

KIMANI ROMANCE



*Poetry*  
**man**

Melanie Schuster

# Melanie Schuster

## Poetry Man

### Аннотация

Romantic days. Passionate nights. After trying everything from blind dates to online matchmaking to speed dating, Alexis Sharp has given up finding Mr. Right. Or even Mr. Almost Right. Until the stormy night when the South Carolina spa owner gets a flat...and a hunky stranger comes to her rescue. Sexy, sensitive, super-successful Chicago chef Jared Van Buren is everything Alexis could want in a man. There's only one thing standing in the way of their budding romance: Jared isn't black. To her surprise, Alexis discovers she and Jared aren't as different as she thinks. As desire melts their barriers, Jared vows to prove to Alexis that they belong together. What will it take when it comes to affairs of the heart, to convince the woman who fills his life with passionate poetry that love is color-blind?

Romantic days. Passionate nights.

After trying everything from blind dates to online matchmaking to speed dating, Alexis Sharp has given up finding Mr. Right. Or even Mr. Almost Right. Until the stormy night when the South Carolina spa owner gets a flat...and a hunky stranger comes to her rescue.

Sexy, sensitive, supersuccessful Chicago chef Jared VanBuren is everything Alexis could want in a man. There's only one thing standing in the way of their budding romance—Jared isn't black.

To her surprise, Alexis discovers she and Jared aren't as different as she thinks. As desire melts their barriers, Jared vows to prove to Alexis that they belong together. When it comes to affairs of the heart, what will it take to convince the woman who fills his life with passionate poetry that love is color-blind?

He looked at her in a way she didn't recognize; she had nothing with which to compare it. Finally he spoke, and she recognized his words immediately.

Jared was reciting a poem by Langston Hughes, a poem called "When Sue Wears Red," and he did it perfectly. He looked at her with all the reverence the great poet had intended, walking around her and taking in every detail of her essence; it was way beyond just her appearance, and she knew it. How he knew a poem by Langston Hughes she didn't know, but there was something else she knew for sure. When Jared finished the poem their fingers slid together and neither of them said anything for a moment until Alexis broke the silence.

“We’re not going out, are we?”

Jared had pulled her into his arms and was holding her close when he answered. “Probably not.”

She melted against him, her arms going around him trustingly as she tilted her head back to receive his kiss. “What do you want to do?”

He took his time answering because he was engrossed in the feel of her taut, sexy body against his own. “Everything.”

MELANIE SCHUSTER

started reading when she was four and believes that’s why she’s a writer today. She was always fascinated with books and loved telling stories. From the time she was very small she wanted to be a writer. She fell in love with romances when she began reading the ones her mother would bring home. She would go to any store that sold paperbacks and load up! When she had a spare moment she was reading. Schuster loves romance because it’s always so hopeful. Despite the harsh realities of life, romance always brings to mind the wonderful, exciting adventure of falling in love and meeting your soul mate. She believes in love and romance with all her heart, and she finds fulfillment in writing stories about compelling couples who find true, lasting love in the face of all the obstacles out there. She hopes all her readers find their true love. If they’ve already been lucky enough to find love, she hopes that they never forget what it felt like to fall in love.

*Poetry Man*

Melanie Schuster



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

Dear Reader,

Thanks for coming along on another installment of Friends & Lovers. If you started with Working Man, then you know how the series got started with Nick Hunter and Dakota Phillips. It was followed by Model Perfect Passion (Billie Phillips and Jason Wainwright), A Case for Romance (Ayanna Walker and Johnny Phillips) and Chemistry of Desire (Emily Porter and Todd Wainwright). Now in Poetry Man, we have Emily's ride-or-die girlfriend Alexis Sharp's story of finding love with Jared VanBuren, finding true love in the most unlikely way.

Next March you'll find out all about Emily and Alexis's BFF, Dr. Sherri Stratton. As you saw in Poetry Man, Sherri has sworn off men until her precocious little girl, Sydney, is at least fifteen. But there are two people who have other ideas about the situation. One is Sydney, who's decided that her mommy needs a husband. And the other person is Lucas VanBuren, Jared's handsome younger brother, who agrees with Sydney that he'd make a perfect mate for Sherri. When these two put their heads

and hearts together, Sherri won't stand a chance.

And yes, Alexis's sisters will find love in the near future because with these friends, love is never far away!

By the way, The Nero Wolfe Cookbook mentioned in my book is real; I'm a huge fan of the series by the esteemed Mr. Rex Stout and I use the cookbook regularly.

Stay blessed,

Melanie

[melanieschuster@sbcglobal.net](mailto:melanieschuster@sbcglobal.net)

I Chronicles 4:10

To all the DIVAS who have come before me and on whose shoulders I stand; all the magnificent and generous writers who have encouraged me along the way and made me believe that I could do it, too.

A special thanks to Evette Porter, Gwen Osborne, Sha-Shana Crichton and as always to Jamil, who still makes me laugh. And a very special thanks to Pam Beasley, who's my own ride-or-die BFF.

Everybody should be blessed with a friend like Pam.

To all my faithful readers

who keep their love on top for me!

I love and appreciate you all.

And a special dedication to my brother Dwight Woods.

Thanks for being my rock and for giving me the most beautiful nieces in the world.

Stay blessed!

# Contents

[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](#)

**Prologue**

Alexis Sharp took a deep breath before plunging into the empty pool at her health club. Alexis preferred to get her daily swim in early, before she went to work. She'd often wished she had a pool at one of her two beauty spas, but reality would kick in and she knew it was too expensive to install and not really what her customer base wanted. Her clients wanted top-notch hair care, facials, massages, mani-pedis and the like. What they didn't want was to get their expensive hairdos wet. So, she made do with a daily swim that was as necessary to her as breathing.

The cool water stimulated her and gave her a chance to think. She was so busy running the spas, her volunteer work teaching water aerobics and being a swim instructor on the weekend that she often felt as if she was treading water when she was on dry land. She used her schedule as the reason why she didn't date; she was just too busy. However, she and her closest friends knew that wasn't the real reason she didn't make room for social interaction in her life. She'd had a normal dating life at one time. She'd been engaged, in fact; right up until the night she'd found her fiancé in bed with his ex-girlfriend. That had put a crimp in her feelings about men for quite a while. Plus the tales of romantic woe she'd heard from the women of her family since she was a small child. Her mother insisted that all the women of their family were doomed to never have a successful relationship with a man. If it was just her mother talking, Alexis could have overlooked it, but her grandmother, her aunts, cousins and her sisters all agreed that there was no point in any women in the family woman trying

to fall in love because they had a love curse on them. It was all nonsense, of course, but when Alexis was adding up the reasons that men were off-limits in her current life, she'd think about her mother's pontificating with a grim smile.

