

MICHELLE BETHAM



Shirley
Valentine
Goes to Vegas

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Аннотация

Shirley Valentine meets Sons of Anarchy in this raunchy, red-hot read! Lana Saunders is on a mission find the 'new Lana', the real Lana. After twenty years spent as a prim and proper businessman's wife, she's finally swapped beige cotton for black leather, and cardigans for tattoo sleeves! With the ink only just dry on her divorce papers, she's ready to live it up in Vegas. What she doesn't expect is to meet wickedly sexy biker, Eddie and is shocked when he asks her out. Not only does he send her sex-starved libido into overdrive, but the connection between them is unlike anything she's ever experienced. So when Eddie asks her to stay with him in Vegas, the desire to fall into this gorgeous man's bed and stay there forever is too tempting to ignore! Living with Eddie in Las Vegas is the most fun Lana's had in years—especially when he shows her that there's more than one way to ride on a Harley!—but soon she realises she can't ignore her old life forever, particularly when her ex, Adam shows up determined to win her back! Author Michelle Betham gives Jackie Collins a run for her money in SHIRLEY VALENTINE GOES TO VEGAS, a story about what happens when you realise that life isn't what you thought it would be...

Содержание

Shirley Valentine Goes to Vegas	5
Prologue	9
1	11
2	22
3	30
4	43
5	60
6	70
7	79
8	88
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	103

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For everyone who believes in a little bit of fate...

And to Helen at Indigo Rose, thank you, for giving me the tattoo of my dreams.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Also by Michelle Betham ...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About HarperImpulse](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Prologue

Dragging the suitcase down from the top of the wardrobe I threw it onto the bed, standing back as it hit the mattress with a resounding thud. For a couple of seconds I just looked at it as if, all of a sudden, I'd temporarily forgotten just what the hell it was I was doing. Was that deliberate? Was that actually my own subconscious giving me a little bit more time to think about everything? To make sure this really was the right thing to do?

Leaning back against the wall, I closed my eyes, breathing in deeply. My heart was still beating fast, pounding away inside my chest as I tried to shut out the noise drifting up from the party going on downstairs: a party I should be getting back to. But I couldn't. Not now.

'... this is just something she needs to get out of her system...'

His words were playing over and over in my head like some never-ending record I couldn't switch off.

'She loves me, and she knows I need her to do certain things if this is going to work a second time...'

Yeah. I loved him. But did I love him enough? Enough to strip myself of everything I'd fought so hard to become?

I slowly opened my eyes, taking another deep breath, my gaze falling back on the empty suitcase.

'Lana?'

I swung around so quickly I almost lost my balance, my breath

catching in my throat as I saw him standing there.

‘What’s going on?’

‘I’m leaving, Adam.’ I’d thought my resolve would weaken the second I saw him, but I was obviously stronger than I thought I was. ‘And this time, I’m not coming back.’

1

My brother, Finn, slid something a rather startling shade of orange towards me.

‘What’s that?’ I asked, eyeing the drink warily.

‘A cocktail.’

I threw him a withering look. ‘Yeah. I can see that. It’s what’s in it that’s bothering me. What *is* in it?’

He shrugged. ‘No idea. Just thought you might like one, you know, you being a woman and all that.’

My withering look turned into a wide-eyed stare. ‘Seriously?’

He shrugged, a look of mock innocence on his face.

‘When have you ever known me to drink cocktails, Finn? When?’

‘Just get it down you. Might help you loosen up a bit.’

I loved Finn. I loved him a lot, despite his knack of being able to wind me up at a moment’s notice. But he’d always been able to do that, right from when we’d been kids and he’d realised how easily I could be sucked in.

At thirty-five years old Finn was four years younger than me. And with his short, dark, messed-up hair, a multitude of tattoos that adorned his entire body, and a black and red Ducati Multistrada that I was extremely jealous of, he was handsome in that rough, edgy, rock-star kind of way – a bit of a cross between a younger version of Aerosmith’s Steven Tyler and The

Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl – which meant he was never short of female attention. And the fact he was also one of the most reputable tattoo artists in the north-east of England didn't do him any harm, either. His studio – Black Ink – saw people travel to Newcastle-upon-Tyne from as far afield as Cumbria, north Yorkshire, and even Scotland, to be 'inked' by my brother. I was incredibly proud of him. Even more so after everything he'd done for me over the past twelve months. He'd been my rock. The best friend I could have asked for. Because the past twelve months had seen my life change in a way I could never have anticipated. A year ago I'd walked out on my husband, and left behind the only life I'd known for almost two decades; a decision that hadn't been an easy one to make, because Adam was a good man. We'd been together almost twenty years, and been married for eighteen of those. I'd thought I'd found my soul mate. But sometimes, even when – or should that be *especially* when – you've been together for as long as we had, people can grow apart. They lose each other. And when neither of them really make that effort to find their way back, well, it stops working. There's no point any more if the fight has gone.

We'd started wanting different things – or, in my case, things I'd always dreamed of, but thought I could never have. Those things I'd put to the back of my mind whilst I'd concentrated on doing what everybody else wanted me to do, instead of doing things that actually made me happy. I guess I'd just wanted an easy life. But now I considered 'easy' to be dull. Now I wanted

a bit more excitement. Was that selfish of me? Maybe. But when you know you're not the person you really want to be, there comes a point when you either accept that this is the way things are always going to be or you realise the stone-cold reality that you only get one life, and you've got to go out and live it. That's exactly what I'd done. I'd moved in with Finn, got to know my brother again, and gradually started putting my life back together. By changing it completely.

'Can I just have a beer?' I asked, still warily eyeing the cocktail. 'I mean, do I look like the kind of woman who'd drink something that colour?'

'Lana, there were nights when you'd drink anything of any colour, remember? As long as it got the end result you were looking for.'

I couldn't argue with that. There'd been times when I could have quite easily reached for the mouthwash, but I was past all of that now.

As kids, I'd always been slightly jealous of Finn, of the way he just seemed to know exactly what he wanted to do. His fascination with tattoos had started as a teenager, and after he'd got his first one on his eighteenth birthday that had sealed the deal for him – he knew where his life was going. I'd always been less decisive, finally letting my love of the theatre guide me in the direction of a BTEC in performing arts and an eventual job as a deputy stage manager in a theatre in Newcastle. A job I'd walked out on the same day I'd walked out on Adam. I didn't do

things by halves, that was for sure. But I'd had to cut those ties, leave behind the old so I could start the new. Any remnants of the past would have only held me back.

I'd started hanging out at Black Ink, watching Finn and the guys work, soaking up the atmosphere that I'd never really paid that much attention to before, because I'd never really seen all that much of Finn after I'd married Adam. We'd moved out of Newcastle and settled in north Northumberland, but it wasn't just distance that had seen me lose touch with my brother. Our worlds became very different, and we'd inevitably drifted apart, coming together only for the obligatory family weddings, birthdays and Christmases. But the more I hung out at Black Ink, the more I began to realise that Finn's world was where I really felt comfortable. It was the kind of world I wanted to be a part of – a world where people didn't judge. A world where it was okay to be different. It was the world I'd always dreamt of. I just hadn't realised it, until now.

So, just a few days after walking out on my marriage, I began putting the wheels of my brand-new life in motion by doing something the old Lana would never have done – I got “inked”. By Finn. Twice. A beautiful tribal design in deep black that covered the underside of my left forearm, and a deep-red rose emerging from a mass of tangled thorns on my upper right arm. Finn had been a little unsure, at first, about being the one to permanently tattoo his once rather straight-laced and conservative sister, but he understood I'd needed to do

something drastic to kick-start my new journey. To give my life the complete turnaround it needed. But, looking back, I suppose it had been a bit of a shock for him to see the speed at which I'd turned from wife of one of the region's top businessmen to tattooed biker chick. It had unnerved *me* for a day or two, but just two weeks after getting those new tattoos, changing my hair, acquiring a whole new set of friends and an attitude I hadn't even known I'd had, I'd made another decision. I was truly fascinated by the work my brother and the guys at Black Ink did, but I wanted to play a bigger part than just observing. I needed a new career, something to aim for, and, after talking to Finn and going over the options, the decision was made – Finn was going to take me on as his apprentice. I was going to train to become a tattoo artist. It meant I could stay close to my brother and stay inside that world I'd fallen in love with.

I'd spend hours at the studio watching, in complete awe, as Finn created intricate and beautiful designs on a wide variety of clients, each tattoo different and personal. From deep blacks to colours so vivid they almost jumped off the skin, there was so much beauty in body art, which was why that tattoo Finn had given me on my upper right arm had now turned into a sleeve, covering the skin from the wrist, stretching all the way up over my shoulder. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen – from the multitude of colours that ranged from bright oranges and aqua blues and the rich, dark red of bloodied roses, to the way it snaked across my skin, the designs merging, fading in and out of

one another; intertwining, blending. In my eyes, every single inch of it signalled a move forward from a life that had once stifled me, into one that was slowly setting me free. As I'd watched it take shape, felt that needle dig into my skin, it really had felt as though that tattoo was wiping away the past and ushering in my new future. It had taken weeks to complete, but just watching Finn work on it had been an almost cathartic experience.

It was going to take a couple of years before I became a fully qualified tattooist myself, but I woke up every day now just itching to get to work. And I hadn't felt like that in a long time. The people who came into Black Ink, the heavy rock music that blasted out of speakers placed all around the two floors of the studio; the whole atmosphere of the place – it really did feel as though, somehow, I'd found my spiritual home. It was somewhere I'd always wanted to be but had never had the confidence to seek out before because I'd spent most of my life “settling”. Whilst Adam had been quite happy to let our lives “tick along”, the thought of that going on for years to come had, in the end, terrified me. I hadn't wanted my life to “tick along” anymore – I wanted to live it and, with Finn's help, I was getting there.

Even though this weekend in Las Vegas – at one of the biggest tattoo conventions in the world – was something of a busman's holiday for me, Finn and the rest of the guys from Black Ink, after the year I'd had I was hoping it was going to give me a chance to kick back, cut loose for a little while, even if it was only

for a couple of days. The past few months had been exhausting, and though I barely recognised the woman I'd used to be, I still felt as though there was a tiny bit more shaking off to be done. And this weekend, I intended to do a lot of shaking. Right now, I wasn't totally feeling the Vegas vibe, but I was probably just tired. We'd not long arrived at the hotel, it was late, and it had been a long day.

'Here. Is this more your kind of thing?' Finn handed me a bottle of Budweiser.

I smiled at him. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. Now drink your beer, beautiful.'

He always called me beautiful, and I loved him for that, even if he was probably just saying it because I was his sister. I'd just never felt all that comfortable blowing my own trumpet, that was all, so I'd never really thought of myself as beautiful, though Adam had often told me I was. And I suppose I *could* scrub up pretty well when I put the effort in. I'd managed to keep my long blonde hair in pretty good condition, despite the amount of styling products it had seen over the years, and a good few inches of it, from the bottom up, had been dyed black now, which I loved. My eyes were a bit more grey than blue, but I'd never seen that as a negative. And my body wasn't looking too bad for a woman hurtling towards middle-age, and by that I mean I could still rock a bikini on holiday as long as I laid off the doughnuts for a couple of weeks beforehand. Or have a complete mid-life meltdown, leave my husband and throw my old life away to head

off into the unknown. Both had much the same effect as far as weight loss was concerned.

‘And start enjoying yourself,’ Finn went on. ‘We’re in Vegas, remember?’

I picked up my beer and took a large, probably slightly unladylike, swig.

‘I *am* enjoying myself,’ I protested, throwing him a look.

He threw one right back. ‘You might want to try telling your face that, then.’

I ignored him, taking another swig of beer. ‘I might have an early night,’ I sighed, running my finger up and down the ice-cold bottle, watching as it left a trail of condensation in its wake.

Finn almost choked on his own drink. ‘Early night? Do you know where we are?’

I blinked a few times as I looked at him. ‘I’m well aware of where we are, thank you. You keep reminding me every five minutes.’

Finn’s eyes widened as he stared at me. ‘And?’

I frowned. ‘And what?’

‘Where *are* we?’

‘How many beers have you had?’

‘We’re in Las Vegas,’ Finn went on, completely ignoring my question.

‘Yes, I know we are. I was on that plane this morning, too.’

‘So, people come to Vegas to party.’

‘Do they? *All* of them?’

‘You’re giving me a headache now.’

‘That’s my job.’ I took another long drink of beer, looking around the busy bar. The music was loud, the atmosphere everything I loved. I just knew I’d love it a whole lot more when I didn’t feel so tired. I was such a lightweight sometimes. I turned back to face my brother. ‘I’m just a bit tired, okay? It’s been a really long day. I’m sure I’ll be much more my usual self after a good night’s sleep.’

‘You’re really having an early night?’ Finn asked, his expression verging on disbelief.

I ran a hand along the back of my neck as I took another look around me. I’d noticed a small group of bikers come in earlier, and they were still there, hanging out in the corner of the bar, dressed in leather and denim with their messed-up hair and unkempt beards. Sexy as hell in my eyes. The fact I found that kind of man sexy now was weird, because my husband had been a clean-shaven businessman who loathed tattoos, hated facial hair and didn’t really trust bikers. Which was why he and Finn had never really been that close. Their two worlds were so far apart it had been hard for them to find any common ground. Another reason why my brother and I had drifted apart.

Secretly, though, I’d always found the idea of a hot, tattooed, bearded, rough-looking bloke on a motorbike incredibly attractive. Even more so since I’d started hanging out with Finn and working at Black Ink. It was just that now I didn’t have to make a secret out of it. And I couldn’t help smiling to myself as

I realised that.

‘What’s distracting *you*?’ Finn asked, frowning slightly as he noticed my expression change.

‘Nothing.’ I quickly tried to lose the smirk, but I wasn’t quick enough.

Finn turned around, looking over at the bikers in the corner, a slow grin spreading across his face. ‘Oh, I get it. Still after that biker boyfriend, huh?’

