented tea leaves, Burmese style.” He emptied the pots into serving bowls and handed one to her. She held the bowl in her hands and her head swam.

I cannot believe this. Standing in the kitchen with a steaming dish of beautifully aromatic food, Rebecca inhaled deeply and felt her hunger grow. What a meal. What a man.

What a world, what a world. Another of her favorite quotes. When the dying Wicked Witch of the West said, “What a world,” she was wondering at its sadness. But when Rebecca replayed the words now, they were very different, a joyous shout-out to the many amazing facets of her world.

She looked up at O.E. and smiled. “By the way, thank you for that graphic illustration of your jaw’s capabilities.”

“I wasn’t sure if I could still do it. It’s been a long time, you know. I may need more practice after dinner.”

Rebecca smiled at him and touched her lower lip. It was still warm. “Practice makes perfect.”

They brought the food to the table, sat down, and filled their plates. After a few bites, she leaned back in her chair. “Another superlative, O.E. You cook like a chef. Where did you learn that?”

“Same place as I got my color sense: two older sisters. And the whole family cooked. My parents ran a restaurant.”

Lucky man. Rebecca wished she had a sister who cared enough to teach her anything. "They must have loved you."

"Perhaps they did, in their own strange way. I think they mostly saw me as a willing student for their lectures. Being the youngest had its disadvantages." O.E. lowered his head and looked up at her. "I guess I don't have to tell you about older sisters, do I?"

Rebecca grumbled. "Don't remind me. She's the worst."

"All because she called you ugly? Come on now, you've got to get over that."

"Our older sisters needed someone to make them feel superior. Yours may have rammed a lot of recipes and fashion sense down your throat, but at least they left you with some useful skills, especially for a man. My sister never taught me anything. All she gave me was abuse."

"Well, I look forward to meeting her. Are we still having dinner with her next Friday?"

I was hoping to forget about that. "Ugh, yes. You may be looking forward to it, but I'm not."

He reached out and grabbed her shoulder. "Are you saying that this gorgeous woman is still insecure about her looks?"

Rebecca blushed. "A little. I guess I have a hard time accepting that a guy as handsome as you wants to be with me."

"Are you kidding? You're everything I want in a woman." He held up his hand and raised one finger. "You have a pretty face and a body that I lust for." He raised a second finger. "You're smart and witty." The third finger went up. "You were very nice to me when I had my jaw wired shut." The fourth finger joined. "You love *The Wizard of Oz*." He raised all five fingers. "I always have fun when I'm with you."

He pushed his hand closer to her. “Why is that not enough?”

“I guess I don’t believe all of it.” She flapped her hands about. “I’m sorry, O.E., but I still don’t think I’m pretty enough to attract someone as handsome as you. You’re such a looker—you could be a model.”

“That’s just wrong, Bec. You have so much going on! You should be proud of yourself. You should say ‘I’m beautiful and smart and accomplished, and I can get any man to fall for me.’”

“I *do* feel that way. . .” She dropped her voice. “Some of the time.” She rallied. “But I worry you’ll leave me for someone prettier.”

“Prettier than you? I’m thirty-three years old and I haven’t found such a woman yet.”

“Oh come on, look at me. No breasts, big butt, little girl freckles, . . .”

“Stop! You’re killing me.” He took a breath. “Do you really want to talk about your body? Because I’d be happy to tell you what I think. No breasts, eh? Well sure there are women with bigger breasts, but here’s the thing: I don’t care. I’m a leg man, and boy do I love your legs. As far as your breasts go, I think they’re just fine.”

He ran his hand up her leg, pushing her skirt up and grabbing her thigh. She tensed her body. “That’s right, tense that leg for me. It’s so hot. You have great legs, muscular and shapely.” He let go of her leg and ran a finger up the side of her thigh. “See that line there, where the muscles meet? That’s incredibly hot—it makes me crazy.”

He got up and pulled her to her feet. With his hands wrapped around her backside, he cupped each cheek. “And as for your butt, there’s nothing wrong with it at all. You’ve got perfect curves, all the way down. Believe me, I’ve

studied this, and I look forward to studying it more later. Don't get confused by the twisted image of women that the media feeds us—your butt is super fine. You've got shape.”

His hands reached up to her head, and his thumbs touched the bridge of her nose where the line of freckles crossed it. He then followed the freckles, down her nose and under her eyes, his thumbs tracing it out. “Have I told you that your freckles are super sexy? They are. They give you a hot little mask that I can stare at all day.” He stepped back and nodded his head. “So don't give me any crap about not being good looking, because that's wrong.”

O.E. roamed his eyes up and down her body, his lips curled as he took in her revealing outfit. Then he grabbed her chin and turned her head from side to side. “Your sister is a jealous bitch. She knows she'll never be as beautiful as you. I can't wait to see her. Now stop this and eat. The food is getting cold.”