Alexis swam vigorously for a while, enjoying the feeling of the water against her body. After doing about twenty laps, she turned over and floated on her back. She'd been swimming since she was about three years old and her enjoyment of it never flagged. Her love of the water was one of the reasons she kept her hair cut so short. And the fact that it suited her face so well. Glancing at the big clock on the wall, she decided she could stay in five more minutes. She had taken the day off because she was having her two BFFs over for lunch today and she wanted to make sure everything was ready. Not just the food, she wanted to get herself emotionally ready, too, because she knew that her friend Emily was going to interrogate her about her social life, rather her lack thereof.

After her dear friend Emily had surprised everyone by getting married out of the blue, Alexis had done an abrupt about-face and decided that she was going to find her own Mr. Right. She'd had enough of being alone and if Emily could find a tall, handsome doctor and start a new life, so could she. After her firm declaration of her intention to meet her perfect mate, Emily was going to want to know about her progress and the fact was there wasn't any. It was both embarrassing and frustrating for a lot of reasons, not the least of which was that she was tired of

being celibate.

There were times that her body drove her crazy with longing for a lover. Alexis had to admit there were times she wanted Mr. Right Now; she couldn't have cared less about Mr. Right. Alexis was a perfectly normal woman with perfectly normal desires. She couldn't sublimate her desires in her work forever; all the spa business in the world couldn't prevent her from wanting all the things that any woman wanted. Things like an understanding man, a good lover and plenty of really good sex. If she didn't get some soon her sheets might burst into flames from all the hot dreams she'd been having.

She stopped her lazy floating and turned over and started stroking again, swimming ten more laps before getting out of the pool. She was still alone because most people didn't start coming into the gym until later in the morning. Especially on a morning like this one, with pouring rain and the occasional clap of thunder. Thunderstorms were typical in Columbia, South Carolina, especially in the summer, but they didn't bother her at all. Alexis had always been fond of rain; she was a true water baby. She was patting off her face with her towel as she walked to the women's locker rooms. She'd almost reached the door when a really loud crackling arose, followed by a clap of thunder that sounded like an explosion. The room went black and Alexis had to stifle a scream as she collided with a wet man who was coming out of the adjacent men's locker rooms.

He was very tall, as her nose reached the middle of his chest.

His arms went around her and hers went around him in an automatic response. His skin was damp from the shower all members had to take before getting in the pool, but he didn't feel clammy. Instead, he felt wonderfully warm and he smelled terrific.

“Are you okay?”

Alexis had to clear her throat before answering, because his deep voice did something to her, something really nice.

“I'm fine,” she said. “Thanks for asking.”

The lights flickered and it looked as if they were coming back on. Alexis seized the moment to back out of the tempting arms of the stranger and scoot into the locker room. She fumbled the handle on the women's side just as the lights began working again. She towed off most of the water and got dressed in record time without stopping for a shower. She was normally cool and in control, but the feel of the tall man's body on hers had lit a fire in her. She wouldn't have been able to recognize him if she met him on the street because she hadn't gotten a look at him, thanks to her running off like a scared rabbit. But the brief encounter reminded her of just why she'd decided to get back in the dating game. She couldn't ignore her needs, wants and desires anymore. Maybe it was time she got back in the dating game and play until she won. Just once. If she played it right, one time was all she'd need.

Chapter 1

“So exactly when are you going to start dating, Alexis? I

thought you had a big change of heart when I got married.” Emily Wainwright, recently wed and soon to be a mother, accompanied her words with a sweet, teasing smile that Alexis would tolerate only from an old friend. Emily had been Alexis’s bestie since elementary school, along with their other BFF, Sherri Stratton. The three of them were sitting around the table in Alexis’s cute kitchen. Like the rest of the house, it was beautifully decorated; Alexis had really good taste. They were enjoying the lunch that Alexis had prepared when Emily had brought up what was once a sensitive subject. Sherri braced herself for a dose of Alexis’s wrath, but it didn’t come. Instead, Alexis laughed.

“I admit that I’ve been known to sidestep the dating scene, but I’ve actually been trying to do a little more socializing,” she admitted. “And it’s not the easiest thing in the world. Girl, dating is hard,” she said emphatically. “Have some more salad?”

Emily was easily distracted by Alexis’s offer of more crab salad and homemade rolls. Alexis heaped another helping of the delicious salad onto Emily’s plate, while Sherri gave her another roll and refilled her lemonade. They loved spoiling Emily anytime, but especially now during her pregnancy. Since she’d eloped over Thanksgiving weekend and then moved to Chicago, they didn’t have too many chances to dote on their girl.

“I’m probably eating too much, but this tastes so wonderful,” Emily said happily.

“You can have anything you want, now that you’re eating for two,” Sherri assured her. Sherri was a doctor and spoke

with authority on the subject. “You should gain about thirty-five pounds before delivery and you’re nowhere near that yet. You’ve been taking very good care of yourself.”

“I’m eating well and I’m still exercising and Todd keeps a close eye on me, whether I want him to or not.” Emily sighed. Her new husband was a doctor, too, and his only desire in life was to keep her safe and happy. “And I’m actually eating for three,” Emily said with a smile. “We just found out that we’re having twins!”

After the exclamations of joy and excitement, Emily went right back to her initial topic of discussion. She was a biochemist by profession and nothing could deter her once she had marked out a path of inquiry on any subject. “Alexis, you vowed on New Year’s Day that you were going to have a love life this year. You wanted the spare keys to the house on Hilton Head because you were going to meet the man of your dreams, kidnap him and spend next New Year’s Eve having a passion-filled tryst. It’s June. Halfway there. So what happened to those plans, Lex?”

Alexis curled her dainty upper lip in a gesture that was more snarl than smile. “Is it nice to rub people’s noses in their fantasies? No, it’s not. It’s very mean, as a matter of fact.” She rose gracefully from her chair and went to the refrigerator to refill the glass pitcher of lemonade. She always made the old-fashioned kind from scratch with fresh lemons and spring water. Hopefully being a good hostess would make her friend drop the subject. But her maneuver didn’t work.

Emily patted the corners of her mouth with her linen napkin

and held out her glass for more when Alexis came back to the table. “It didn’t sound like a fantasy to me, Lex. It sounded like a declaration, a statement of intent. Your primary goal was to meet a suitable mate and develop a relationship.”