I didn’t reply. Just took one last drink of beer.

‘I’ve told you, kiddo. Bobby could fix you up with any number of our mates from the club. They all love a hot, inked woman. Have a word with him. I’m sure once we’re home he’ll sort you out.’

I wrinkled my nose up at the thought of Bobby – Finn’s number two at Black Ink – and his biker friends. Lovely guys, but not really the hot-and-handsome type. Their bikes were pretty sexy, though, but that’s where the attraction ended. ‘You’ve somehow managed to make all of that sound slightly sleazy.’ I slid down from my stool and kissed Finn quickly on the cheek. ‘I’m off to bed.’

‘Alone?’

‘You’re hilarious.’

‘Well, you’ve got to pass ‘Sons of Anarchy’ over there on your way out. Who knows what might happen between here and your hotel room.’

‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ I said, acknowledging him only

by raising my hand, without looking back. I was too busy concentrating on where I was going as I headed for the door, passing the group of bikers on the way. I was aware of a low whistle coming from their direction as I passed them, and although I didn't have the nerve to look back and check, I was going to hope it was aimed at me. I'd worked hard to cultivate this biker-babe image. It'd be nice to get some appreciation from the men who mattered. But as I finally headed out of the bar, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck suddenly stand on end, the weirdest feeling washing over me. I wasn't sure where that had come from, or why it had happened, but as the loud music and the party atmosphere still emanating from the bar surrounded me, I suddenly began to feel the Vegas vibe kick in. Big time. And I smiled to myself again. Yeah. I was going to be so ready for this weekend after a good night's sleep. I mean, this was Vegas! And I might only be here for a couple of days, but who knew what could happen in that time? I just had no idea that what was about to happen was going to shake my life up even more – in ways I couldn't begin to imagine...

2

‘This place is crazy!’ I gasped, turning right around on the heels of my Harley Davidson biker boots, taking in the huge space filled with people sporting all manner of tattoos, every colour of the rainbow, every shade of black and grey adorning bodies both male and female. There were booths and stalls set out all around the vast area given over to this convention; I could even see places where you could get a brand-new tattoo right there and then, and I was tempted. Wildly oversized TV screens were also everywhere you looked, all of them show-casing the very best the world of ink had to offer. I felt like I’d come home. And, as expected, the Vegas vibe was really kicking in now. A good night’s sleep had seen to that.

‘I still can’t believe you and Adam never came here. To Vegas.’ Finn stuck his hands into the pockets of his skinny black jeans as he followed me further into the room. ‘You seem to have been everywhere else on the planet.’

‘He was never that keen,’ I said, still trying to take in everything that was going on around me. ‘And when you’re married you tend to compromise on things like holidays. Not that you’d know anything about that.’ I threw my brother a half-smile. He just pulled a face.

‘Why would I want to get married, huh? And disappoint the female population of the north-east of England?’

‘Yeah. You keep telling yourself that.’

He winked at me. I just rolled my eyes. ‘Anyway, sis, if you’re talking compromise, then surely he could’ve suffered Vegas for a couple of days? For you?’

‘Not seeing Vegas was a sacrifice I was willing to make, Finn. Because Adam and me, we visited so many other amazing places together. Just, not *this* amazing place.’ I let my mind briefly jump back in time, to those holidays Adam and I had shared, before things had started to go stale. Stagnate. Before we’d started to drift apart, and a little piece of me felt sad that we hadn’t been able to cling onto those times, because we’d been so happy. Once.

‘Why did you marry him, Lana?’

I turned to face my brother, cocking my head and frowning slightly. That was a question I hadn’t been expecting. ‘I loved him, Finn. And things weren’t always as bad as they ended up being.’

‘I never really took to him,’ Finn sniffed, sliding his arm across my shoulders as we ventured further into the room. ‘I mean, he’s like Mister Straight-Laced businessman, all clean-shaven and well-spoken. And then there’s you.’

I stood still, folding my arms and fixing Finn with a look that almost dared him to say something he might regret. But I couldn’t help smiling, so the stern edge had been slightly lost there. And what he was saying was largely true anyway – Adam *was* a bit straight-laced, always smartly dressed, and *always* clean-shaven, even at weekends. And his accent *was* a touch milder than mine, with him hailing from rural Northumberland rather than the

heart of Newcastle. But it wasn't like he'd been brought up in Downtown bloody Abbey.

'Then there's you...' Finn carried on, grinning just a touch too widely for my liking, '... with your black-dipped blonde hair and all those tattoos.'

I didn't say anything to that, my gaze suddenly dropping to the floor.

Finn tilted my chin up so I was looking at him. 'What's wrong?'

'The divorce. It came through, just before we flew out here.'

Finn ran a hand through his hair, throwing his head back and sighing heavily. 'Jesus, Lana, I'm sorry. I didn't know.'

I shrugged. 'I didn't really want to talk about it. Anyway, it's over now. Time to put it completely behind me, once and for all.' I slipped my hand into his, smiling again as I stood up on tiptoes to kiss him quickly. 'And anyway, before I started hanging out with you I was Miss Ordinary, remember? This hair and these tattoos, they were non-existent until my marriage started to break down. Until I finally threw off those shackles of normality and joined the freak show that is your world.'

He smiled at me, slipping his arm back around my shoulders and squeezing them tight. 'Yeah. And now there's no escaping the dark side.'

'I quite like the dark side.' I hugged his waist, leaning in against him as we walked. 'Daylight scares me.'

'Weirdo.'

‘I learned from the best.’

‘Yeah. And don’t ever forget that. Come on.’ He took my hand, pulling me towards a stand that was manned by one of his heroes – a legendary Vegas-based tattoo artist from whom Finn had gained a lot of inspiration due to his edgy designs and use of colour. Finn’s tattoo studio back home had a bit of a reputation for cutting-edge ink itself, and it was something he prided himself on, which was why so many people made that special journey to be “inked” by Finn Black and why I was so excited to be serving my apprenticeship under him. He was an incredible teacher. An amazing tattooist. The best brother I could have asked for, at a time when I really needed one.

‘Do they do drinks in here?’ I gasped, out of breath at trying to keep up with Finn’s brisk pace.

‘And she’s back.’ Finn pulled a few dollars from the back pocket of his jeans. ‘The bar’s just out there. Get me a beer, will you?’

‘What did your last slave die of?’

He threw me a wink. ‘I don’t have slaves, kiddo. I have willing participants.’

I couldn’t help smiling at him, rolling my eyes again before I turned and made my way across the crowded space in search of the bar. Catching sight of it, I pushed my way through the maze of people, almost throwing myself against the counter with relief as I ordered a couple of beers.

‘That’s not a local accent.’

I heard the voice coming from right beside me, but I didn't know whether that comment had been aimed at me or not, so I kept my attention focused on the barman, watching as he flipped the lids off the beer, setting the bottles down on the counter in front of me.

'Newcastle-upon-Tyne, north-east England. Am I right?'

I paid for the drinks and slowly turned to face the person to whom the voice belonged. And that's when the same strange feeling I'd experienced last night as I'd left the bar hit me again, causing my breath to catch in my throat. I was rendered speechless for a second or two, which was quite unlike me. But I just couldn't take my eyes off the man standing beside me. And I wasn't entirely sure *how* I could describe him, because he wasn't exactly handsome in the conventional sense of the word – he was no clean-shaven pretty boy, that's for sure. Quite the opposite. But he was attractive on a whole other level. A sexy-as-hell, rough-edged kind of way. He had the most beautiful, dark, almost black, eyes. I knew that much. Eyes that seemed to verge on dangerous, which for some reason just made him even hotter. His hair was a dark brown, but greying slightly at the roots, so that gave me some indication as to his age, as did the colour of his goatee beard and moustache – a lighter brown streaked with grey. I was guessing mid- to late-forties. But he looked good on it. He looked *really* good. And he was tall. That was always a bonus. Then I suddenly realised I was quite obviously staring and immediately looked down at the ground, feeling a touch

embarrassed. I didn't normally do that kind of thing. Ever. I'd just had the weirdest feeling that I'd seen him somewhere before. But, surely, if I had, I'd have remembered him?

Swallowing down my surprise – and my slight embarrassment – I slowly raised my gaze, giving him what I hoped was a friendly smile. 'You're right.' I was managing to keep my voice quite steady, considering. 'And, if I'm not mistaken, *that's* not a local accent, either. Scottish, huh?'

He returned my smile; a rather nice smile, actually. No, make that a *really* nice smile. 'Glasgow. Place called Newbank, just north of the Clyde.'

'Okay... Well, it's good to meet another Brit.'

'Aye. It certainly is.' Those dark eyes were fixed on mine, making it hard for me to look away, but I did so only briefly, taking in his battered jeans, his heavy boots and what looked like an extremely worn leather biker's jacket. I couldn't find any negatives so far. 'You have a name, darlin'?'

I let the corner of my mouth curl up into a smile. 'Have *you*'?

He laughed, a low, almost rasping, laugh. Jesus! That was hot! *So* hot! 'I'm Eddie,' he said, throwing me that smile again. 'Eddie Fletcher.'

I felt my stomach give a huge, almost three-sixty-degree somersault as my eyes once more locked with his; something that, quite literally, took my breath away. It was a crazy feeling, but I was quite liking crazy. Crazy felt *good*!

'Lana,' I said quietly, my voice suddenly refusing to rise above

a whisper. ‘Lana Saunders.’

‘Lana...’ he repeated, his eyes still fixed on mine as he spoke my name, all slow and sexy. ‘That’s a beautiful name.’

I was still running with crazy, but, seriously, I’d only gone to the bar for a couple of beers. I hadn’t expected to bump into a drop-dead-gorgeous biker dressed in leather and denim with a smile that seemed to have the ability to floor me within seconds.

‘You here on your own?’ he continued, and I looked back up at him, unaware I’d actually broken the stare, but I must have done at some point. ‘I’m here with friends. We work in a tattoo studio back home in the UK.’ There really was something about this stranger that made me feel as if I’d known him for years. Or that I’d, at least, seen him somewhere before. And I just couldn’t shake that feeling.

He leant back against the counter beside me, folding his arms as he looked out ahead of him, and I followed his gaze, watching the crowds as they flitted from stand to stand, doing whatever it was people did at events like this, because I really had no idea. This was all still quite new to me. It had a good vibe, though, I knew that much.

‘So, you’re here for the convention, then?’ he asked.

I nodded, then remembered he wasn’t actually looking at me, so he wouldn’t have been able to see my response. ‘Yeah. Yeah, we are.’

He turned to face me. ‘You in Vegas for long, Lana?’

Oh, dear God! The way he said my name! How did he *do* that?

‘A couple of days.’

My fingers tightened around the beer bottles I’d suddenly realised I was still holding, as his eyes once more met mine.

‘You’re not hanging around, then.’ It was more of a statement than a question.

‘No. No, we’re not.’

I finally broke the stare, looking down at my boots.

‘Okay, so, if you’re not gonna be around for long... How do you fancy a night to remember, sweetheart?’

I almost dropped the beers, my head shooting straight back up. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘Come out with me. Tonight. What d’you say, darlin’?’

3

That had thrown me. Somewhat. ‘I... I don’t know...’ *Why didn’t I know?*

Just say yes, Lana. Just say yes!

‘I know we’ve only just met, but...’ He shrugged. ‘Does that really matter?’ He raised an eyebrow, his mouth twisting up into a slight smirk. How could *anybody* manage to make that look so incredibly sexy? And even though there was a part of me that wanted to scream, *Do you know what? We might have only just met, but what the hell! Yes, I’ll go out with you!* there was another part of me – remnants of the old, more reserved and cautious Lana, maybe – that was holding back. A part of me that was slightly wary of accepting his invitation.

‘No. It doesn’t really matter, but...’ That cautious part had won. ‘Look, I... I really should go and find my friends...’

He pushed a hand through his hair, and I watched as his expression changed, his eyes dipping briefly before he looked back at me. ‘I’m sorry. I really didn’t want to make you feel uncomfortable, in any way, it’s just that, when I saw you last night...’

‘You saw me last night?’ My voice appeared to have gone up an octave, and I gave a little cough in the hope it would return to normal next time I opened my mouth. ‘Where?’ Thankfully, it had.

‘In the bar, downstairs. You staying here?’

I nodded, and then I suddenly realised where I’d seen him before – or, at least, where I *thought* I’d seen him before. ‘Were you with a group of bikers?’

He smiled, and I kind of liked the way his eyes crinkled up at the edges when he did that. ‘You saw us?’

‘Yeah. Yeah, I saw you.’

‘You were with a tall, tattooed guy,’ Eddie went on. ‘Boyfriend?’

‘Brother,’ I corrected, pleased my voice appeared to be behaving itself now.

‘Do you *have* a boyfriend?’

My eyes were fixed on his as I spoke, my voice still steady as a rock, despite my insides misbehaving in a way they hadn’t done in a long, long time. ‘Is that any of your business?’

He laughed quietly, raking a hand through his hair. ‘There’s something about you, Lana.’

I continued to stare at him, right at him. That weird feeling I’d experienced last night, as I’d left the bar – was that down to him?

‘You stood out, from everybody else in that room last night. I don’t know why, I just... My eyes, they went straight to you, the second I walked in. And that incredible sleeve tattoo you’ve got, that might’ve had something to do with it. That’s some pretty eye-catching ink there, darlin’.’

I looked at my arm, absentmindedly running my hand up and down it.

‘You seem like the kind of woman I...’ He trailed off, his eyes dropping to the floor. ‘Anyway, seeing you here...’ He raised his gaze, looking straight at me. ‘Do you believe in fate?’

I narrowed my eyes slightly. ‘About as much as I believe in the tooth fairy.’ I wasn’t sure I’d meant that to sound quite as cynical as it had come out.

He raised that eyebrow again, and I was beginning to wish he’d stop doing that because it was really messing with my head. ‘You’ve never believed in the tooth fairy?’

I shrugged. ‘I was a cynical child.’