They sat back down and resumed dinner. Rebecca fidgeted in the ensuing silence. “Lauren's not bad looking.”

“Got any pictures?”

“Hardly any, I try not to remind myself about her.”

“Good. Forget her. She can't be as pretty as you, because you are the best looking woman I know.”

It sounds like such a line. But he wasn't making a joke of it—he seemed sincere.

Rebecca smiled a tiny bit. “There you go again with the superlatives. I guess a man with a big ego understands the importance of stroking other people's egos.” Her smile widened. “Is there anything you don't do well?”

“I'm actually not a very good surfer. But I love it, and so will you.”

“You still think I'm going surfing with you in Malibu?”

O.E. arched an eyebrow and stared. "Of course you are. If you like superlatives, that is. It's awesome fun."

Soon their spicy Chinese feast was done. They cleared away the dishes and made their way to the living room. O.E. motioned Rebecca to the sofa, and they sat together. With one arm behind her back, he waved the other over the coffee table, indicating a pile of movies. "Ready for a movie, or would you rather skip to the feature presentation?"

I want the feature presentation, but I'm willing to sample some short subjects. She smirked and leaned forward to sift through the pile. "Seen it. . . Seen it. . . Seen it. . ." She stopped and picked up a different-shaped box. "Wow! You don't see videotapes much anymore. And I've never heard of this one. *Patchwork Girl of Oz?*"

"I told you about that. An old silent movie. Not the greatest. They haven't issued it digitally yet, it's so obscure."

"Can we see it?"

O.E. narrowed his eyes. "I've got to warn you, it's pretty boring. If you watch this movie, you better prepare yourself for a less than superlative experience."

Rebecca's curiosity overruled her arousal. "Play the movie! Maybe you'll enjoy it more this time."

He flipped his hands out at his sides and shook his head, as if to say, you'll be sorry. The movie started and after a few minutes, they both began to shoot each other wide-eyed looks, giggling nervously. It was a bizarre story about a woman living in a run-down house, not very Oz-like at all. "Too bad, O.E. This is definitely *not* a superlative movie."

"I know. It's sad. But here's a little magic trick that would make it better." He picked up the remote. "Now you see it. . ." He waved the remote grandly, and the screen went blank. "Now you don't."

Oh yes, hocus pocus. Rebecca took a long breath as he approached her slowly with huge, excited eyes. After days of longing for each other, they were finally able to act. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck.

They fell into each other and resumed the kiss that was so rudely interrupted by dinner. It was wonderful, and she soon lost herself in his mouth. After a minute, he stopped, grabbed her, and laid her down on the sofa. They were side by side, facing each other and kissing some more. Deeply. Passionately. Tongues entwined and bodies pressed together, a mystical new world of never-before-seen wonders.

Rebecca's body tingled in his embrace, hard yet yielding, burning yet cool. He wrapped around her perfectly, and she gave herself up to his loving control.

O.E. played with her hair. His hand traced out the curve of her head, sweeping red locks in every direction. He caressed her neck, her cheek, and her ear. Rebecca kept one arm around his back while the other wandered up and down his body, exploring muscles, flexed and firm. So much sexuality in one body seemed almost unfair.

His hand meandered around her waist, roamed over her back, and surveyed her contours. She thrilled with anticipation from his touch, his warmth.

He gave her a crushing embrace, then let his hand run slowly but firmly down her back. When he reached her waist, his fingers slipped under her panties and continued down to cup a cheek. Soon he was caressing her backside with vigorous devotion, their kiss still unbroken.

Yes, keep going. Rebecca moaned into his mouth as he continued to explore. She couldn't remember being so worked up from kissing, and she clamped her legs together with a shiver.

O.E. broke the kiss and pulled back with the smile of a little boy who had just performed his first magic trick. For his next act, his hands came around to her front and disappeared under her knit top.

He roamed up and down the sides of her body, teasing her breasts with glancing swipes and swirling around them. There was no bra to stop his advance, so after some teasing, he palmed her breasts, sliding his hands over excited nipples.

Rebecca experienced a moment of embarrassment about her breasts, surely insufficient for a man this exquisite. But O.E. seemed more than happy to play with her. The intensity of his caresses soon washed away her insecurity, and excitement coursed through her. She arched her back to push herself into his hands.

He rolled nipples between his fingers, the pressure ranging from gentle to hard, from pinching to tickling. He played with her breasts in every imaginable way. They ached for his enchanted touch. She cried out for his body.

Rebecca grabbed his shirt, unbuttoned it quickly and pulled it away, running her hands along his chest. This guy was amazing—solid muscle with a nice trail of hair down the middle. She scraped her fingernails across his chest. His tan, ripped torso heaved under her touch.