Alexis didn’t have a chance to refute Emily’s remark before Sherri chimed in. “Not just a relationship, a marriage. I was there and I heard every word. And trust me, she’s not doing anything that could possibly plant her feet on a trip down the aisle.”

She and Emily laughed heartily, but Alexis didn’t join in. She uncrossed her arms, which had been locked across her chest like an extra-tight sports bra. “It’s not that funny, you two. I’ve dated enough lately to realize that the single pool is shrinking and stagnant and the likelihood of finding a mate is small. Infinitesimal, actually. So I’ve decided that I’m not looking anymore. I’m going to let him search for me,” she said with a touch of defiance.

Sherri looked surprised and Emily looked thoughtful after Alexis made her announcement. She finished off her roll and took a sip of lemonade before speaking, but what she said let Alexis know that she was on her side.

“I actually think that’s a good idea, Lexie. When you go out looking for something you almost never find it. I wasn’t looking when I got together with Todd. He just kinda dropped into my lap. If the things you’ve been doing haven’t been working, it’s time to sit back and see what happens,” she said. “What exactly have you been doing, by the way?”

Alexis gave her a grim smile that was less from humor than frustration. “I’ve been going out on some really bad dates. Really, really bad,” she emphasized.

Emily’s eyes widened. “Bad dates? How many and how bad? And what’s for dessert? Wait a minute, don’t tell me yet. I have to pee again.” She pushed away her chair from the table and hurried to the bathroom.

Alexis had to smile as she watched her scurry off. It was hard to believe that less than a year ago Emily was a grouchy, rumped academic with no interest in men whatsoever. After a surprise encounter with Todd Wainwright at her family’s vacation home on Hilton Head Island, she and Todd fell head over heels in love. Now Emily was a newlywed with two babies on the way. She looked like a new person with her fabulous haircut, courtesy of Alexis, and a new wardrobe Sherri helped her pick out. Her beautiful caramel skin glowed with happiness and her demeanor was now anything but glum. She was cheerful and more outgoing than she’d ever been before. And it was all because she’d met and married her soul mate. Love could work miracles, if Emily was an example.

“What’s for dessert? And what’s up with the bad dates?” Emily was back, seeking truth and sweets.

“I have some homemade lemon bars if you refrain from asking questions.” Alexis was an excellent cook and her lemon bars were better than any in the whole world. Emily was clearly torn for a moment, but she decided to play the mommy-to-be card.

“Sherri says I can have anything I want. And since your godsons or goddaughters are incubating inside me as we speak, I can’t be denied,” she said smugly. “So you can’t make me choose between dessert and dish. Give it up or I’ll whine,” she warned.

“Oh, sit down. I’ll tell you whatever you want, just don’t make that horrible sound. You know I can’t stand that,” Alexis said grumpily.

“Good. I want two,” Emily said, holding up as many fingers. When the pair of extra-big bars was set before her on beautiful pale green pottery, she grinned and took a huge bite. “So good! Now these bad dates— How bad could they have been?”

This time, Sherri and Alexis locked gazes and burst out laughing. When they could talk again, Sherri wiped her eyes with her napkin.

“They weren’t just bad, they were atrocious,” Sherri said. “If I hadn’t been an eyewitness to a couple of these so-called dates I would swear she’d been exaggerating, but I was there and I saw it all. It’s just ridiculous what passes for dating these days.”

“Sherri saw them? Were they double dates or something?” Emily’s face was alight with open curiosity.

Alexis sighed loudly. “These would have to fall into the ‘or something’ category. Sherri was my wingman a few times. She’d go with me and sit at another table in case things went south and they often did. Like with that jackleg preacher,” she said with a shudder.

“How did you meet him and what went wrong?”

“Are you sure you’ve got time to listen to this drivel? Because if I try to tell you about each one it could take all day,” Alexis warned.

“I’ve got plenty of time. Todd is with Mama, helping her to organize the rest of the things she wants to move to Chicago. Closing a house you’ve lived in as long as she lived there is more than a notion. He won’t mind if we take our time. He adores Momma and the feeling is quite mutual. They just love each other. So if you can find me something to put my chubby pregnant-lady feet on, I’m good to go. After I pee again,” she said thoughtfully. “I think they take turns jumping on my bladder. They must be boys because sweet little girls wouldn’t do that to their mommy.”

Sherri looked wise and shook her head gently as Emily went to the bathroom once again. “Sydney got in a few good kicks from time to time,” she said, referring to her little girl. “She liked music and she’d dance whenever she felt like it. She also seemed to respond to football games because she loved marching bands. If a game was on, she’d be marching along in my belly like a drum major. As you know, I was sure she was gonna be a total tomboy but she’s turning out to be a regular little princess. She still loves football, but only from the stands. Soccer and dance are her main interests for now. And yep, she used to tap dance on my bladder with great frequency.”

“You don’t have to remind me,” Alexis said. “We were with you every step of the way, if you recall.”

Emily came back into the kitchen in time to agree with Alexis's last statement. "Let's elevate my mother-to-be cankles, please. And then I want the real deal, no more stalling!" Emily said firmly.

"Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you, chick. These are some scary tales straight from the crypt of broken dreams. Don't blame me if you have bad dreams tonight."

After they retired to the comfortable living room and Emily's feet were propped on an ottoman, it was story time.

"I guess I should do this in chronological order," Alexis said thoughtfully. "That way you can see how my lovely hopes and dreams got smashed into bits on the ugly cliffs of reality."

Emily had to swallow a laugh. "You're still the queen of melodrama, aren't you?"

Sherri assured her that she was. "Some things never change."

"And you know this," Alexis said with a spot-on imitation of a royal wave. "Now, if you harpies would quit picking on me I'll tell Emily the sad tales of romance gone wrong. Sherri is my witness. I wasn't going anywhere alone with a strange man so I would have the guy meet me and Sherri would be there, too, discreetly, of course. Anyway, the first guy was a cousin of a very nice lady from my church. You know they always say that, when you want to meet someone, you should let your friends know so they can hook you up. And what's better than a church hookup, right? I was pretty sure that Mrs. Grice wouldn't introduce me to a serial killer, you know?"

“His name is Herbert and he’s a teacher. He’s also getting a degree in theology, or so he said. Not good-looking, not bad looking, just average. No real personality, but he was pleasant enough until he told me I was the darkest woman he’d ever dated. And how surprised he was at how pretty I am.”

Emily’s eyes got huge and her mouth fell open. “Girl, no he didn’t!”

“Oh, yes, he did. It was bad enough that he brought up the subject in the first place, but the dummy wouldn’t let it go. He kept talking about it like I was the eighth wonder of the world or something.”