‘And...are you *still* cynical?’

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. He kind of made me want to smile. ‘Not as much.’

He smiled too, and I found myself relaxing that little bit more, a strange yet comforting warmth flooding through me. I was actually starting to enjoy myself now.

‘That’s a shame. Because you don’t look like a cynical woman to me.’

‘And what does a cynical woman look like, exactly?’

His head dropped again, and I couldn’t help noticing the way his hair fell forward; the way he quickly pushed it back off his face as he turned to look at me again. ‘About tonight...’

His eyes almost burned into mine, my skin breaking out in goose bumps as a warm shiver ran right up my back. And for a few seconds – a few glorious, almost unreal, seconds – it was like we were the only two people in the room. ‘I... Eddie, I can’t. I

can't.' Reality – and my over-cautious side – returned. And the moment was gone.

‘Okay.’ He shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets. ‘I can’t say I’m not disappointed, but... You take care now, darlin’, you hear?’

I nodded, giving him one more smile before I turned and started to walk away, bumping straight into Finn, who was quite obviously on his way to find me.

‘Where the hell have you been?’ he asked, taking a beer from me. ‘Thought you were brewing the stuff yourself... What?’

I took a quick glance behind me, and Finn’s gaze followed mine.

‘What am I supposed to be looking at?’

My eyes were still on Eddie as he disappeared back into the mass of people. ‘That guy over there. The one in the black-leather biker jacket... He’s pushing a hand through his hair now, look! Him.’

Finn frowned. ‘Yeah? What about him?’

I took a second or two to let that totally unexpected encounter sink in a little more before I spoke again. ‘He just asked me out.’

‘Fuck off!’ Finn laughed, his expression changing only when he saw mine. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, really.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I said I couldn’t.’ I closed my eyes and threw back my head, letting out the longest groan. ‘Why did I say that?’

‘Beats me, kiddo.’

I looked at him. ‘You’re no help.’

‘What do you want me to do? I can go check him out for you, if you like. You know, do the brotherly thing, find out if he’s got any dark secrets...’

I threw Finn a look. ‘I just got a shock, you know? It was a bit of a surprise, that’s all. I mean, it’s not like it’s been an everyday occurrence for me, has it? Men asking me out.’

‘Only because you’ve shied away from any attention of that kind, Lana. Believe me, sis, there’s a queue of people back home all gagging to ask you out, but that look you give sometimes... it kind of warns them off. You do know you’re doing that, don’t you? It’s like a fucking death stare...’

‘I’d just walked out on Adam.’

‘That was a year ago, Lana.’

‘I’d just walked out on my life, and I’m still trying to get used to a new one. Relationships have been the last thing on my mind.’

‘And now?’

‘My divorce has just come through, Finn.’

‘And your point is?’

I threw him yet another of my withering looks. ‘I turned him down, okay? Conversation over.’

‘Why –did you turn him down, I mean?’

‘*Why?*’

‘Yes. *Why?*’

It was a question I’d probably be asking myself for days to

come, if I was honest. ‘Look, the ink isn’t even dry on my divorce papers...’

‘What’s that got to do with anything? Listen, Lana, it really is time to start living again. I know this year’s been tough on you and I know you’ve tried to move on, but you haven’t really made all that much progress, have you?’

I stared at him with wide eyes, indicating my tattoos, my black-tipped hair; my skinny jeans and biker boots. ‘*This* isn’t progress?’

‘That’s all wrapping paper, kiddo. I’m talking about what’s going on inside.’

‘You’re very perceptive, all of a sudden.’

He pulled a face, downing another mouthful of beer. ‘Why not take a chance now and again? That’s all I’m saying.’

I looked back out into the crowd, even though I knew Eddie would be long gone and the slight pang of regret I’d felt since he’d walked away intensified. Why couldn’t I just have said yes? There’d been something about that man and not just the way he looked, all edgy and rough and, quite frankly, hot as hell. There’d just been something about him... the way he’d looked at me. There was a connection there and I’d just severed it, dead. ‘Should I have accepted?’ I asked quietly, still staring out into the crowd, as though willing Eddie to reappear. Eddie Fletcher – the kind of Prince Charming who wouldn’t so much ride up on a white stallion, he’d be more likely to cruise up on a Harley, and I’d turned him down!

Oh God! I'd said no! How could I have said no?! Lana, you idiot!

Finn shrugged, his voice pulling me back to reality. 'All I'm saying is, you're trying to build this new life for yourself, right? And I can only do so much, you know? I mean, I've given you one hell of a kick-start...'

I playfully nudged his arm. 'Don't sell yourself short or anything.'

'I really am being serious now, Lana. Sometimes in life you've just got to take a risk. And this could have been one of those times.'

I sighed. 'I'm not looking for any kind of relationship, Finn, you know that.'

'He asked you out, sis. He didn't propose.'

He put his arm around my shoulders again and I hugged his waist tight as we walked. 'It just all feels a bit... I dunno. Odd. Surreal.'

'Truthfully, did even the tiniest part of you want to say yes to him?' Finn asked.

'Yeah. It did. It really did.'

'Then you should have gone with your gut, girl.'

'I know,' I sighed, because regret was kicking in big-time now.

'I mean, what happened to that fun-loving, kick-ass woman you told me you were gonna become? I thought you were someone who was determined to take life by the balls and live it.'

'I am. It's just... it's still hard for me, sometimes, to get my

head around the fact that this is me now. You know what I was like before, and this – this is so different.’

Finn flashed me a huge grin. ‘Yeah, but just remember how boring your life was before you started hanging out with me again.’

I smiled at him, knowing he was kind of right. But my life hadn’t been *that* bad before. It just hadn’t been the life I’d wanted in the end. ‘Even if I *was* looking to start all that dating crap again, Finn, I’m not sure... Look, all of this is pointless. I said no, he’s gone, it’s over.’

Finn gave my hand a little squeeze. ‘You’ve still got me.’

‘Yeah. I’ve still got you.’ I leant over to kiss his cheek. ‘And I’ve still got this weekend in Vegas.’

But what kind of weekend *could* it have been? The chance to find out was gone now. I’d blown it. Whoever Eddie Fletcher was, I’d probably never see him again. And that was nobody’s fault but my own.

Pulling the hem of my dress, which I still thought was a little too short, down over my thighs, I quickly looked around as I waited for the elevator to arrive. Black, strapless, and just about skimming my arse, I couldn’t deny I loved the way it made me feel, despite its slightly daring length. I’d teamed it with knee-high, black, spike-heeled boots, which made my legs look pretty much incredible, even if I did say so myself, and with my long blonde-and-black hair hanging in large, loose curls down my back, my make-up all dark eyes and pale lips, those tattoos I was

so proud of all on show, I felt every inch the wannabe biker chick I'd always dreamt of becoming. I was slowly getting used to the fact that I could scrub up pretty well for a woman about to hit forty. I still had it, and I was damn well going to make sure I flaunted it, while I still could.

Taking a quick peek in the full-length mirror on the wall beside the elevator, I studied my reflection carefully. The woman staring back at me was one I still wasn't all that familiar with, but I was getting a little more used to her as each day passed. And a lot of that was down to Finn. He'd made me realise it wasn't a crime to change, if that was what you needed to do. He'd given me a strength and a confidence I'd never had before, and I loved him so much for that. So much. Because, without him, I wasn't sure I'd be where I was right now.

As the elevator doors slowly slid open I pulled the hem of my dress down again, wiggling my hips slightly to help it on its way. 'Whoa!'

That voice, accompanied by a long, low whistle, made my head shoot up and I could have died of embarrassment as I saw him standing there, leaning back against the handrail. Eddie Fletcher. Bold as brass and twice as hot as I remembered him being a few hours ago. Shit! I wasn't prepared for this. I mean, it was like all my prayers were being answered now, bumping into him again after I'd spent the entire afternoon berating myself for letting him go. But a little bit of warning would have been nice. 'Looking good there, darlin'.'

Jesus! That accent! I'd never found a Glaswegian accent sexy before. Never. But on this guy it was like honey dripping off a hot crumpet...

What the hell was I talking about?

I quickly brushed down my dress, shook out my hair, and walked into the elevator, displaying what I hoped was an air of confidence, which was more difficult than it should have been thanks to boots I wasn't quite used to walking in yet.

Leaning back against the rail beside him, I watched as the doors slid shut, neither of us saying anything for a second or two. But I was more than aware of my heart picking up a rhythm that was faster than I'd have liked it to be.

'Where're you heading?' he asked, taking his hand out of his pocket and hovering his finger over the buttons on the wall to his left.

'Ground floor.' It was taking every ounce of strength I had to keep my voice steady. I hadn't expected to see this man again, and yet, here we were, sharing an elevator. Just the two of us. Was I going to mess up a second time? I wasn't planning on it.

He pulled his hand away, shoving it back in his pocket. 'Me too.'

I took a sneaky sideways look at him. He wasn't dressed all that differently to how he had been when I'd seen him earlier, still wearing those battered jeans and biker's jacket, and those heavy black boots I found strangely sexy.

As he took his left hand out of his pocket again, raking it

through his hair, I tried to see if he was wearing a wedding ring, and then quickly turned away as I realised I was probably staring. Again.

‘I’ve never been married,’ he said, as though reading my mind, which made me squirm slightly. Was I that transparent? Still, at least that was one question answered. ‘Never felt the need.’

I turned my head to look at him again, and he was smiling at me, a smile I really liked because it reached his eyes – those beautiful, dark eyes... I really had to get a grip here. I was in Las Vegas. This place didn’t exactly epitomise reality, and what was happening here, this wasn’t real. And even if the invitation to go out with him was still open, which I had yet to find out, in a few days’ time he’d be heading back to wherever he came from, and I’d be on my way back to England. That was the reality of the situation. So was it even worth me telling him I’d changed my mind? That I would, after all, like to go out with him? And what if he’d already found a woman more willing to take him up on his offer? It wouldn’t surprise me if he had.

‘What about you?’ he asked, his voice pulling me back to the here and now. ‘You never did answer my question earlier. When I asked if you had a boyfriend.’

I dropped my gaze, his question making Adam and my past life come rushing back to the forefront of my mind – a place I’d wanted to try and keep both well away from.

‘I’m divorced,’ I replied, the words falling from my mouth before I could stop them, my eyes back on his. ‘Finalised a few

days ago.’ He hadn’t really needed to know that. And I had no idea why I’d told him.

It was his turn to lower his gaze, his hair falling down over his eyes as he dropped his head. Once more I felt the strangest feeling flood through me, something I couldn’t really explain, it just felt – I don’t know – like there was some invisible spark between us that kept firing off little shots of, well, it was like a heady mixture of excitement tinged with fear and... I was confusing myself now. It just felt – it felt nice. Really nice. Different.

‘I’m sorry.’ He looked back up, pushing his hair away from his face. ‘I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable, I just... I guess I let my mouth run away with me, huh?’

I smiled. I couldn’t help it. Once more he was just making me feel like smiling, and I wasn’t fighting that. ‘It’s okay. We’d been separated for a while and...’ I stopped talking, because this really was information he didn’t need to know. And I really didn’t want to talk about it.

He returned my smile, his eyes looking right into mine, and all I wanted now was a drink. Something to calm the sudden nerves that had taken over, caused by the close proximity of this darkly attractive man. A man I wanted to get to know better, and I wasn’t going to lose this opportunity a second time.

So when the elevator reached the ground floor, shuddering to a halt with a light thud, I almost willed him to ask me again; the same question he’d asked me this morning, because this time my answer would be yes. A huge, enthusiastic yes. Looking briefly

down at my boots I waited for the doors to open, longing for him to ask that question, and wondering whether I should just make the first move myself before it was too late.

But I didn't get the chance, because all of a sudden the elevator started moving again...

My head shot back up and I stared at him. Mainly because I couldn't quite work out what was happening.

'Sorry, darlin', but I'm not giving up without a fight.'

I continued to stare at him. 'Not giving up *what*?' Feisty Lana was starting to emerge now. Which was good. I had a feeling I was going to need her.

'You.'

The way he said that, with that accent of his and that mean and moody look on his face, it was so sexy I actually felt my knees give the tiniest of wobbles. Or that could've been because I hadn't eaten all that much since breakfast, which in a place like Vegas, with its wall-to-wall mega-buffets and endless restaurants, was quite a feat. But I preferred to believe it was because of Eddie.

I gripped the rail behind me tightly as the elevator started to rise again. 'Where are we going?' Not that I cared. Not really. Anywhere would be good. I was just relieved I hadn't messed up again, because there was something about Eddie Fletcher that was drawing me to him, more and more, with each second we spent together.

'There's a bar at the top of this hotel,' he replied, his hands in his pockets, his eyes focused on the elevator doors as we continued to ascend. 'You get an amazing view of Vegas from up there. And I think we could both do with a drink, don't you?'

He'd got *that* right. Those nerves still needed steadying.

I looked down at my boots again, raising one leg up, resting my foot against the glass wall behind me. 'I could call this kidnapping, you know.' I slowly raised my head, my eyes meeting his, a slight smirk on my face.

'You want to call security?' He raised that eyebrow again, causing me to grip the rail even tighter, but at least I was managing to hold his gaze. Good. Feisty Lana was holding her own here.

I shook my head, a slow smile starting to spread across my face. 'No. You're alright. I kind of trust you.'

'Kind of?' He still had that eyebrow arched.

'Well, I still don't *know* you, do I?'

He smiled again. But thankfully he'd lowered the eyebrow now. 'Stick around for a couple of hours, sweetheart, and you'll know enough.'

I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that, but just trying to get my head around this whole scenario was exhausting enough without asking any more questions. I'd decided to just go with it now. See where the night took us.

The elevator doors finally slid open and he held out his hand. And, like an idiot, I just stared at it, not really sure if I should take it. But that's obviously what he wanted me to do, right?

'I won't bite,' he said, that smile still there on his really quite handsome face, if you went for the rough, weathered, bearded look, which I did. Oh, I really, *really* did.