I want a bite. A big, juicy chunk of the most well seasoned piece of meat she had ever seen. She could live on this.

O.E. grabbed her and raised her to a sitting position on the sofa. He lifted her top up and over her head and tossed it away, leaving her naked from the waist up. He quickly shed his own shirt and clasped her tightly, their bodies supernaturally hot. Wrapped in each other's arms, they fell

back to the sofa and kissed again, this time harder, plundering new depths in each other's mouths.

Rebecca warmed from the heat of his chest, the heat of his mouth, and the heat down below in her preheated oven.

One of his hands explored her legs, up and down. After a few passes, he slid her skirt up the remaining few inches as he ascended her thigh, lightly brushing her panties. He followed the insides of her legs back down, making her tremble. His hand took a drunkard's walk across her skin, searing her as it grazed.

Something needs to be let out of the box. Rebecca reached into his pants to find his magic wand. It was easy to spot, poking through the tight pants. But before she could get her hands on it, he slithered down her body, away from her reach.

O.E. faced her bunched-up miniskirt and carefully unzipped it. He pulled it away from her, while nuzzling into her belly and thighs. She spread her legs and begged for him to bewitch her.

Down to panties, Rebecca bathed in his huge wolf eyes, consuming her from above. One finger traveled the edge of her panties, following its contour. He expertly touched her through the flimsy material, tickling and teasing. Then, back at her hip, his finger curled inside of the panties and ran down to the point between her legs. When he reached the bottom, he pulled the panties away from her, shifting them to the side. His wolf eyes grew even wider as he took in her naked body, and he gave a loud whoop.

Rebecca looked at him, one eyebrow raised. What was going on? Why had he stopped, frozen, staring? His face was lit up with pure joy, as if he'd never seen a naked woman before. "What is it?"

He spoke as if he had just achieved nirvana. "You really *are* a natural redhead."

Rebecca threw her head back on the sofa and laughed. The laughter released some sexual tension, while it pumped up her desire. She wanted him so much, she could hardly breathe. And he really lusted for her red hair, wherever it appeared. If he was a magician, then she was his beautiful assistant, helping him with his most popular tricks, both on stage and off.

"So? What are you going to do about it?"

He pulled her panties off and brought his head down, close to her. Gently pushing her legs apart, he caressed her inner thighs and belly, dipping his nose and inhaling deeply. "Mmm. You're wet."

Clean up on aisle one. Rebecca laid back on the sofa, panting, delirious from his touch.

O.E. dropped onto her with his mouth and kissed her lower lips. She slammed her head back and cried out, fingers dug into his long silky hair. His tongue took a lazy tour of the area, down, around, and back up, finding all the perfect places that made her quiver.

Rebecca's head swirled. She was high on his lust, high on his extraordinary body, high on the things his mouth could do. She moaned and floated in the air, supported only by his expert tongue.

He continued the attack, licking and flicking, sucking and nipping. He moved about, his tongue always knew where to go. Rebecca began to feel an overwhelming buildup. With no control left in her body, she stopped breathing and held on tight.

Like a race car setting the land speed record, the orgasm ripped through her and carried her miles away. She

screamed out, then collapsed into the sofa with husky breath and unsteady sighs.

O.E. kept his face buried between her legs and licked her gently, conjuring up a steady stream of post-orgasmic tremors. After one particularly violent shudder, she pushed his head away. He looked up with large, scorching eyes. "Now you know why I wanted my mouth back."

Rebecca pulled him up and planted her lips on his, tasting herself. She couldn't remember a release so powerful, so intense, so satisfying. And something else was pressing against her, something that promised even more. Time to collect on that promise.

He got up on his hands and knees, suspended above her, still bent down in the kiss. With their bodies separated, she reached into his pants to finally claim her prize, grabbing it like a life line. Huge and hot in her hand, she wanted it now. He broke the kiss and stared at her, a half smile on his lips. "Could I interest you in that item you're holding?"

Yes, I'll take one of these, please. He really was big, and she couldn't wait to wrap her body around him. She held on for a few seconds before speaking. "I've got condoms."

"You really don't trust me, do you?" He pulled her hand away and stood up to remove his pants. After unzipping them, he shoved his hands into his pockets to push the pants down. Once they cleared his knees and tenting briefs, he removed his hands from his pockets and proudly held them out to her. Each one held a condom. "Neat trick, huh?"

Rebecca smiled. "Show me another."

O.E. instantly lost his briefs. He stood up straight and naked, a hypnotic look in his dark gray eyes. She couldn't help but stare at his beautifully sculpted muscles and

impressive display of excitement. His voice rumbled. "What would *you* like?"

Why was this outrageously well-built man standing before her, eager to make love? Had she won the lottery, or traded places with someone else? Perhaps she wasn't really here at all, just under an erotic hypnotic delusion that would disappear when she heard fingers snap.