Alexis was indeed the proud possessor of a complexion as dark as chocolate and as smooth as the finest silk. She was also extremely fashionable. She wore her glossy black hair in a short, chic style like Halle Berry’s and it showed off her features beautifully. Alexis wore sleek, contemporary clothes in dazzling colors that brought out her rich coloring and made her look like the best-dressed woman in any room she entered. To some, Sherri, Emily and Alexis made an odd-looking trio. Emily was tall and brown, Sherri even taller and very fair skinned and Alexis the shortest of the trio with her chocolate-brown complexion. She had a hard time getting her head around the concept of being color-struck but there were still folks who clung to the idea that lighter skin was more desirable. It was so silly to Alexis that she generally just ignored the idea and all it implied. When she did stumble over someone who voiced their preference in

pigmentation, it was like meeting someone who thought the earth was flat or who believed in alchemy. Alexis rarely encountered the outdated concept unless she was talking to someone who was really dense like Herbert.

Alexis could remember the exact moment when she knew Herbert was going to say something ignorant that would get him placed in her little red book of losers from which there was no hope of return. They met at the restaurant, which was his pick. It wasn't a four-star gourmet establishment, but it was nice enough for a first date, especially if the male wasn't foolish enough to expect after-dinner sex. That wasn't gonna be happening tonight or any other night, ever, no matter how needy she was. Alexis was her usual calm, reserved self, if she had to say so herself; she was ladylike and accepting of his humor; she contributed to the conversation in a friendly manner as long as it didn't veer into the ridiculous. When she caught him staring at her as if she possessed the secret location of the Holy Grail, she knew he was about to blurt out something she'd regret hearing and sure enough, he did.

"All the women I've ever dated have been either light skinned or very pale brown," he said.

Alexis wisely held her tongue because if she opened her mouth, she'd let go with a stream of vitriol that would land her on the local news at the very least, and quite possibly on the internet. Everybody had a cell phone these days; people who couldn't balance a checkbook knew how to upload scandalous videos to the web. Instead of lashing out at him, she adopted the expression

she used when dealing with social misfits like Herbert. It was a bland, patient expression that gave away nothing but covered a variety of unpleasant reactions. To Alexis's delight, a large piece of lettuce had lodged itself between his front teeth and she wasn't about to tell him. It was much too pleasurable to observe his stupid grin with the random bit of greenery adorning it. He just kept rattling on, unaware of the fury that was mounting across the table.

"I've never dated anyone who couldn't go to a paper bag party," he confided. "But you're so pretty, they'd have to let you in even though you're so dark. Your hair even looks good, but it would be better long. How come you don't get a weave?"

Emily's laugh was choked off by a gasp of horror. "Girl, no he didn't! What an idiot."

"That was the main reason, of course, but he also took my doggie bag," Alexis said dryly.

"He did what?" Emily stopped in the middle of wiping away tears of laughter to stare at Alexis.

"We went to that Chinese restaurant that serves those huge portions. There was enough food on my plate for three people at least. I couldn't eat it all and I asked for a to-go box. He promptly confiscated it and took it home with him!"

Emily looked totally stymied by this revelation. "Well, maybe he..."

"Don't try to make excuses for him. He actually said something about how he paid for it and he should be the one

to eat it. Sherri heard him because we were walking out to the parking lot and she was right behind us.

Sherri nodded her head vigorously. “Yes, he did, girl. He grabbed that thing like he had imminent domain or something. Latched on like there was a winning Powerball ticket in it and hurried to his car as if somebody was going to take it from him. But not before he tried to get a little sugar from the lovely Alexis.” Sherri tried not to laugh when she said it, but a few giggles crept out, anyway.

Emily made a face. “He tried to kiss you? Ewwww!”

Sherri couldn’t contain her laughter anymore. “He tried and succeeded, didn’t he?”

“He mumbled something about ‘gettin’ a little sugar from his sugar’ and before I could react his mouth was on me like a vacuum cleaner hose. I’m sure the memory of that impromptu embrace is going to haunt me for the rest of my days,” Alexis said glumly. She brightened up and added, “But he’s gonna remember it, too, because I kneed him right in his party favors. His little favors.”

Sherri was howling with mirth and Emily had joined her, but Alexis didn’t care at that point. It was a funny story, although it wasn’t a testimonial for dating in a modern world. After a few minutes, Alexis reminded Emily that she had more tales to share.

“Well, when the friends-and-family intro program didn’t bear fruit, we tried speed dating,” she reported.

Emily gave a Sherri a surprised look. “Sherri, you went speed

dating?”

“No, no, no! You know I’m not going to date until Sydney is at least fifteen. I don’t have the time or the inclination to try and incorporate a man into our lives right now,” Sherri said firmly. Sydney had just turned six and Sherri was determined not to complicate her child’s life with an entourage of strange men. Alexis often told her that a few dates were hardly a parade but Sherri wouldn’t change her mind.

“Sherri didn’t participate in the speed dating. She just dragged me there and loitered around until I had to bolt,” Alexis said. “And before you ask, yes, I absolutely had to get the hell out of there.” She shuddered theatrically as she thought about the night in question. The event was held on a Wednesday evening at a popular restaurant/nightclub. The tables were arranged so the aspiring daters could face each other. In Alexis’s mind it was sort of like what purgatory would resemble.

A couple of the men she talked to seemed nice, but they didn’t strike any chords with her. One man she recognized as the husband of one of her clients. He had no idea who she was, but she definitely knew him. There was no way in the world Alexis could face sitting across from him, so she kept a keen eye on his progress. The bell rang to signal it was time to change partners.

“So I’m barely over the fact that a married man had the gall to show up at a public affair for single people when another guy sat down. He was tall, dark and handsome, believe it or not, and he was in PR or something. We actually had a decent conversation

for about a minute until he said that he hoped I wasn't a democrat. That's when I noticed the little enamel Tea Party button on his lapel and I got up and walked out. I just couldn't deal with it," she said wearily. "Besides, if I'd stayed in my chair, my next 'prospect' would've been the married man."

Sherri and Emily knew how seriously Alexis took politics and infidelity so they didn't suggest that she had overreacted. Emily did have a question for her. "Have you ever thought about online dating?"

Alexis made a face. "Yes, I tried that, too. The results were less than stellar. I keep getting emails from boys who were too young and men who were too old. Lots of white men, for some reason. Why they found their way to a site called Mahogany Singles I don't know, but I was their pick of the week."

"Don't be so close-minded," Emily chided her. "Are you telling me you wouldn't date a man from another race?"