I paused for just a second longer before tentatively slipping my hand into his, his fingers tightening around mine, and I took a small but deep breath as my stomach fluttered. ‘You okay there, darlin’?’

I looked up at him, my eyes once more meeting his. No. This definitely wasn’t a dream. He was very, very real. The fact he was squeezing my hand was telling me just how real he was.

‘I’m fine. I’m just... It’s been a while, that’s all. Since I’ve done this.’

‘Done what? Embarked on a night out with a stranger?’ He’d raised that eyebrow. Again. And my stomach acted accordingly.

‘How do I know you don’t make a habit of this?’ I asked, not realising I’d just voiced my thoughts out loud until I heard the words. Still, I couldn’t take them back now, could I? ‘I mean, you could pick up different women on a regular basis for all I know.’ I figured I might as well get it all off my chest, because it *was* something I’d been wondering.

He threw me another smile. ‘Come on. Let’s get that drink.’ He didn’t even attempt to answer my question, but what the hell. I wasn’t going to push it.

I clung onto his hand as he led me through some wide double doors into the busy bar, a space that seemed to go on forever – but the view! He hadn’t been wrong about that. The walls surrounding a huge, circular counter in the centre of the room seemed to be made of nothing but pure glass, meaning that everywhere you looked you could see the lights of Las Vegas

down below, the city spread out like a colourful blanket. I gasped as I tried to take it all in. What a view! It was utterly mesmerising.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ He turned to look at me. ‘Just like you, Lana.’

Jesus Christ! I wanted him to say my name over and over again, just keep saying it, because he was making it sound like the sexiest thing in the world right now.

‘Beer!’ It was a statement rather than a question, as if he’d known me for ever.

Okay. One word and the mood could change in an instant, but... Did he know me that well already? All that stuff about fate – maybe he was right. ‘Yes. Please.’ I was grateful for the lovely, comfy couch behind me to sink into as his hand slowly slipped out of mine.

‘I’ll be right back,’ he said, his expression suddenly turning serious. ‘Don’t go anywhere. Okay?’

As if! But all I could do was nod. And stare after him as he walked over to the bar, even though there were servers hovering around all over the place. But I was glad he’d gone over there himself. It gave me a chance to do two things – watch him walk, because he had a swagger I’d never seen on a man before and I was finding it incredibly sexy, and quickly text Finn to let him know what was happening. I didn’t want him sending out a search party.

Less than two seconds after pressing send on that text my phone rang. I quickly answered it. ‘You decided to take that

chance, then,' Finn said.

I looked over at the bar. Eddie was talking to the bartender, smiling and laughing, pushing a hand back through his hair and I watched as it fell forward again almost immediately. 'Yeah. What the hell, huh?'

'That's my girl. Just be yourself, beautiful. Okay? And try and enjoy the night.'

I sighed quietly, my eyes still on Eddie. 'He knew what to get me from the bar without even asking.'

'Nothing a ridiculous shade of orange, then?' Finn deadpanned.

I finally pulled my gaze away from Eddie. I didn't want to be caught staring again. 'No. Nothing a ridiculous shade of orange... He's coming back! I'll call you later.'

'If you need us...'

'I'll be fine.' I ended the call, quickly throwing my phone back into my bag.

Eddie sat down on the chair to my left, handing me a bottle of beer. 'I didn't get you a glass. Do you want one?'

'Do I look like the kind of woman who needs a glass?'

He smiled. I was fast becoming addicted to that smile of his. There was something safe about it, almost. Something warm and comforting, which was a little bit at odds with the way he looked – that rough-around-the-edges exterior he displayed with the messed-up hair and beard; those dark, almost dangerous eyes. 'You sure you're okay?'

‘I’m fine,’ I replied, taking a quick drink of beer, thankful for the small but significant hit it gave me.

He leant forward, resting his elbows on his slightly open knees. ‘So, shall we start getting to know one another?’

All those nerves had gone now. In fact, I was feeling more relaxed than I had in a long time. ‘You look like a bit of a bad boy to me.’ Possibly too relaxed, because I wasn’t entirely sure I’d meant to say that out loud. But he did have that aura about him; the way he looked, the way he dressed. Even the way he spoke.

He laughed quietly. ‘I think “boy” might be pushing it a bit, darlin’, but... Does that put you off?’

Quite the opposite, actually, but I wasn’t going to tell *him* that. And at almost forty years old I should probably be past the whole “bad boy” thing but, hey, I’d lived with a good guy for way too long. Was it so wrong to fancy a change? ‘Would it matter if it did?’

He narrowed those beautiful dark eyes of his as he looked straight at me. ‘My name’s Eddie Fletcher, I’m forty-seven years old and I own a motorcycle shop in downtown Las Vegas. I live not far from the Strip in a place called Rancho Oakey, own two Harleys, ride regularly, hang out at biker bars and my MC clubhouse. I like beer and Mexican food, and can’t stand jazz music. And lastly, I’m still hanging around this hotel, instead of just going home, because I was hoping to see *you*.’

I blinked a few times, trying to take it all in; where I was, everything that was happening. But none of it was easy. I still

felt as though I'd suddenly stepped into some kind of weird and unfamiliar parallel world that I wasn't altogether sure I should be a part of.

'You don't *have* to tell me anything about yourself,' Eddie went on, his voice shaking me back to the here and now. 'But, you know, I'd quite like to find out a little bit more about you.'

I stared down at my beer, closing my eyes for a second before I looked back up at him, fixing a smile on my face. 'Let's just say I've left a lot behind, and I'm starting again.'

He looked at me – right at me – for a few, long seconds. Long enough for my heart to start knocking out a fast and heavy rhythm, pounding away inside me like some pulsating drum. If I'd been standing up I might well have felt faint, but as I was sitting down I just felt a little light-headed.

'There really is something about you, Lana...' The smile he gave me seemed to send a wave of calm washing over me. Like I'd just had a shot of something warm and relaxing, and I found my confidence returning.

Putting my beer down on the table in front of us I curled my legs up underneath me, resting my elbow on the arm of the couch as I looked at him. 'You live here in Vegas?'

He nodded. 'Have done for over fifteen years now.'

That explained the slight hint of US twang in his accent. I hadn't really noticed it earlier today, but tonight it was coming through a little more.

'Came over for a bikers' convention, and I never went home.'

He didn't seem in a hurry to offer up any more information, and I wasn't going to push it. I'd hardly been forthcoming with mine.

'You said something, this morning, about fate,' I said, staring straight at him. 'Do you really believe in all that?'

He shrugged, taking another drink. '*You* obviously don't.'

'We're not talking about me. And I told you, I'm cynical.'

His eyes were still locked with mine and for a few seconds nobody said anything. But it didn't feel like one of those awkward silences, and that was weird, in a way, given how long we'd known each other. Which was all of five minutes.

'Maybe fate's the wrong word,' he said quietly. 'Coincidence... is that a better one?'

My eyes refused to leave his, which was fine because, in all honesty, I could have sat staring at him all night. 'So, were you really gonna hang around the hotel tonight on the offchance you'd bump into me again?'

'I told you, that's exactly what I was planning to do.'

'Okay, well, you've found me, so... what else did you have planned?'

He laughed quietly, his eyes dipping briefly before meeting mine again. 'I hadn't really thought that far ahead, darlin', if I'm being honest. But, you know, a few drinks, a club, then... maybe, back to my place...'

I broke the stare, those final few words killing the moment. 'I'd better go.' I swung my legs down from the couch, grabbing

my bag as I stood up.

‘Lana, wait! Please. Just, wait.’

Oh, God, why did he have to say my name like that? Why?

I turned around, standing completely still as he walked over to me.

‘I’m sorry. That was really...’ He bowed his head, running a hand along the back of his neck before he raised his gaze. ‘It was inappropriate. But you... you’re... Jesus, Lana, you’re hot, you know?’

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. ‘Thanks.’

He laughed, the mood suddenly lightening. ‘Come on.’ He took hold of my hand, and my fingers automatically curled around his, clinging on tightly as he led the way out of the bar, beating a steady pace to the elevator, his long legs taking the kind of strides my slightly shorter ones weren’t capable of in the dress and boots I was wearing. ‘I know a great club not far from here.’ He stopped for a second, smiling that smile again, his hand still holding tightly onto mine. ‘You’re gonna like this place. I promise.’

It was a bit early to be making me any kind of promises, but his eyes – I trusted him, I really did. As much as you could trust anyone you’d known for less than an hour, anyway.

Neither of us said anything else until we were back in the elevator, winging our way down to the ground floor.

‘I’m gonna give you the night of your life, Lana Saunders.’ He winked at me before slipping on a pair of dark glasses, his hand

still holding mine. And it was a nice feeling, holding his hand, his thumb running gently over my knuckles. ‘I won’t hurt you, I promise,’ he said quietly, a slow, sexy smirk spreading across his roughly handsome face. ‘Not unless you want me to.’

I couldn’t stop a full-on smile from appearing. ‘I’ll get back to you on that one, okay?’

‘Okay.’ He squeezed my hand, and I felt the most insane sensation shoot through me. I had no idea what it was, or where it had come from, but it both scared and excited me. ‘Let’s play it by ear, huh?’

I was happy to go with that. I’d come *this* far...

He squeezed my hand again, pulling me closer to him, and I felt a tiny shiver run through me as my hip nudged his. I’m not saying sparks were flying or anything like that, but I definitely felt that hint of a shiver, and my fingers curled tighter around his, almost as if I really did believe this was nothing but a dream and if I let go of him – well, then he’d disappear. And I didn’t want him to disappear. Not yet.

The elevator doors slowly slid open and he looked at me, his expression a touch more serious than it had been before. ‘If you don’t want to do this, Lana...’ I took a second to let the way he said my name wash over me, bringing with it the return of that tiny shiver, before I interrupted him.

‘You just promised me the night of my life, Eddie Fletcher. I want to see if you can live up to your promises.’

He grinned, and if I hadn’t been holding onto him I swear my

legs would've buckled underneath me. 'You got it, sweetheart. Let's get out of here.'

He continued that rapid pace he seemed to favour as we exited the hotel and headed out onto the Strip, its bright lights and noise giving everything an unreal, almost fairytale, atmosphere. It was as if I'd, somehow, stumbled into someone else's life and I was just looking in from the sidelines. But the excitement that was bubbling away in the pit of my stomach, I couldn't ignore that. I didn't want to. I was in a place I'd always wanted to visit, with the kind of man I'd always dreamt of. So I was grabbing this experience with both hands and not letting go. Not until I had to.

'Okay, sweetheart, here we are.' We'd stopped outside a building not far from the hotel; an unassuming place with a small entrance way and stairs that seemed to descend forever down into darkness. 'It's a hidden secret, this is. One of the best clubs in Vegas. I come here all the time; it's my kind of hang-out. And I'm guessing it might be yours, too.'

'You think you know me that well, huh?'

He turned to face me, smiling slightly. 'I think I'm getting there.'

I shook my head, but I was also laughing. It was crazy, to be this comfortable in the company of a man I'd only just met, but that's how I felt. 'Well, let's see if you're right, hmm?'

He laughed too, letting go of my hand and sliding his arm across my shoulders. Overly familiar maybe but, hey, I wasn't complaining. This was Vegas and whatever happened here, it

stayed here, apparently. Not that anything wasgoing to happen. And even if it did...

I slid my arm around his waist, leaning into him as his thumb slowly stroked the back of my neck, turning that tiny shiver I'd felt earlier into a long, languid tingle running slowly up and down my spine. Okay, so maybe this *was* crazy. A little unreal. But I was going with it. You only got one life, and I'd promised Finn – I'd promised *myself* – I was going to start living mine. Even if this hadn't really been the start I'd planned. Or expected.

We headed into the building, making our way down the stairs, the sound of heavy rock music coming from somewhere below, my fingers gripping the material of Eddie's t-shirt for dear life because the stairs were so steep, and not that easy to navigate in my choice of footwear. It was only when we were about halfway down that I loosened my grip, although I didn't let go of him completely. I was enjoying being this close to him. Adam and I, we'd never really been the hand-holding, waist-hugging type of couple. And now I realised what I'd been missing, that comforting feeling of closeness. It was nice. I liked it.

'You holding up okay there, darlin'?' Eddie asked, letting his thumb wander over the back of my neck again. God, that felt *so good!*

I nodded, once more concentrating on those stairs. We seemed to be descending more than I could count now, until we finally came to a long, black-walled corridor, a corridor that, thankfully, seemed to be leading us to the entrance of the club. Once there

Eddie had a word with a tall, well-built man at the door who seemed to know him rather well, and after a lot of laughter and genial back-slapping – during which he never once let go of me – we eventually headed inside.

The club itself had a dark, almost dangerous, atmosphere, yet, I didn't *feel* in any danger. Nothing felt threatening, and that was probably because I'd been to clubs like this before, with Finn and our friends. They'd taken me to so many places I'd never had the chance to experience before, from biker bars, like this one, to rock gigs, pub lock-ins and house parties that ranged from wild all-nighters to chilled-out evenings spent listening to Pink Floyd and eating great food with good friends. So this world, it wasn't completely alien to me. It was still quite new, but not completely alien.

Loud, thumping rock music pulsed from what I could only imagine were concealed speakers, because I couldn't see any anywhere, filling the space with a vibe I couldn't describe, but I liked it. I craved it. Because this was a place where nobody seemed to care what anyone else thought. The people here were dressed in everything from denim to leather, skinny jeans to short skirts, and tattoos certainly seemed to be something favoured by the clientele, which suited me just fine. The walls, like the corridor outside, were mostly dark, the prominent colours being a deep, almost blood-red and black, all of them decorated with images of rock stars, reapers and huge swirling snakes wrapped around bloodied thorns. I felt like Alice walking into my very

own warped kind of wonderland.

‘I knew you’d like it here,’ Eddie murmured, his mouth so close to my ear I could feel his breath on my neck. And that shiver returned. It was growing stronger with every visit.