Rebecca stood up and gave him a quick hug, burning his flesh against hers. She looked into his eyes. "Here's what I would like. You, on your back, on a bed."

He gave her a twisted grin, then turned and led her upstairs, a naked romp to the bedroom. The covers flew through the air and O.E. launched himself onto the bed, pointing up. He rolled on the condom and opened his arms to welcome her.

She was instantly on top, one hand on his chest, the other guiding his missile. He held her waist with one hand and let the other wander over her breasts.

Oh yes, what a rush. Carefully, a little at a time, she worked her way down, filling herself up. She was perched on his muscular body and his above average anatomy. When she hit bottom, she shuddered and stayed there for a few seconds, their eyes unable to look away from each other. This was so much better than she had imagined. Tight and deep, her body quivered from the inside out.

She began to glide up and down, alternating between riding him rapidly, and sliding more slowly. Occasionally she would stop to grind against him for a few seconds of near orgasmic bliss. They writhed on the bed as their bodies slithered about.

Nobody had ever made love to her in this way, and her world shifted on its axis. He had pursued her for weeks with offers of a superlative show. Now he was making good on

his offer and was giving her a performance she would never forget. He even asked her what position she liked, something no man had ever done.

Once again, the buildup started, and she welcomed it like an old friend. Slowly, one stroke at a time, it spread through her body. Then it emerged in a flash, even more powerful than before, rocking her wildly as she rode the incredible stallion between her legs, engulfed in a barrage of full-body quakes.

When she was calm again, she dropped down onto him and kissed him, still impaled by his unspent enthusiasm. He wrapped his arms around her, pulled her down to his chest, and rolled her over on her back. His eyes burned for a few seconds, then he started to move.

Spinning from arousal, Rebecca stared into superbly intense eyes. This Adonis of a man was taking her to a third climax. His lust was heavenly and devilish at the same time, an incredible bliss that had no equal in her experience. Could he really keep going like this? She doubted he could—she certainly couldn't.

The pace picked up, increasing in force and fury. His sudden increase in intensity drove them both wild, and she clawed her fingernails against his back, causing him to clutch her even harder. He dug in and pounded ferociously.

Rebecca looked into O.E.'s eyes and growled. He growled back, quietly at first, then with increased volume. When it couldn't grow louder, he yelled out and dove into her, all the way, crushing her to him. It triggered her own release into ecstasy, the most intense yet. She wailed and held onto him, lost in the sorcery of his seduction.

Definitely the best sex ever. Her heart pounded, and she could barely sigh—language skills would take a bit longer to

return. They finally laid on their backs, holding hands, needing nothing more.

She turned to look at him. “*That* was truly great and powerful. You *are* the Wizard.”

He gave her the smile of a conquering hero. “Then you have to come to the Emerald City with me.”

She quirked one eye. “And where would that be?”

“Why, Malibu. Of course!”

Of course. He’s wanted me to come surfing with him since we met. Rebecca laughed. As relationships with uncertain futures went, this one was at the top of the chart. Sexy and super masculine, he had brought out things in her that she hadn’t ever felt before. A weekend in Malibu with O.E. sounded like a great idea. Sex and surfing—forget the future.

Besides, who needed a future together? The present was more than fine. She was going to learn how to surf and he’d show off his “stick.” Oh, and also his surfboard.

“Are we flying there, or taking the Yellow Brick Road?”

“Well. . .” his voice became theatrical as he quoted their favorite movie. “It’s not a place you can get to by a boat or a train.” He smiled. “I say we fly. How about two weeks from now?”

Sounds perfect. He didn’t need to convince her anymore. Rebecca pretended to consider the offer, then beamed at him. “All right. You’ve got a deal. Let’s go to Malibu and surf.”

O.E. smiled hugely and got up on his elbows, leaning over her and dropping down for a quick kiss. “I’ll get plane tickets for us.”

“Really? You’re treating me to a plane ticket? I can pay for my own trip, you know.”

“I insist. Your lovely naked body is making me want to spend my money.” He kissed her softly on her cheek, her neck, her shoulder. “You can pay for the next trip.” His kiss shifted to her breast, her belly, her thigh. “Indulge me.”

“Okay, okay.” Rebecca squirmed and grabbed his head, steering him up to her mouth. After another of his soul-tingling kisses, she relented. “You can buy the plane tickets.”

End of Free Preview



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About the Author



This is my second romance novel and my fourth book. The other two books are non-fiction and weren't nearly as much fun to write.

Although I am a huge fan of novels, I must admit that I never read a romance novel before writing the Westerley series. Creating these books has definitely changed that, and now I love a good romance story.

Life in Northern California is full of surprises, including these novels. I have been happily married for thirty years, and we have raised two wonderful children. I honestly wouldn't trade places with anyone else, living or dead, real or imagined.