"Not if he's old enough to be my grandpa," Alexis replied. "I don't care about race. I just don't want to date senior citizens. If somebody bought me a Mercedes and it was blue instead of red, I certainly wouldn't hand back the keys," she said. "If a man has the right qualifications, who cares what color his wrapper is? I'm just not into antiques, that's all."

Sherri tried not to laugh but failed. "That is so wrong, Alexis! An older man might have a lot to offer. Wisdom, maturity, sophistication..."

"Age spots, wrinkles and a lifetime supply of Viagra," Alexis

cut in sarcastically. “If you’re interested, I have several you can email. One of them looks like he played backup for ZZ Top, except his beard is longer.”

They were all laughing when Todd Wainwright came to collect his beautiful bride. Todd seemed to be perfect for Emily in every possible way. He was tall, gorgeous, brainy and he adored her. He cherished her so much that it would have been sickening had it been anyone but Emily on the receiving end of all that love. Alexis felt as if her friend deserved every wonderful thing that had come into her life and she was really happy for the two of them. They chatted for a while, until Todd announced that Emily needed to relax before dinner.

“You ladies will have to come up to see us soon,” he said. “No more flying for her before the babies get here.”

Once upon a time Emily would have had a sarcastic remark to rebut a statement like that, but all she did was smile and agree. “We’re actually cutting it close,” she said. “This is the beginning of my last trimester. I’m due in August but with twins you never know.”

Alexis and Sherri walked the couple out to their car and waved them off. Sherri gave Alexis a one-armed hug and reminded her that she had to pick up Sydney from a play date. She got into her car and buckled her seat belt, but before she drove off, she had to drop some knowledge on Alexis.

“I just figured something out today, Lexie. The reason you’re meeting the wrong men is because you don’t know what you want

in the right man. You need to make a list of every single quality you desire and then you'll know him when he finds you," she said.

Alexis frowned. "A grocery list for a man? That doesn't sound very romantic. It sounds kind of desperate, actually."

"Not really. What happens when you go to the store without a list? You come home with everything except what you went to get. You have to know all the characteristics you're looking for in a man before you throw yourself into the mating pool. And I figured something else out today, too. You really don't want to date, you want to get married. You're looking for a husband, not a playmate. I could see it in your eyes when you were looking at Emily and Todd."

"No, I don't," Alexis sputtered.

"Yes, you do, and there's no reason why you shouldn't want to get married. You'd make a wonderful wife and mother. But in order to get that, you need to be very specific about the man you want to see first thing every morning. When you make that list, don't hold back. Include everything you can think of and then put one secret thing at the very bottom of the list. It has to be something that will truly touch your heart that no one else could ever guess. When you see that trait in a man, that's how you're gonna know he's your mate," Sherri said confidently.

"If you know so much about it, why aren't you hooked up? It seems to me that you're the one who should be on her way to married bliss, not me." Alexis was very fond of having the last word, but so was Sherri.

“Yes, but remember there’s one big difference between you and me, chick. I don’t want to get married. Go inside and start working on your list, I’ll call you later.”

Before Alexis could marshal up a reply, Sherri was backing down the driveway, waving merrily. All Alexis could do was stare at her friend with her hands on her hips and a little pout on her lips. She walked back into the house and poured the last of the lemonade over ice, deep in thought as she did so. She wasn’t completely sold on the idea of making a list, but she did go into her bedroom, taking out a pretty navy blue leather journal she’d bought a couple weeks ago. Armed with her glass and her notebook and a pen, she went to her deck and reclined on a chaise, sipping and thinking.

## Chapter 2

Despite Sherri’s insistence that a list would make things easier in the dating department, it only made things worse. Alexis dutifully wrote down all the characteristics she was looking for in a man. However comprehensive the list was, it wasn’t magic; even months later, the list didn’t cause Mr. Right to show up at her door. She was sticking to her resolution not to look anymore, but she hadn’t noticed a sudden influx of new men in her life. She told Emily so while they spoke via Skype that night. Emily was breast-feeding one of her sons and Alexis felt a pang in her own breasts as she watched. She was so fascinated that Emily had to call her name a couple times to reengage her in conversation.

“You aren’t listening to me, are you?”

“Not really,” Alexis admitted. “Where is Daniel?”

“I’m impressed. Most people can’t tell Randall from Daniel. Daniel has already dined and his loving daddy is changing him and putting him to bed. So tell me what happened with the dating thing? We talked about this back in June and here it is, almost Halloween and you’ve done basically nothing to improve your dating situation.”

“I told you I’m not on the hunt anymore. He’s going to find me and so far he’s taking his own sweet time.”

Emily was about to say something when Todd came into view to scoop up Randall. He was bare chested and wearing scrub pants and the look of love he gave Emily made Alexis’s heart turn over. After he greeted Alexis with a quick hello, he bent to kiss his wife and cradled their son on his shoulder, patting his little back to insure a good burp. Emily stared after him with the same besotted look in her eyes and Alexis suggested that they talk later, but Emily wanted more dating details.

“Emmie, there are no more details. I just haven’t had any social intercourse to speak of, really.”

“Wow. You made this decision way before the babies were born and now it’s the end of October. But I really do think it’s better to take your time than to mouse around with a slew of losers. Don’t worry. Your man is on his way, trust me.”

“He’d better get here soon because frankly I’m losing interest in the whole idea. I’m looking for a couple new spa locations, one in Hilton Head and one in Georgia. I’ve decided to be a tycoon.

I don't have to look for anyone or wait for anyone to do what I do best."

Emily sighed deeply and ran her fingers through her hair. "Don't give up on love, Alexis. There's someone out there for you, I know there is."

Todd returned to the bedroom and soft music started playing. He had a tray with two flutes of what looked like champagne and a plate with fruit and cheese. This time Alexis insisted that she had to leave and Todd gave her a grateful smile.

"I'm not giving up, Emmie. I'm just not looking anymore. If my Mr. Right is out there, he'll find me. Now it looks like your Mr. Right has some plans that don't include a third wheel so you go ahead with your evening and we'll visit again soon. Good night, you two." Before Emily could protest, Alexis got offline at once.

She stared at the computer screen and traced the outline of her lips several times, something she did when she was deep in thought. Without actually realizing what she was doing, she took out her navy journal and turned to the pages with her secret list. "Maybe I need to rethink this," she murmured as she picked up her pen.