I gripped his waist tightly again as we walked over to a booth at the side of the room, my head turning this way and that as I tried to take it all in. He let go of me as we sat down, and I continued to stare out ahead of me, watching everything with a slight sense of awe. It was like another world; one I was quite happy to frequent.

‘I’ve ordered beers. That okay with you?’

I turned my head to look at him. ‘Yeah. Yeah, that’s fine. I’m not really a champagne kind of woman.’

He slid his arm along the back of the couch, finally taking off his dark glasses and slipping them into his jacket pocket.

‘Are you always this perceptive when it comes to women?’ I asked, shuffling my body around slightly, pulling my legs up underneath me, tucking them in, resting my elbow on the back of the couch, our arms touching, just a brief second of contact but enough to cause goose bumps to form.

He smiled, pushing a hand through his hair, although it was refusing to stay back off his face tonight. But I quite liked that just-got-out-of-bed look that he was managing to pull off quite magnificently.

‘I’ve always thought I was rather good at reading people, if that’s what you mean.’

I could have listened to him talk all night. Constantly. I'm sure if he was to sit there reading a take-out menu to me I'd still find it incredibly sexy. He had a way of rolling his tongue that was just so hot! 'So, do you think you can read *me*?' I asked, trying desperately to stop imagining what else he could do with that tongue.

'I know you're looking for something.'

I smiled at the pretty, dark-haired waitress as she set our drinks down on the table in front of us before I let my eyes meet his, and all I could do was stare at him. Again. Because I didn't really know what to say to that.

'I'm sorry,' he said, breaking the stare and bowing his head. 'I'm pushing too much.' He slowly raised his gaze, our eyes locking once more. 'None of this matters tonight.'

'No,' I whispered. 'None of it matters.' Did any of it matter at all? But maybe he was right about tonight. It was too early, too soon – it was pointless getting into any kind of deep conversation about our pasts and who was looking for what when this was nothing more than some chance encounter I really should just be making the most of, while it lasted.

I felt his fingers slide between mine, and I looked at our joined hands, blinking a few times as I tried to force feisty Lana back out of hiding. I needed her right now, because I had a feeling that, tonight, I was either going to do something I could end up regretting for a very long time, or something I might actually enjoy. If I let myself. I just wasn't sure which it was going to

be. Either way, it was going to be something completely out of character – for the old me, which was why I needed feisty Lana back.

‘And in answer to one of your earlier questions,’ he went on, reaching out with his other hand to push my hair back off my shoulder, ‘... I don’t do this on a regular basis. Pick up random women, I mean. I’m not gonna pretend I’m some kind of monk either, but... You’re different, Lana. I know you are. I can *feel* it.’

The way he put the emphasis on the word *feel*, with that low, sexy voice and eyes that seemed to be so sincere, it did something to my insides I hadn’t felt happen before. And they’d been experiencing a lot of new activity over the course of the day.

His hand moved up to my neck, resting gently against it, his thumb lightly stroking my cheek. ‘Are you okay with this, darlin’?’

I felt my eyes slowly close, his thumb still stroking my cheek, an action that was almost hypnotic, and all I could do was nod, aware that he was moving closer now.

‘Good,’ he whispered. ‘Because this is something I have wanted to do ever since I saw you this morning.’

I laid my hand over his, our fingers intertwining as his mouth touched mine, and I swear I had never felt anything like it before. I’d never experienced a kiss like that in my entire life, because for most of my life I’d only ever kissed one person. So how could I possibly have known *this* kind of kiss existed? His lips moved ever-so-slowly against mine, opening just a touch, his tongue

hesitating only slightly before pushing its way into my mouth, and I accepted it immediately. I let his hand slip lower, onto my hip, stroking it gently as he continued to kiss the hell out of me. And I was in no hurry for him to stop. Whatever the rights or wrongs of this situation; however weird or unreal it could yet turn out to be, right now I didn't care. I just didn't. I might be acting like some teenager out on a Saturday night, but I really didn't care. Being with Adam from such a young age, I'd missed out on so much. Was it *that* wrong of me to want to have some fun now?

Eddie pulled away, but only slightly, his forehead resting against mine, his hand back on my neck, his thumb stroking my cheek again. 'Should I be saying sorry?' But he was smiling, and I returned it, shaking my head.

'No.'

'Lana, I...'

He pulled away a touch more, so he could look at me properly, dropping his hand from my cheek, pushing it back through his hair. 'I promised you the night of your life, right?' Our eyes locked, both of us unable to keep the grins off our faces.

'Yeah, you did. I guess it's time to see if you can deliver, then, biker boy.'

‘Down in one, darlin’. Down in one,’ Eddie shouted, slamming his empty shot glass down onto the table.

Picking up my drink I knocked the clear liquid back in a single mouthful, quickly sucking on the lime in my other hand, which made me choke slightly as the juice mingled with the tequila in my throat, causing Eddie to laugh out loud.

‘Bastard!’ The fact I was laughing too only caused me to cough even more. ‘Still got it down, though.’

He threw me an appreciative look, taking a sip of his beer. ‘You can hold your own, sweetheart, I’ll give you that.’

I sat back, closing my eyes briefly to let the alcohol hit take hold. I was verging on tipsy, but nowhere near drunk. I was determined to keep as clear a head as I could tonight, because I had a feeling I was going to want to remember this. When it was all over.

‘Come on,’ he said, draining the last of his beer and grabbing my hand, pulling me up off the couch. ‘It’s time to hit the casinos.’

This night was turning out to be a fast-paced, whirlwind of an affair, with my feet hardly having time to hit the ground as we almost ran from bar to bar, all of them favourites of Eddie’s, grabbing a drink, meeting all the people Eddie knew – a wonderfully eclectic mix ranging from musicians to artists to fellow bikers. People that reminded me a bit of the new friends I’d

made back home. And because of the speed at which everything seemed to be moving, I'd almost forgotten that I was doing it all in a dress that was probably way too short and boots that were a little too high. I was just having the best time. It was the most exhilarated I'd felt since my college days and the weekly Friday-night pub crawl. But this – this was on a whole different level.

Despite the pace at which Eddie was playing this night, I had no urge to fall into bed just yet. This was a twenty-four-hour town, and I was going to make the most of every single one of those hours. As far as casinos went, well, this was Vegas! And you had to hit at least *one* casino when you were in Vegas, right?

Back out on the Strip, the blast of fresh air was more than welcome and I took a few seconds to catch my breath, once more marvelling at the bright lights and vibrant atmosphere this town was so good at creating. I'd fallen head-first in love with the place.

'What time is it?' I asked, snaking my arm around his waist, sliding my hand up under his t-shirt, biting down on my lip as it touched his skin.

'No clue, darlin'. Could be eight in the morning for all I care.'

All of a sudden he stopped in his tracks, taking me by surprise as he pushed me gently back against the nearest wall, his fingers winding in my hair as he kissed me slowly. So slowly I felt my whole body relax, bit by bit, with every touch of his lips against mine.

'Still want to check out those slot machines?' His mouth was

twitching at the corners, his eyes trying to stay deadly serious and I couldn't stop a fit of the giggles from taking over.

'Where did you come from?' I whispered, pulling him closer by his jacket collar, running my fingers over his beard, my eyes following their every move.

'I don't know, baby,' he murmured, his mouth gently brushing that soft space just below my ear, causing the most delicious sensation to course right through me. 'But wherever it is, I'm in no hurry to go back there.'

I rested my hand against his cheek, turning his face to look at me, leaning forward to kiss him again, sighing quietly as his mouth opened slightly, our tongues touching as he pulled me closer. The second our bodies connected I felt a heat the like of which I hadn't known could exist just from touching another human being; it was like a series of minute electric shocks were being fired into me, one after the other. 'I think we should probably go check out that casino now, don't you?' I whispered, my mouth resting against his as I spoke. I could almost feel him breathing into me – breathing *life* into me. A new life. The life I'd always been looking for?

His face broke into a smile, his thumb stroking my cheek before he pulled back slightly. 'This night ain't anywhere near over, darlin'. You got that?'

I threw my arms up above my head, stretching out, my eyes still locked with his. He had my answer.

Cocking his head just a touch, he raised that eyebrow again,

a slow smirk forming. ‘Am I doing okay here, kid?’

‘You’re doing just fine,’ I breathed. ‘But you’ve still got some work to do to make this the night of my life.’

‘You throwing me a challenge there?’

‘Call it whatever you like, biker boy. I just can’t wait to see what you do with it.’

All of a sudden he lunged at me, grabbing me around the waist and nuzzling my neck, causing me to shriek out loud and laugh even louder as he tickled me, pushing my body up against his in the process. I just fell into his arms, letting him kiss me again, over and over, every time we came up for air the kisses growing longer and slower. Sexy, soulful kisses. If there was a heaven out there, I hoped to God it was something like this.

‘Oh, you are really playing for points now, aren’t you?’ I smiled, gently stroking the hair at the back of his neck, running my fingers through it.

‘Well, I’ve got something to prove, haven’t I? I’m a man who keeps my promises, sweetheart.’

It was me who pulled away first, shaking my hair out and composing myself before I took his hand. ‘Casino. Come on. I’m feeling lucky tonight.’

It hadn’t been intentional, to end up back outside the hotel I was staying in, but we seemed to have found ourselves there.

Eddie looked at me, his hand giving mine a little squeeze. ‘We can go somewhere else, if you’d prefer.’

‘Why would I want to do that? We’re only going to play some

roulette, maybe a little blackjack. Aren't we?

He grinned and that only made him twice as handsome, doubly hot. Ohboy, was I loving this night? 'Whatever you say, kid.'

'Let's start small, huh?' I winked, leading the way inside.

'Small?' he questioned, his grip on my hand tightening.

I glanced at him over my shoulder. 'Slot machines. I want to ease myself into things gently, okay?'

He grinned again, swinging me around so I fell back into his arms. 'You're one hell of a woman, Lana Saunders. I kind of need you to know that, darlin'.'

I reached out to touch his face, letting my thumb run lightly over his cheek. 'Yeah, well, you're proving to be a bit of a surprise to me, too, Eddie Fletcher.' Grabbing his hand I started pulling him towards the sound of a barrage of slot machines coming from the hotel casino. 'Come on. We're wasting valuable gambling time here.'

Clutching a fistful of money, I sat myself down at a random machine, Eddie behind me, the closeness of his body something I was used to now. It kind of felt odd if he wasn't there.

'I'll go get us a drink,' he said quietly, leaning over so his mouth was practically touching my ear. It was an action that sent a lovely sensation coursing through my body. 'You get started, okay?'

I turned my head to smile at him, my mouth catching his in a quick but still unbelievably hot kiss. And I couldn't help but let out another of those unfamiliar, tiny gasps as I watched him walk over to the bar, that sexy swagger meaning mine wasn't the

only head that was turning.

Back off, bitches, he's mine!

Smiling to myself, I turned back to face the machine, carefully sliding a note into it, watching as that first attempt at a win failed. But so what? I had a feeling I'd already won the best prize of the night. Hitting the jackpot here would be nothing but a bonus.

'Any luck?' Eddie asked, handing me a beer.

I shook my head, concentrating on my next attempt. Which also failed.

'Here.' He leant over me again, his body touching mine from behind as he reached out to take a note from my hand, sliding it into the machine. I could feel his breath on my cheek, his beard rough against my skin, and I had a sudden urge to just pull him down and kiss him until our mouths ached. But I took a drink of beer instead, my head spinning slightly, telling me I was probably on the edge of being drunk now.

His luck was no better than mine, as far as the slot machines were concerned, and I smiled as he swore quietly, making no attempt to pull away from his position behind me. 'Lady Luck ain't smiling on us tonight, darlin',' he sighed, his fingers trailing lazily along the back of my neck.

Flip!

I wasn't sure if he was aware of exactly what he was doing to me, but I could feel myself heading in a direction I still wasn't sure I should be heading in. I needed a bit more time to think about this.

Grabbing my beer and stuffing the money down the front of my dress, I took his hand, dragging him over to the roulette wheel.

‘Oh, we’re going bigger now, are we?’ He smirked, and I threw back a slow smile.

‘You have no idea how big I intend to go tonight.’

‘Feel like giving me a clue?’

I shook my head, digging out a handful of chips from my bag. ‘Stick these on red.’

He looked at me. ‘Any particular reason why?’

I shrugged. ‘I like red.’

‘Good enough,’ he said, turning to place the chips on the table. I slid my arms around him from behind, resting my head against his shoulder, breathing in the smell of leather and cigarettes as the wheel turned, round and round, faster and faster, until it inevitably slowed down, that tiny white ball jumping in and out of the red and black compartments. It was actually quite strange, the level of excitement that small ball could create, but as it finally settled in red even I couldn’t stop myself from giving a shriek of delight and high-fiving Eddie. This was fun!

‘Red again. Or do *you* want to choose this time?’ I asked, my excitement reaching child-like proportions now.

‘No. What the lady wants, the lady gets.’ Eddie smiled, his eyes meeting mine for a brief and surprisingly intense second. Enough time for me to know, for sure, that I was done with the alcohol for tonight. I really needed to keep my head as clear as

possible. I could cope with slightly woozy, but any more than that and I knew I was going to forget too much of tonight. And I didn't want to forget any of it.

'Stick it on red then, handsome,' I whispered, lightly kissing the back of his neck.

'You're killing me here, darlin',' he murmured, reaching behind him to rub my bottom. *Oh yes!* No way did I want to forget this night!

I felt his hand slide into mine as the ball once more bounced into the red, and I let out another tiny squeal of excitement, squeezing Eddie's hand probably a touch too hard.

He let go of me, leaning forward to retrieve our winning chips, scooping them up and dropping them into his pocket.

'Come on, kid. We're quitting while we're ahead.'

'We are?'

I let him take my hand again as we headed out of the casino. And it wasn't until we were back outside in the hotel's sprawling foyer that he stopped, swinging me around to face him, reaching out to cup my cheek in his hand. 'You ready to call it a night yet, darlin'?'