\* \* \*

Now that her list was complete, it occupied a permanent corner of her mind. Given the time of year, it seemed like an early letter to Santa Claus. She was headed to work in her cute little MINI Cooper Countryman. She loved the little car with

its custom paint job; the roof was creamy ivory and the base was chocolate brown and it suited her perfectly. While she was fastening her seat belt, the list was still foremost in her mind and she started giggling at the Santa Claus idea. “Dear Santa, I’ve been a very good girl. Could you please bring me a burning-hot hunk of tall, dark-chocolate-colored love to have my way with on Christmas morning? I’ll be a very bad girl then, I promise.”

Alexis was still laughing out loud as she pulled into the parking lot of Sanctuary One, the first spa she’d opened five years before. When she crossed the employee entrance in the back of the spacious building, she was engulfed by the familiar scent of her home away from home. It was a combination of organic hair products, scented candles and the incense from the yoga studio. She inhaled deeply and smiled as she went to her small office to leave her purse and jacket. After she looked at her daily planner, she slipped on a fresh smock while she took off her taupe platform heels and put on her black wedges. They were just as high as her heels, but she’d learned the hard way not to wear light-colored shoes to work. One drop of tint was all it took to ruin an expensive pair of pumps. That was also why she protected her expensive clothes with a cover-up; one drip of peroxide or even permanent wave solution would wreck an outfit. This she knew from sad experience.

Alexis worked very few customers these days. Her emphasis was on managing the spas, not servicing customers. Hiring, training, managing the budget, advertising and other such

areas were her bailiwick now. Besides hairstylists, she had aestheticians, yoga and Pilates instructors, nail technicians and manicurists to manage, in two locations, no less. But there were a few clients she continued to work on mainly because they were close friends and they simply wouldn't allow anyone else to touch their heads. She also liked to keep her hand in the various offerings so that her skills would remain sharp. Emily's mother was one of those ladies she couldn't abandon and, since she was in town, of course she was getting the full treatment today.

The salon was laid out in such a way that each patron had the luxury of some privacy due to the half walls that separated the stations, yet it wasn't so closed off that they couldn't chat with one another. There was something about being in a hair salon that encouraged even the most reserved women to relax. There was always pleasant conversation to go along with the soothing jazz that played all day, except for the early afternoon when the soaps were played on the wall-mounted flat-screen televisions. Alexis was making her customary preopening walk-through to make sure that everything was in proper order. It was always pristine and perfect, a tribute to her management and to the loyalty of her staff. All Alexis had to do was start the coffee and the water for tea, and she really didn't have to do that because her lead stylist, Javier, was already taking care of that.

He greeted her with a raised eyebrow and a grin. "One of these days you'll let someone else do things around here and we're all going to pass out from shock," he said dryly.

Alexis pretended to misunderstand him. “Oh, then I shouldn’t have made those ultrarich brownies and pecan tassies last night? Well, shoot, I guess we don’t need them here. I can just drop them off at church for choir rehearsal, I guess.”

“Don’t pay me any attention, I’m still half asleep,” Javier said hastily. “Did you leave them in your office? I’ll just go back there and get them and you can arrange them any way you like. Just ignore me altogether. You know I don’t have good sense.”

Nothing could have been further from the truth, of course. Javier DeLaCruz was very smart as well as being very talented. He was also quite easy on the eye with smooth golden skin, jet-black hair and eyes and a smile that brightened any room. Alexis sized him up as he left the room. He was a devoted and trusted employee of several years and there was no reason not to consider promoting him to a management position. He had the experience and education and the right attitude. Alexis would be foolish not to offer him a better position with a higher salary; if she didn’t, he might leave and start his own salon. She was still mulling over that idea as she continued the opening procedure for the day.

One of the things that made Sanctuary so popular was the ultra-deluxe treatment of the clientele. Alexis always provided refreshments for her customers, hot coffee and tea along with fresh fruit and luscious baked goods that she often made herself. It was a practice that was as popular with the staff as with the customers, but there was no real need for her to make them herself. Alexis had a moment of clarity that told her she was

doing too much. It probably came from the gentle little dig Javier made about her doing everything around the place. His remark had merit, and she was going to give it serious thought when she got home that evening. She knew she worked too hard and too long, but the results were well worth it.

Sanctuary One was all about relaxation and nurturing. It was decorated in soothing peach and green with lots of live plants and specially designed lighting. Sanctuary Two was similar in design, but it was robin's-egg blue and chocolate-brown. She enjoyed the brief moment of calm before the doors opened; it always gave her a sense of accomplishment as well as inner peace, but it didn't last long. The salon came to life first, as usual. Early morning appointments were very popular especially toward the weekend. Alexis had to bite her lower lip as she noticed that her receptionist was once again late. Plus, she hadn't called in to let anyone know she was going to be tardy, which was a requirement of all employees. Here was another thing to put on Alexis's must-do list: a serious talk with a backsliding employee.

As usual, Alexis didn't let her annoyance show, she merely took over the desk, checking in customers and fielding calls until her appointment arrived and the missing receptionist showed up. Luckily the two events occurred at the same time. Ava, looking pretty and flustered, hurried into her seat at the reception counter with excuses pouring out of her mouth. All Alexis said was, "We'll talk about it later."

She turned her full attention to Lucie Porter, Emily's mother.

“Ms. Lucie, I have to say that Chicago agrees with you. As much as I miss seeing you when you’re away, I can tell that you’re really enjoying your new life in the Windy City.”

Lucie was a lovely woman and she did indeed show every indication of having a rich, fulfilling life. “I’m having a ball, Alexis. It’s wonderful being in the same city with my daughters and my grandchildren, but I’m also meeting some fabulous men,” she confided.

Alexis wasn’t really surprised to hear that. Lucie was pretty and vivacious and she attracted men in droves. She was a great dancer and Chicago was a dancing town. Sure enough, Lucie told her about a dance club she’d joined and how much fun it was. She also had new pictures of Emily and the twins, plus pictures of her other daughter, Ayanna, who had twin daughters and two teenage sons.

“They’re growing so fast, aren’t they? They’re so handsome,” Alexis praised. “Emily sounds so happy every time I talk to her.”

“She is,” Lucie confirmed. “Both of my girls are very happy with their husbands and their families. But truthfully, Alexis, I thought you’d be all married up and happy, too, by now. I expected you’d be married long before Emily,” she admitted. “What are you waiting for?”

Alexis covered her surprise at Lucie’s question by putting a terry wrap around her neck, followed by a pretty protective cape. “I think it’s time for a touch-up on your relaxer and a trim. And you’re overdue for some color, unless you’ve decided to leave it

au naturel.”

As she hoped, her words distracted the older woman. Lucie picked up a hand mirror and looked intently at her hair, particularly at the silvery strands that were beginning to surround her face. “Let’s leave the color alone for right now. I’ve started liking the silver, believe it or not. I have a friend in Chicago who has the most beautiful white hair you ever saw. It’s more like platinum, actually. By the way, she’s going to be down here in a few weeks. Would you mind taking her as a client? I know how busy you are.”

“Of course, Ms. Lucie, I’d be happy to. Any friend of yours is a welcome client of mine.”

“Wonderful! I’ll give her your card and let her know to call you. Her name is Vanessa Lomax and she’s a fascinating woman. I think you’ll like her.”

Lucie chatted happily while Alexis parted her hair, applied the protective base to her scalp and hairline and then carefully stroked on the cream relaxer to the new hair that had grown since then. After she smoothed the relaxer with the back of a wide-toothed comb and she could see that the hair was sufficiently relaxed, Alexis took Lucie to the shampoo area and made her comfortable before rinsing her hair thoroughly and washing it with neutralizing shampoo.

Lucie was perfectly content during the process. “Alexis, you have the most relaxing hands in the world. I have trouble staying awake when you start working on me,” she confessed.

“I have magic fingers,” Alexis said cheerfully. It was true, her customers always told her how sleepy they got as soon as her hands touched their heads. It was sometimes a problem when she was giving a haircut, especially to a man. It wasn’t too bad with Lucie; Alexis was used to doing Lucie’s long thick hair and the older woman’s silence gave her time to mull over what she’d said about Alexis being married with children. She was so far away from that territory she didn’t even know if she wanted to venture that direction. Maybe it was better if she stayed right where she was, doing what she knew best.

Her day ended long after it had begun, but Alexis was still wired up, and it wasn’t from too much coffee. It was part exhaustion and part frustration that was making her edgy. After the spa closed its doors that night, she had to have a talk with her almost-always-tardy receptionist. They had gone into Alexis’s office and Ava, the guilty party, started spouting off a long list of reasons why she was late. Unfortunately, she chose the one phrase that was guaranteed to drive Alexis batty.

“See, what had happened was...”

Alexis held up a hand and closed her eyes. Every time Ava started an explanation with “What had happened was,” the end result was usually an argument.

“Ava, stop. Let’s not go there, please. You have to get to work on time if you intend to keep this job. Any job, as a matter of fact. You can’t expect your employer to fill in for you when you can’t manage to get to work on time. You’re way too casual about

punctuality which is why you've lost so many jobs in the past.”

A glimmer of panic went across Ava's pretty face. “You can't fire me. You told Mama you'd give me a job until I went back to school.”

Alexis squeezed her eyes shut before opening them slowly. “Don't play the baby-sister card, Ava. It's only because you are my sister that I haven't bounced you out of here on your fanny. You have a lot going for yourself, kid. You're good-looking, you're smart and talented. Why you can't seem to pull yourself together and do something with all the gifts God gave you, I just don't know. But you need to stop playing the victim and start living up to your potential. Start with something small, like getting to work on time,” she said pointedly, “then work your way up.”

As usual, Ava didn't seem to absorb anything that Alexis was saying. Her next words were proof of that. “Can I move in with you? Mama is driving me crazy.”

“You know, doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result is the definition of insanity,” Alexis said as she picked up her purse and set the alarm. “You keep asking me that question and the answer is always the same. No, you can't move in with me. And from what I hear, you're giving as good as you're getting in the crazy department. Mama isn't thrilled with you, either. I'll give you a ride home, but I'm not putting a roof over your head. Let's go.”

“Can I have that purse?” Ava, having ignored all the advice her

sister doled out, was on to the next thing, in this case, a fabulous Louis Vuitton bag she'd coveted for some time.

"Don't beg, it'll make people hate you," Alexis advised as she turned into the driveway of her mother's pretty brick home.

"I'm not begging, I just want to borrow it," Ava whined.

"You don't have to borrow it. You can have one just like it when you finish school and get a good job. Until then, Payless is having a BOGO. Tell Mama I'll call her after my book club."

"Book club, swim class, work, aerobics classes, my God, do you ever just sit your butt down and do nothing?" Ava got out of the car and slammed the door a little too hard for Alexis's taste.

"I'll have plenty of time for that when I'm dead. Slam my door again and you'll be walking home from now on, heifer."

\* \* \*

The rain was pouring by the time Alexis left her book club meeting. She didn't mind, she was used to driving in the rain, even a downpour like this one. The meeting had been stimulating and enjoyable as always, even though the book wasn't her favorite genre. The books were funny and well written, but nothing Alexis could fantasize about. There was no way she could hook up with a vampire. It made her shudder to think about it. The idea of cold skin next to hers was daunting and the thought of somebody sucking blood out of her body was... A sudden thud made her snap back to reality. She stopped the car and checked all the dashboard lights to see if there was something internal going on with her vehicle. Finally she bowed to the inevitable and got out

of the car with her little pink flashlight.

Damn, damn, damn. A flat friggin' tire! She hopped back in and reached for her cell phone. She hit the speed dial for AAA and waited to get through to a human. An eerily bright blaze of lightning preceded an unnaturally loud crash and her head almost hit her roof when a huge branch fell down in a shower of sparks, barely missing her hood. Crap. If it was like this all over Columbia, it could be quite a while before she got help. Alexis patted her chest in the vicinity where she imagined her heart was. She was normally quite calm, but the past few minutes had her really unnerved. That's why she screamed when she heard the tap at her window. Of course, when she saw a pale face with deep-set pale eyes and stringy wet hair she yelped again. "A vampire!"

The man looked puzzled and touched his ear to indicate that he couldn't hear her, thank God. She didn't need him thinking she was crazy; he looked nutty enough for both of them. She let the window down a bit so that she could talk to him, but she prudently locked the doors as she did so.

"Umm, yes, did you need something?"

He smiled a crooked, surprisingly sexy smile that did funny things to her while she tried to compose herself.

"I think you need something," he said. "I can see that you have a really flat tire and I can change it for you if you will open your hatch."

Okay, that wasn't what she was expecting. "Thanks, but AAA is on their way. I'm fine."

“Well, they’re likely to be a while with the weather and all. I can get you up and running in about fifteen minutes,” he offered.

Nice. The stranger outside her door was certainly a rock and the flat tire was definitely a hard place. This was how people ended up on those true-crime shows, accepting help from a stranger. He said he wanted to help her but he could probably gut her like a fish and string her entrails on the fallen branch in the road.

“No, really, I’m fine,” she insisted. “Thanks for the offer, but I’m sure they’ll be along in a few.”