I stared up at him, those dark eyes of his boring into mine, that intensity I'd sensed before coming back with a vengeance now. 'I'm not sure,' I said slowly, and then inwardly shook myself, taking a very quick, very deep, breath. 'Tell you what... Let's go grab a whisky or something. Outside.' I didn't really fancy another drink, but I didn't feel much like letting him go just yet,

either. And this was the only compromise I could come up with on the spur of the moment.

‘Suits me.’ He shrugged, letting me lead the way out to the pool bar. But the second we were outside he stopped, pulling me back into his arms. ‘What are you scared of, Lana?’ His mouth was already closing in on mine, and I felt my heart start to beat faster. Harder. Louder.

‘I’m not scared of anything,’ I breathed, grabbing onto his jacket collar to steady myself as my knees started weakening again. I was still putting that down to Eddie. To this. To everything that was happening. Was *that* what I was scared of? *This?*

‘I think you are,’ he whispered, his hand in the small of my back, pressing me against him.

‘I thought we were getting a drink?’ And I wasn’t entirely sure why I was almost pulling back from this, because it felt good, being this close to him. It was everything I wanted. Everything this night had inevitably been leading up to.

‘In a minute.’ His voice had a beautiful, gravelly tone to it now, probably due to the cigarettes and alcohol he’d been indulging in tonight. It was so sexy I almost moaned out loud. ‘I’m not finished here yet.’

I closed my eyes, letting my hand fall loosely around his neck as his mouth lowered down onto mine, kissing me so slow and so deep I didn’t ever want to come up for air.

‘You are such a bad influence,’ I groaned, his mouth moving

to my neck, brushing over it so gently, so lightly, it was crazy!

‘You don’t know how bad I can be,’ he growled, swinging me around so I was backed up against the wall, at his mercy, silently willing him to do all manner of unspeakable things to me, right there and then. I didn’t really care. Not anymore.

‘I’d quite like you to show me,’ I whispered, taking hold of his t-shirt and pulling him against me, smiling as my mouth rested against his. ‘Right now.’

6

Kicking my hotel-room door shut behind me, our lips still locked together, I fell back against the wall, my fingers burying themselves in his hair as we kissed. And kissed. And, oh God, we kissed!

‘You okay?’ he asked, pulling away only slightly, his breathing heavy, his fingers running lightly along the top of my dress.

‘I’m fine,’ I whispered, aware that my chest was heaving, and whether that was because his fingers were almost skimming the curves of my breasts, or whether it was because I was still out of breath due to our practically running here all the way from the elevator, I didn’t know. I just knew that, what was happening here, I was ready for it. I wanted it. I wanted *him* – this tall, dark, dangerous stranger with the beard and the bikes. My Harley Davidson-riding hero. I couldn’t stop myself from smiling, and he looked at me, smiling too.

‘You sure? Because...’

I shut him up with a kiss, sliding his jacket back off his shoulders, hearing it fall to the floor with a soft thud.

‘Well, I think if we’re playing fair here, darlin’, then you need to lose some clothing too.’

I laughed quietly, my mouth still touching his. ‘I’m not wearing a jacket. You were. I’d say we’re pretty much even now.’

‘Oh, I gotta feisty one here.’

I closed my eyes again as I felt his hand slide up and under my dress, resting on my thighs. I bit down on my lip, our eyes locked together as I silently gave him the permission he was looking for.

‘You sure you’re okay with this?’ His gaze dropped to my still-heaving chest, the fingers of his other hand sliding just underneath the top of my dress, causing me to gasp out loud as they touched my breasts.

All I could do was nod, the need to take this to its somewhat inevitable conclusion achingly painful.

‘I’m okay with this,’ I whispered, aware that he was tugging at my knickers, and I helped him slowly slide them down until they gathered around my ankles. Kicking them away, I stared into his eyes as I pushed my dress down over my breasts, my hips, letting that drop to the floor too, stepping out of it, leaving me naked, bar those spike-heeled boots. And I felt nothing but a sense of overwhelming freedom. No fear. No nerves. I was naked, in front of this man I’d only just met, and I felt incredible.

‘Oh, Jesus, Lana, sweetheart... you truly are beautiful.’

Yeah, and so was he, in that rough, edgy way I was finding so sexy. But, right now, I was done with the talking. It was time for the action we’d probably both been looking for since the second we’d met in the elevator just a few short hours ago.

I backed right up against the wall, raising my arms above my head, closing my eyes as his fingers slid between mine, his mouth gently brushing over my neck with kisses so light I couldn’t help but moan out loud.

‘Are you sure, Lana?’ His fingers tightened around mine, and I had a feeling that, as long as he kept talking to me, his voice could more than likely bring me to orgasm without him even having to touch me. But I wanted to be touched. Oh, God, did I want to be touched! ‘Really sure?’

I didn’t want to think about it anymore. I didn’t want to think about the reality of the situation – that we were, quite obviously, going to have sex and then our lives would go their separate ways. I didn’t want to think about that. I just wanted to do this. For me. This man, he wanted me. I wanted him. We both wanted *this*. Even if we *had* only known each other a few hours.

I nodded, and then he was holding me tight, his mouth crashing against mine with a force that literally took my breath away as he lifted me up, my legs wrapping firmly around his hips. I should have been scared. Or at least had the decency to feel just the tiniest hint of nerves – I hadn’t had sex in so long, not since I’d left Adam. I hadn’t even wanted it. Until now. Until this very second.

Throwing my head back slightly, my eyes closed again as his mouth moved down to my breasts, covering them in the lightest of kisses, his rough beard tickling my skin, and I couldn’t help giggling slightly, a giggle that fast turned into a long, low, drawn-out moan as his tongue circled my nipple, causing goose bumps to break out in epic proportions all over my skin.

But then, a wave of ice-cold reality swept over me, hitting me from right out of nowhere, and I unwrapped my legs from around

him, pushing him gently away. 'I'm sorry, Eddie, but I... I don't think I can do this,' I whispered, retrieving my dress from the floor, hurriedly pulling it back on.

'It's okay.' He smiled, and I felt that wave of reality start to retreat almost as quickly as it had appeared. 'Really. Believe me, darlin', I'm not just here for the sex.'

Did he mean that? How the hell could I possibly know? When I didn't know *him*. Which was why I really shouldn't have even been *thinking* about having sex with him. But we'd been so close to it just then, and my body had almost let itself go there, because I'd wanted it, I really had. I'd wanted *him*. But was that not just because my head was all over the place, because of my divorce, and the fact that this man wanted me? Wanted *sex* with me?

I closed my eyes for a couple of beats, turning and walking over to the bed. My skin felt warm, those tiny goose bumps that had appeared just seconds earlier still covering it, the tingling between my thighs growing stronger by the second.

'Lana?'

I turned around, my eyes meeting his, and they stayed fixed on him as he walked over to me. I didn't want him to go. I really didn't want him to go. There was still some crazy connection here that went way deeper than a physical need, and I was starting to find it all slightly confusing now. This was so out of my comfort zone.

'I'm... I'm fine,' I stuttered, feeling my heart start to race faster as he stood there in front of me, those dark eyes of his so intense

I could feel every defence I was trying to put up weakening, crumbling down around me. There was still a part of me that was struggling for identity... Fuck it! You only live once. And whatever this was, whatever it turned out to be, I was taking it all, and I was going to enjoy it. I deserved *that* much, didn't I?

He smiled a slow smile as I once more slipped out of my dress, kicking it across the room in a manner verging on vicious, almost as if I didn't want to give myself another excuse to grab it again.

Moving closer, he slid a hand around the back of my neck, his fingers winding into my hair as he gently pulled my head back, his mouth lowering down onto mine in another of those incredible kisses. I could lose myself in those kisses. Completely and utterly lose myself. They seemed to go on forever, both of us separating only when he pulled back to take off his t-shirt, revealing an array of tattoos that took my breath away. Covering both his arms, his shoulders, chest and back, I'd never seen ink like it. Skulls and knives, fire and flames, vibrant colour and deep, deep black; designs I'd never seen before. I could have spent a good half an hour just checking them out. And maybe I would, later.

I felt my heart start to pound, hammering hard inside of me, the anticipation both terrifying and exciting. I'd never done anything like this before. Ever. I'd only made love to one man my entire life, never really needing to know what another body felt like until I'd pulled my safe and comfortable world down around myself. Then everything had changed!

Once again he lifted me up, my legs briefly wrapping themselves back around him as he lay me down on the bed, my heart still trying its hardest to escape the confines of my chest with a heavy, almost painful, rhythm. I closed my eyes, pulling my legs up slightly, stretching out as I waited for him to undress, trying not to over-think this, because doing that just increased the nerves I was already feeling. Yeah, they'd suddenly hit me, those nerves. And I didn't want to feel nervous. I just wanted to let this happen.

I kept my eyes closed, feeling his hands on my knees gently push my legs further apart, allowing him to lie between, his body warm and hard against mine. A shockwave coursed through me, merging with an excitement I was finding hard to control and I breathed out deeply, desperately trying to push the old Lana further away. She needed to go, and take the past with her. She needed to go, now.

Keeping my arms stretched up above my head, I arched my back as his fingers slowly intertwined with mine, and I clung onto him, my eyes finally opening, meeting his.

'Okay?' he whispered, gripping my fingers tight.

I nodded, letting that tingling between my thighs take over, feeling it spread further up my body, causing the goose bumps to grow and my heart to continue racing at a rate I was finding hard to cope with. It really was quite difficult to breathe now, my throat was so tight.

But then, almost as if he was injecting me with a shot of

something calming, I felt him push inside me, so slowly and carefully it caused that breath I'd thought was stuck in my throat to shift, giving way to a low groan I couldn't keep down.

I could feel him, his thrusts slow and gentle, the grip he had on my fingers intensifying as our bodies picked up a steady rhythm, moving together, and I pulled my legs up around him, arching my back again, pushing my hips up against his. I was giving him permission to push harder, go deeper, do whatever it was he needed to do because I was going to take it all. He was setting me free, making me realise what I'd been missing all that time I'd been unhappy and unsure of the life I'd once led. It was like the floodgates were finally opening, and this time I really was emerging as the new me, instead of all those practice sessions I'd been going through these past few months. Could sex with a new man really do that? Could it really make me feel that way?

Throwing my head back I closed my eyes again, moaning quietly as his mouth began covering my neck in the tiniest of kisses, starting at the base of my throat and working upwards, his hips grinding into mine as he continued to thrust in and out of me with that same gentle rhythm. And each time he pushed back inside me I felt a beautiful shot of something – like the sweetest of electric shocks – hit me, causing my body to buck slightly, forcing more low groans out of me. He was making me crazy, and I was loving every wrong, confused second of it.

But then, as his fingers gripped mine so tight it verged on painful, I felt him stop, just for a second, then shudder slightly.

And that was when the rush hit me. He was coming fast and hard, and I couldn't help but cry out loud as I felt my own climax start to build, my whole body shaking with the force of an orgasm the like of which I hadn't experienced since – I hadn't experienced. Ever. Every inch of my skin felt like it was on fire, burning up with the heat that seemed to spread through me, diminishing only slightly as both our bodies began to slow down, that rhythm fading, his grip on my fingers loosening.

I kept my eyes closed for a few more seconds, just listening to his breathing, heavy and ragged.

'You okay?' he asked, gently stroking my hair from my eyes, which I slowly opened, my heart still racing as I looked at him.

'Hell, yes!' I smiled, because what had just happened here... how could that *not* make me smile? Even though I wasn't entirely sure *what* I should be feeling now. I'd had sex with this man, just hours after meeting him. What did that make me? Crazy? Cheap? Lucky? All three?

'You felt incredible.' His voice was so low, his mouth almost resting on mine as he spoke. It was the most erotic thing I'd ever experienced, but then, to be fair, anything even verging on erotic wasn't something my I'd experienced all that much of before. Adam just hadn't been the type to go in for all that. He'd been a very practical man, in every sense of the word. Guarded, almost. But I'd loved him. I really had loved him. Once upon a time.

I didn't know what to say now. I wasn't even sure I could speak anymore, my throat had gone all tight again. And my body, Jesus!

That was still tingling in a way I hoped would never disappear. I could live with that feeling forever.

I felt him slowly pull out of me, rolling over onto his back. I turned onto my side, propping myself up on one elbow. ‘Thank you.’

He did the same, leaning forward to kiss me gently. ‘For what?’

‘For waking me up.’ In more ways than one. But he didn’t need to know all the other stuff.

He smiled, reaching out to run his fingers lightly over the curve of my waist. ‘Baby, it was a pleasure.’ His eyes dipped to my breasts, his hand moving up to touch them, something that brought back that wonderful tingle as his fingers grazed my nipples. ‘Has anyone ever told you you’ve got the most incredible tits?’

‘No,’ I laughed. ‘Actually, they haven’t.’

‘Well, somebody should have done,’ he whispered, his mouth resting against mine as he spoke in that deep, raspy accent of his. ‘Because they are fucking amazing.’

I smiled, running my fingers through his even more messed-up hair, letting him pull me closer as he kissed me again, so slowly it drew another tiny moan out of me.

‘Stay with me, Lana. Don’t go back home. Stay here. In Vegas. With me.’

All I could do was stare at him. I certainly couldn't get any words out, not that I'd know what to say anyway. Was he being serious? Or was he just a little bit drunk? Because I was positive I must be. None of this was making sense anymore. If it ever *had* made sense. What on earth had I just done? What the hell was he asking me to do?

'Look, darlin', I'm the kind of guy who likes to take a risk, and you look like the kind of girl who feels the same.'

As a woman about to turn forty, I silently thanked him for calling me a girl. But this still wasn't making any sense. 'I don't know what kind of risk you're asking me to take here, Eddie. But I'm not sure I...'

He shut me up with a kiss. A long, deep, sexy-as-hell kiss. And that just pushed me under, killed me dead. I was gone. Finished. Another kiss. Another deadly blow to any common sense I might have still been clinging onto.

'I know you're looking for something, darlin'. And whatever it is, maybe you can find it here.'

'In Vegas?'

'It's as good a place as any.'

'You have no idea what I might be leaving behind back home.'

'I don't believe you're leaving anything important.'

'You don't know me, Eddie.'

‘But I want to. I want to know every, single, beautiful inch of you.’ His mouth was back on my neck, leaving a trail of tiny, soft kisses along my skin, my entire body shuddering as those kisses travelled lower. ‘Spend the day with me tomorrow, Lana. We’ll take one of the Harleys, go riding, grab some food at this great little diner I know on the edge of the desert... Let’s have some fun, darlin’.

‘You make everything sound so easy,’ I groaned, unable to stop my body from shuddering again as his fingers gently stroked my hip.

‘It *is* easy,’ he whispered, his lips gently brushing my shoulder, his beard tickling my skin again. I was beginning to love that feeling. ‘I can guarantee, sweetheart, that after you’ve spent the day with me, you aren’t gonna *want* to go home.’

I couldn’t help laughing, a small, slightly hysterical, laugh. It was the nerves and the shock and the total confusion this entire surreal scenario was throwing my way.

‘You’re actually serious?’

‘I’m serious.’

I was thrown now. Completely. ‘Okay, I... I mean, that’s just... I can’t even find the words... We only met yesterday.’

His thumb stroked my cheek again, his mouth so close to mine I could feel his breath on my skin. ‘And you still don’t believe in fate?’

‘I told you. I’m cynical. I don’t believe in fairytales.’

‘Who said anything about fairytales?’

‘Why, Eddie? Why do you want me to stay here? A complete stranger you don’t know from...’ I stopped talking, the sudden realisation that I was about to mention my ex-husband’s name hitting me like a smack to the face.

‘I’ve just been inside you, Lana.’

Oh, Jesus, was this really happening?

‘And I want to go there again, and again.’ His mouth was back on my neck, moving slowly upwards, kissing that spot just below my ear, sending a shiver through me I couldn’t control.

‘I can’t just up and leave everything behind, Eddie.’ Why not? I’d already done it once and even though that had only involved me moving a few miles down the road, it had also involved breaking up my marriage. But this...this involved a whole new country.

‘Don’t you want to know what it feels like to take a chance?’

I’d already taken one. Was it not a little too soon to be thinking of taking another?

‘It’s a crazy idea,’ I groaned, arching my back as I felt him start to stroke my thigh, his hand warm and soft against me.

‘I like crazy.’

Oh, God, he was inside me again, his fingers pushing their way in, touching me, teasing out of me another long, loud moan. ‘This is so unfair.’

‘Stay with me, Lana.’ He kissed me slowly, and I could feel reality being pushed further and further away with every movement of his lips on mine. ‘Stay with me...’

The thick white robe felt soft and comforting against my skin and I folded my arms against myself as I stared out of the window. Outside another Vegas day was dawning, the sky slowly changing colour, the darkness gradually being replaced with swirls of red and orange that cast an almost eerie shadow over a town that never really slept. It was beautiful to watch, my mind completely captivated by something I just didn't get to see back home. Back home there was too much reality. Here I could leave all that behind. And it felt good. I felt free for the first time in so long.

'Come back to bed.'

I closed my eyes as I felt his arms slide around my waist, pulling me against him from behind. 'I couldn't sleep.'

'I'd gathered that much, darlin'. But I didn't say anything about sleeping.'

I smiled, remembering the past few hours with a surprising clarity, given that we'd both drunk quite a bit last night. But not enough to dim the memories of sex I never wanted to forget. My whole body felt almost re-energised this morning. In fact, everything about me felt different today.

'Were you serious, Eddie?' I opened my eyes, but continued to stare out of the window, watching as Vegas became bathed in soft, early-morning sunlight. 'About me staying here?'

He kissed my neck, his fingers intertwining with mine as our hands rested on my stomach. 'Baby, I've never been more serious.'

‘I just thought, you know, because we’d been drinking...’

He loosened my robe, pulling it open, his hands sliding over my naked skin. ‘I’m as sober as the next man now, kid. And I still meant every word I said last night.’

I leant back against him, sighing quietly as his fingers ran over my breasts, not caring that we were in front of the window, not caring about anything except the way he was touching me. His touch was like nothing I’d ever felt before – it was new and different and I was beginning to crave it.

‘I meant every word,’ he murmured, his fingers running over my hips, down over my bottom. I was lost. In just a few, incredible hours he’d opened up a whole new world for me and it was a world I was becoming more and more reluctant to leave.

I reached back to touch his face, my fingertips grazing his rough skin, burying themselves in his hair as he continued to tease me. I’d never been touched like this before. Ever. And I loved the way it made me feel: alive, beautiful – and sexy. This man made me feel so fucking sexy!

‘I know it sounds like some crazy, spur-of-the-moment thing, Lana...’ He pulled my robe back off my shoulders, and I let it drop to the floor, gasping softly as he kissed my shoulder, pulling me against him. ‘It’s what I do now, darlin’. Crazy, spur-of-the-moment things. It’s how I live my life.’

What he was doing to me, what he was saying... Just being here was spinning me out of control yet I knew what was going to happen the second I came to a standstill. I’d already made

that decision last night, as we'd had sex over and over again, until our bodies could take no more. I hadn't been able to sleep, so I'd just lain awake, watching him, listening to his breathing, thinking everything over; the craziness of the situation. What I'd be leaving behind. What I might find if I just took a chance – the biggest chance of my life.

'You said something about taking one of your Harleys and going for a ride.' I turned around, the urge to kiss the life out of this man overwhelming. Because I knew how his kisses felt now. I knew what they could do to me. 'So, Eddie Fletcher, we're gonna have sex, then we're gonna go get that bike, and you can start showing me every reason why I should stay here.'

Leaning back against the windowsill, I turned my head to look out of Eddie's living-room window. His house, not all that far from the Vegas Strip, was simple and somewhat sparsely furnished, but it was clean and fairly spacious, with the welcome addition of a little splash-pool out in the back yard, which was more than any house *I'd* owned had ever had. Not that there was all that much call for splash pools in north-east England.

I'd felt a slight hint of trepidation walking into his home, and I didn't even know why. Maybe there was still a tiny part of me that felt this was all going a bit too fast, which it was, in reality. Yet, the second I'd stepped inside, the nerves and the doubt disappeared, to be replaced by something verging on familiarity. It was strange, but I'd decided to stop questioning everything. To stop over-thinking it all. It wasn't helping, it was just getting in

the way.

His home also had a lovely, lived-in feel to it, which seemed to make it all the more welcoming. Probably another reason why I'd felt comfortable the second I'd walked inside. His somewhat bohemian neighbourhood had the most wonderful friendly atmosphere, something I couldn't really explain, but as soon as we'd pulled up outside on the bike there were people shouting hello, conversations striking up before we'd even reached the front door. It seemed like a nice place to hang out. A nice place to live.

'There's a barbecue at Hank's across the road on Wednesday night.'

I turned to see Eddie standing in the doorway. He'd changed his clothes now – the reason why we'd detoured here first before heading out of town. He was still in jeans, of course, but he was managing to pull off a white t-shirt that clung to his toned chest quite magnificently, and it was all I could do not to, audibly, show my appreciation. The addition of a red-and-black bandana tied around his head and a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth only seemed to make the biker in him more obvious, and that was an even bigger turn-on in my eyes. I could feel my thighs physically ache for him, despite the fact we'd only had sex less than an hour ago.

'I might not be here on Wednesday,' I said, allowing my mouth to curl up into a slight smile.

'Well...' He walked over to me, stubbing the cigarette out in

an ashtray on the windowsill before he slid his arms around my waist, pulling me against him, ‘... you used the word *might*, so, I’m gonna look at that as a positive sign.’

‘Eddie?’

‘Hmm?’ he murmured, his mouth nuzzling my neck.

‘You said you never felt the need to get married. Why was that?’

He pulled back slightly, and the look on his face made me wonder if I’d made a mistake asking him that. Was it really any of my business? But this was a man who’d just asked me to stay here in Las Vegas. To give up my life in England and start a new one, with him. Surely I had a right to at least know *something* about his past?

‘There was never anyone special enough, darlin’. Simple as that.’ His expression softened, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing I wanted to do was upset him. And anyway, I wasn’t exactly being open about *my* past, was I?

‘I’m sorry,’ I whispered, letting him pull me back into his arms, his forehead resting against mine, my fingers lazily stroking the back of his neck.

‘You’ve got nothing to be sorry for, sweetheart.’ His mouth lowered down onto mine, and I allowed his kiss to wash everything else away; all the doubt and the fear and the rationality that *should* be pushing its way to the surface here. It was all being slowly washed away with every movement of his lips against mine. ‘I’m saying this again, Lana, because you need to know I’m

serious. Stay with me.’

‘Eddie...’

‘You think it’ll be a mistake?’

I kissed him slowly, my fingers stroking the back of his neck, his hands pushing me harder against him as I continued to live out this fantasy I’d thrown myself head-first into. It also gave me a few more seconds to think. To get my head straight. To make sure I was certain about this. ‘I don’t know. I have no idea whether this is going to turn out to be the biggest mistake of my life, or the best thing I’ve ever done. But I’ll never find out unless I take that chance.’ I smiled, my stomach contracting as he returned that smile. ‘And I think I’m... Yeah. What the hell. I’m gonna take it.’

‘Okay.’ His smile widened, his eyes coming alive right there in front of me, and I couldn’t explain the atmosphere that seemed to surround us at that very second. I just knew it felt right. Like pieces of some messed-up jigsaw puzzle were finally coming together. ‘So, what do you say then, darlin’? You ready to start the ride of your life?’

As far as I was concerned, it had already begun.

I clung onto Eddie's waist, the wind blowing my hair back off my face, the roar of the Harley's engine the only sound I could hear as we sped along the deserted road. On either side of us there was nothing but an expanse of deep, rust-coloured land, the dust and dirt interspersed with patches of green cacti and desert plants. It seemed to go on forever, the colour changing only when it seemed to merge with the pale-blue sky, making it feel as though we were riding on the same stretch of road, over and over. The view didn't seem to change, bar the fleeting glimpse of a bigger cacti patch, or the odd cloud that had dared to show itself in that crystal-clear sky. It felt as though we were the only two people there. Nobody else could touch us, because nobody else existed. That's how it felt.

Leaning forward, I rested my head against his shoulder, closing my eyes for the briefest of seconds, letting the sound of the bike wash over me. I'd ridden pillion on Finn's Ducati a number of times back home, but it had never felt like this. This was something else completely. I felt as though, somewhere between me leaving the tattoo convention yesterday afternoon and meeting Eddie again in the elevator – I felt as though I'd somehow walked into a different world, crossed some kind of parallel timeline into another existence. And I was clinging onto that feeling like my life depended on it.

As Eddie pulled the bike up at the side of the road, I opened my eyes to see a small building a little way off in the distance.

‘The diner I was telling you about,’ Eddie said, killing the engine, pulling off his helmet and laying it down in front of him as he climbed off the bike.

I pulled off my own helmet, laying it down beside Eddie’s, but I stayed where I was for a few more seconds, looking out ahead of me. That building was like an oasis, stuck in the middle of nowhere, even though I knew we were really only a few miles out of Vegas.

‘This is so different to everything I’ve ever been used to,’ I whispered, my eyes still fixed straight ahead.

‘Different can be good sometimes.’

I turned to look at him, standing there all biker-hot and handsome. What I felt for this man was something I really couldn’t explain. I’d known him all of one day – not even that – yet the thought of leaving him behind was the most terrifying feeling. Which was why I’d made the decision to stay here in Vegas. With him. A stupid, crazy decision, but I knew I wasn’t going to change my mind now. I was living a fantasy, and I wasn’t going to walk away from that; from something not many people ever got the chance to do.

I climbed off the bike, leaning back against it, my eyes locked with Eddie’s as he came closer. ‘I have no idea how I’m gonna tell my brother I’m not coming home.’

‘Well, he’s probably gonna try and make you change your

mind.’ He rested his hand against my cheek, his thumb stroking my skin in slow, gentle movements as his eyes sought to reassure me.

‘Probably,’ I whispered, my mouth almost touching his now, my lips physically aching to feel his against them. ‘But I’m a big girl now, Eddie. I can make my own decisions.’

I felt my whole body relax into him as he finally kissed me, every part of me falling against him, giving into him. He was that dream I’d never even realised I had. That person I’d been looking for, the one who could open up all those locked doors that were still firmly closed inside of me. I believed that. I truly believed that. With every touch of his lips on mine, his fingers on my skin. When he was inside me everything just felt right. How could I walk away from that?

‘You haven’t really said that much about your life in the UK,’ he said quietly, pulling back just a touch, his hand still resting against my cheek.

‘You haven’t said all that much about yours.’ I laid my hand gently over his. ‘Have you never felt like going home? Back to Scotland? Don’t you miss it?’

He shook his head, his eyes burning into mine with a strange kind of intensity. ‘America’s my home now. My life’s here, in Las Vegas. I don’t have any reason to go back to Scotland.’

‘There’s nobody waiting for you back there? No family?’

He smiled slightly, just a small smile, which I wasn’t entirely sure reached his eyes. ‘My family aren’t all that accepting of my

lifestyle. We've never really been that close.'

'And what *is* your lifestyle, exactly?'

His smile grew a little wider, his eyes suddenly lighting up, which only served to make my heart beat that little bit faster. 'I'm a free spirit, Lana. The bike shop, and my stake in the garage my MC owns earns me enough to get by on. I live pretty simply. My home's quite basic, you've seen that... When I'm not working I ride, because when I'm out here, on the open road, it's the only time I think clearly. It really is the best kind of therapy.' His eyes were staring into mine with that strange, yet beautiful, intensity again, something that caused a ripple of excitement to bubble up inside of me. 'I'm an old-school biker, darlin'. I wear my colours with pride and loyalty is everything. But freedom – that's the most important thing in the world for me.'

I couldn't tear my eyes away from his. This tall, handsome man with the tattoos and the beard and a voice so low and sexy – he really was everything I'd ever dreamt of. I just hadn't realised it, until now. And everything he'd just said there, it was everything I'd wanted to hear.

'What about *you*?' he asked, his thumb still stroking my cheek, his hand warm yet rough against my skin. I didn't want him to take it away. I liked it, I liked him touching me.

'What *about* me?' But even after all of that I was still reluctant to open up to him. Maybe because opening up, talking about the past brought it all back to the forefront. And I didn't want to look back. I wanted to move forward.

‘Last night, in the elevator – you told me you were divorced.’

I looked down, finally breaking that stare, because looking him in the eye and talking about Adam – that didn’t feel right. ‘I am. It’s just not something I really want to get into.’

‘Things didn’t work out, huh?’

I raised my gaze, my eyes meeting his again. ‘Yeah. Something like that. We were together a long time and... We grew apart, that’s all. It happens.’

‘Yeah,’ he sighed, finally pulling his hand away from my face. ‘A lot of shit happens.’

I frowned slightly as I watched his expression change, the look in his eyes something I couldn’t read. Sadness? I didn’t have time to really let it register as his face broke back into a slow smile. But what he’d said there...

‘You still think about him?’ Eddie asked, a question that surprised me, because it wasn’t something I’d expected him to ask.

‘Sometimes.’ I was being honest now. Because I did still think about Adam. He’d been a huge part of my life – he’d *been* my life. So of course I still thought about him. ‘I was with him for almost twenty years. And you can’t just forget all of that as though it never happened.’

‘No.’ Eddie’s expression changed again, the smile once more disappearing from his face, his eyes clouding over. ‘No, you can’t.’ But then, as quickly as if someone had just flicked a switch, the smile was back. The sadness in his eyes gone. ‘You

said you worked in a tattoo studio...’ It was as if he’d sensed a change of subject was needed. He wasn’t wrong.

‘Yeah. Finn’s – my brother’s – tattoo studio. One of those major life changes, you know? I used to work in the theatre, now I’m training to become a tattoo artist.’

‘You’ve got some beautiful ink there yourself. Your brother do that?’

I nodded. ‘They’re all part of the new me.’

‘And what about the old one?’

My gaze dropped once more, focusing on my biker boots, the road, anything but him. ‘I’m moving on, Eddie.’

I felt him take my hand and I looked up at him, the feeling of his fingers sliding between mine was comforting. ‘Hey, I’m all about the here and now, baby. The past, it should stay where it belongs. You let it back in, it’s only gonna drag you down, believe me.’

‘How can you be so perfect?’ I smiled, my fingers lightly touching his slightly open mouth.

He laughed, that low-down dirty laugh that made my thighs ache for him. ‘I’m anything but perfect, darlin’.’

I cupped his face in my hands, kissing him slowly, enjoying the taste of him; that taste of beer and cigarettes, his mouth opening as his arms fell loosely around my waist. ‘Well, perfect can be boring,’ I whispered.

‘And boring is one thing I’m not, sweetheart.’

Oh, God, he was making me feel like that infatuated teenager

I was trying not to be, but it was hard not to get caught up in the fantasy of this situation. Because the reality was still something I was struggling to get my head around.

‘So, you’ve definitely made your mind up, then?’ Eddie asked, letting his hands fall a little lower, his fingers sliding down the back of my jeans. ‘About staying here, in Vegas?’

It was still the craziest idea; the kind of thing that didn’t happen in real life, not to people like me, anyway. People like me didn’t just up and leave everything behind to stay with a person they’d only just met, in a strange country, just because the sex was great. No, the sex was mindblowing! But this was so much more than sex. I knew that. I could feel it.

‘Oh, I’m staying, biker boy. So you better get ready for a wild ride of your own.’

‘You’re joking, right?’ Finn folded his arms as he leant back against the wall, watching as I brushed mascara over my lashes. I hadn’t expected him to take the news well, and he wasn’t. He wasn’t really taking it at all.

‘Finn, I’m too bloody exhausted to joke about anything.’

‘So, let me get this straight. The reason why none of us have seen you since yesterday afternoon is because you’ve been spending all your time with a Scottish biker called Eddie who owns a motorcycle shop and lives here, in Vegas.’

‘That’s about the size of it, yes.’

‘And tonight, you’re going out with him again?’

‘You’ve been listening, then?’

‘Yeah, I have, and all of that – *all* of that is fine. It’s what I wanted you to do, start having some fun. Have as much of that as you can, kiddo. But... staying here, staying with *him*...? Staying in *America*? What the hell is *that* all about?’

I swung around on my stool. ‘I need distance, okay?’

Finn’s expression was, of course, confused. I couldn’t really expect him to feel any other way. ‘What the fuck are you talking about?’

‘He’s still there, Finn.’

‘Who is? Jesus, Lana, you’re not making any sense here.’

No. I wasn’t. Because all of this had come from nowhere. I hadn’t even been aware it was what I’d been feeling until I’d said the words. ‘Adam.’

‘Adam? Why the hell is Adam on your mind all of a sudden?’

I looked down at my hands, which I’d balled up into fists without even realising, my nails digging into my palms. So why wasn’t I feeling any pain? ‘He’s not on my mind “*all of a sudden*”, Finn. He’s always been there. And what with the divorce and everything...’

Finn came over to me, crouching down in front of me, taking one of my hands and unfurling my fingers. ‘Why didn’t you talk to me, hmm? I thought you and Adam...’

‘We are. We’re over. Of course we are. But it doesn’t mean I can just push him to the back of my mind and forget about everything, just like that. We were together almost twenty years.’

‘But you weren’t happy, Lana.’

‘I *wasn’t* happy, not all the time. But he wasn’t a bad person, Finn. He just wasn’t the *right* person. For me. And I just wish I’d faced up to that sooner.’

‘Okay. But, that’s why you left him, isn’t it? Because he wasn’t the right person for you? You finally found the strength to make that decision, to move on. And that takes guts, kiddo.’

I pulled my hand away from his and turned to look back in the mirror, saying nothing.

Finn sat down on the arm of the couch. ‘I’m more confused than ever now. Lana, I... Are you telling me that you’re gonna up and leave the new life you’ve made for yourself back home and... You’re actually gonna *stay* with this guy? Just like that? Because you do realise how crazy that sounds, don’t you? And you’re gonna do that because, what? You think you need distance between you and your ex-husband? The same ex-husband you haven’t seen for months? And it doesn’t seem to have bothered you being in the same postcode as him since the split. The risk of you running into him, of seeing him, I wasn’t aware it was a problem.’

‘It isn’t.’

‘Then all of this is crazy.’

‘You’re making it *sound* crazy, Finn.’

‘No. It *is* crazy, Lana. It’s off-the-page crazy. It’s ridiculous. You’ve known this guy for all of a day, had one night out with him, fucked him a few times, and in your eyes that constitutes a good enough reason to ride off into the sunset on some ridiculous

notion that you could actually have a life with this man?'

I swung round again, surprised by how calm I actually felt, considering everything Finn was saying made more sense than anything I was doing right now. 'Nobody's talking about making a life with anyone, Finn. This isn't some kind of fairytale happy-ever-after. I'm not *that* naïve?' Or was I?

He just raised an eyebrow, but thankfully kept his mouth shut.

'It's just... This past year, it's been exhausting. And strange. And amazing, and...and I'm still trying to get my head around it all. And you... you are my rock, Finn. I am so glad I found you again, had the chance to get close to you again and you're not just my brother, okay? You're my best friend –you know? The one I will always turn to because you are so important to me now. I love you so much, I really do...'

'And I love you too, beautiful. You walked back into my life as this woman who wanted to change her entire world, and you'd started to do that in a matter of days, Lana. Because you are stronger than you think you are. Than you ever *thought* you were. But this... this is just crazy. And as somebody who loves you, I'm not sure I can stand by and watch you make a mistake like this.'

I shook my head, getting up and walking over to him. 'You can't stop me.'

He stood up, too, his hands in his pockets, his eyes staring deep into mine. 'I can try. Look, I know I pushed you into going out with the guy but, Jesus, Lana, I only meant for a drink. I didn't expect this shit to happen.'

‘Neither did I, Finn. But, you know, sometimes things happen for a reason. Sometimes a chance will appear that you never dreamt would or could happen, and you’ve just got to grab that chance before it disappears forever. Sometimes, you have to rely on fate, whether you believe in it or not.’

He raised that eyebrow again. ‘You’re believing in fate all of a sudden? You? Miss cynical?’

‘I didn’t say I believed in it. I’m just taking a risk, okay? Isn’t that what you told me I should be doing?’

‘I’m absolutely positive I never mentioned running off with a Scottish biker. That wasn’t exactly the kind of risk I meant.’

‘I know,’ I sighed, sitting down on the couch, pushing both hands through my hair. ‘I know that isn’t what you meant, but... Something happened here, Finn. Something clicked inside of me. Something I can’t explain.’

‘Are you sure you haven’t just been blinded by too much sex? I mean, I know you haven’t had any for Christ knows how long...’

I threw him a look as he sat down next to me. ‘I don’t know, okay? And you’re right. This *is* crazy. It’s ridiculous, and unreal, and incredibly selfish of me but...’ I looked down at my clasped hands. ‘Maybe I’m having some kind of middle-age meltdown. But Eddie he’s... he’s just as crazy as I am, Finn. And maybe crazy is just what I need right now.’

Finn sighed, throwing himself back against the couch cushions. ‘Lana, babe, you know nothing about this guy.’

‘And he knows nothing about me. But don’t you think that’s

what makes it so much more exciting?’

He just looked at me, but didn’t offer up any kind of answer.

‘I’m almost forty years old, Finn. And I have spent most of my life in a box I thought I was never going to be able to escape from...’

For the next twenty minutes I found myself pouring my heart out about my marriage break-up. And I had no idea why these floodgates had chosen to open now; why I was suddenly telling Finn all these things I’d kept from him before. I just knew that I needed to get it out. All of it. In order for me to really be able to walk away from the past. Keeping it bottled up inside had only held me back, I knew that now. ‘If there’s something else out there you want, something that might just make you happy; something you know you can have if you just have the balls to go out there and grab it, then... then nobody should feel guilty about doing that. Nobody. And *you* helped me see that, Finn. You gave me the confidence I needed to go out there and be this person I so badly wanted to be; *needed* to be. The person I should have become a long time ago.’

‘So it’s my fault you’re eloping with Scotty, then?’

‘Finn...’

‘And what about your apprenticeship at Black Ink?’

‘Look, Finn, I’m not saying this is forever, okay? It might not even be something that lasts more than a few weeks but I... It’s something I need to do. And I can’t really explain it, or give you a reason that would make any kind of sense, I just... I *need* to do

this. I kind of want to see where it takes me. And, it'll give me the time I quite obviously need to get my head around those things I'm still finding hard to let go of. You'll still train me, won't you? If I come back home?'

'If?'

'Will you?' I fixed him with a look and he sighed.

'You know I will.'

I leant over and kissed his cheek, ruffling his dark hair.

'You're fucking nuts, do you know that? Certifiably crazy.'

I stood up and walked over to the full-length mirror by the bed, cocking my head as I stared at my reflection. 'Yeah. I know I am.' I swung around, smiling as I looked at him. 'Like I said, you made me this way, remember?'

He sighed again as he hauled himself up off the couch. 'I created a frigging monster, that's what I did.' He walked over to me, pulling me into his arms, his expression suddenly turning serious. 'Don't do it, Lana. Please. Think about this, okay? Think about what's happening here. What you're planning to do, it's not the most sensible idea you've ever had.'

'I'm done with sensible, Finn.' I snuggled in against him, holding him tight. 'I've been sensible for almost forty years, and I think that's long enough. Now I want to do crazy and stupid and all those things I never had the chance to do before.'

'But this isn't just...'

He let go of me, pushing both hands through his hair as he let out another heavy sigh. 'It doesn't matter what I say, does it? You're actually gonna do this.'

‘Yeah. I’m gonna do this.’

‘Then know that I think it’s a bad idea.’

‘I need you to be with me on this one, Finn. Please.’

He shook his head, and I felt tears start to prick the backs of my eyes. ‘I can’t, Lana. I can’t support you on this because I think you’re making a mistake.’

‘Finn, please...’

‘Go out with him tonight, and you will be that amazing person I know you are, okay? You do that, you go out there and have some fun, spend the night with him, have as much sex as you want, wear the bastard out for all I care. But in the morning, I want you to tell me you’re coming home with the rest of us.’

‘I can’t promise you that.’

‘Think about this, Lana, please. What you talked about just now, everything you said about finding something that makes you happy, about starting a new life, you’re doing just fine on that score, kiddo. You really are. You don’t need to stay here to prove anything to yourself...’

‘That isn’t why I’m doing it, Finn. I don’t need to prove anything to anyone... Jesus... I just want to... I just want to be with him... There’s something about him that makes me feel – I don’t know. He makes me feel alive. He makes me feel like somebody I never knew I could be. It’s like he’s awakened something inside me that’s been lying there, dormant, for all those years.’

‘Just come home, Lana. Come home and let’s get back to

normal. Let's carry on doing what we were doing because we were having a blast, kiddo. I thought you liked our life.'

'I *love* our life, I really do, I just... I need that space, that time to really push Adam to the back of my mind...'

'I don't think this is all to do with Adam. Not really.'

I stared at him, right into his eyes. 'I'm staying, Finn.'

He let out another heavy, frustrated sigh. 'I can't believe you're doing this... You know I'm always gonna be there for you, don't you? Always. And when this crazy, stupid, rash act you're about to undertake falls down around you – when it all turns to shit and you realise what a huge mistake it really was, I'll *still* be there, ready to pick up the pieces. I'll still be there. But I can't pretend this is a good idea, Lana. Because I think it's wrong.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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