“Listen, I understand you not wanting to trust a man you’ve never met before. I have two sisters and you’re doing exactly what I’ve told them to do. Tell you what. I’ll just wait in my car until they get here so that no one bothers you, okay? I’m behind you and I’ll stay there until your help arrives.”

Alexis mumbled her thanks and put up the window while she tried to call her big sister. Alana was the owner and operator of Custom Classics, the best auto repair and remodeling shop in Columbia and if AAA couldn’t make it, Alana could come get her in ten minutes. She hated bothering her sister, but sitting on a dark street with a wet weirdo behind her was just not a plan. Unfortunately, Alana didn’t answer her phone. She tried her house, her cell and her office to no avail. Crap. She’d just have to wait it out. Her heart rate had completely slowed back to its normal rate and she was now calm enough to rummage around the car to find something sharp and potentially lethal just in case

she had to defend herself.

The rain showed no signs of letting up and the thunder and lightning continued, accompanied by winds strong enough to blow down more branches around her. A particularly strong burst dropped another huge branch, along with a power line—complete with scary sparks that flew in all directions. Lovely. After that display, the stranger returned with a determined expression.

She cracked open the window again and before she could speak, he delivered a speech he'd apparently practiced.

"I know you don't know me well, but I promise you I only want to help you." He held out his cell phone to her as he continued to talk. "My name is Jared VanBuren and I have the police on the line so that they can hear everything that's going on. I explained the situation to them and they're willing to listen in so that, if anything goes wrong, they'll be here in like five minutes to arrest me and save you. Go ahead, talk to the dispatcher, he's waiting."

Alexis stared at the phone, and then directed her wide eyes to the tall, soaking-wet man who looked less like a vamp now. He looked more like a Samaritan. She took a deep breath and put the cell phone to her ear. This was turning into the strangest day she could ever remember and she knew without being told that she wouldn't forget it any time soon.

### Chapter 3

Alexis was feeling slightly silly for her distrust, but only a little. She talked to the dispatcher and was fairly sure of two

things when she finished. One was that the police knew where she was in case things got weird, and the other was that this Jared VanBuren wasn't going to do anything to her that would end up on the late news. She was actually feeling grateful to her Samaritan for his insistence on doing a good deed. It had been over ninety minutes since she'd called AAA and a tow truck had yet to materialize, but Jared, bless his heart, had attended to her tire with speed and skill. The rain hadn't let up and she'd tried to keep him from drowning by holding her snazzy leopard-print Christian Dior umbrella over him as he worked, but he'd refused.

"Look, I can't get any wetter than I already am, so you just sit in the car until I'm done. Better yet, get in my car so we don't have to worry about the jack falling or anything." He guided her to his Range Rover and helped her in, a nice touch considering the circumstances. Alexis had a real thing for a man with nice manners. She appreciated the dry interior of the luxury vehicle as she inspected the SUV. It was very clean and tidy, except for some papers in a folder on the dashboard. Nosy as she was, she was dying to look through them, but she restrained herself. She did wonder what Seven-Seventeen meant, though; she saw the words on the folder and tried to figure out what they signified.

Suddenly all her attention was focused on her car and the man fixing it. Jared let out a yell that scared her half to death and she scrambled from the Range Rover to see what had happened. She was greeted by Jared holding his arm, his very bloody arm.

"Heavenly Father, what happened?"

“The jack slipped when I was taking it off. It’s nothing,” Jared assured her.

Alexis took one look and disagreed vigorously. “That doesn’t look like nothing to me, far from it. I’m taking you to the emergency room.”

Ignoring his protests, she reached into the hatch and came up with a brand-new package of chocolate-brown towels intended for Sanctuary Two. Luckily she’d just gotten a shipment that afternoon. Quick as a cat she wrapped his forearm tightly a few inches above the cut and told him to keep his arm up. It was obvious they couldn’t drive her car because it was blocked by the fallen tree limbs. She wasn’t too sure about driving his gigantic Rover, but a police cruiser showed up just then and the problem was solved. Alexis didn’t have to explain much after the officer saw Jared’s condition and before he could insist it wasn’t necessary, they were all on their way to the nearest emergency room.

Alexis didn’t even blink at going into the E.R. with Jared. She hated hospitals, but he’d gotten injured on her behalf, so she felt as if she owed him. It wasn’t crowded, thank goodness, and the blood that was flowing freely from Jared’s arm had him in an examining room in no time. The nurse who got him situated informed Alexis that she could wait in the lobby but Jared protested.

“Family only, sir. She’ll be right out there in the waiting room.” The nurse was an attractive black woman in her forties

and she was polite but professional and firm.

“She’s my fiancée,” Jared said calmly. “She’s the closest thing I’ve got to family and I’d feel much better if she could stay.”

The older woman, whose name tag read Honor Jackson, didn’t blink an eye. “In that case, she’s welcome to stay. Why don’t you take that chair while I get Mr. VanBuren ready for the doctor?”

After Mrs. Jackson situated Jared on the examining table and set up a tray with the instruments needed to suture the wound, she slipped out to fetch the doctor. Alexis had a chance to really look at her “fiancé” and she had to admit that he was a fine specimen of man. He was about six-five with blond hair, high cheekbones, a deep cleft in his chin and deep-set eyes that were a striking shade of blue. No, gray. Or were they green? Whatever color they were, they were mesmerizing. And he had a body that wouldn’t quit, she could see that quite plainly since Mrs. Jackson had helped him remove his shirt so it wouldn’t get cut off when the doctor started working on him. She was rather glad the shirt had come off because he had a spectacular torso; long and lean with smooth perfect muscles. Her eyes were so busy assessing his biceps and his abs that when he spoke it startled her.

“Hope you didn’t mind that fiancée thing. I just wanted company,” he admitted.

His voice was mellow and soothing like cognac on a cold night. To her surprise she wasn’t upset about his ruse. On the contrary, it seemed kind of sweet. Besides, to her mind it was her fault he was injured.

“No, I don’t mind. Of course, I’m going to hold you to it,” she said with a mischievous smile. “I’m expecting a ring before Christmas.”

His eyes widened with mirth and they laughed together. “As you wish. Big or huge?”

“The ring? Gigantic, in case I have to pawn it.”

He had a good sense of humor because he laughed again. They were still laughing when the doctor came in to inspect the wound. His name was Dr. Patil and he was the real down-to-earth type as he proved with his first words.

“That’s nasty. Looks like you nicked an artery in there,” he said as though it was the most normal thing in the world. “Hope you don’t do a lot of manual labor because you’ll need to take it easy for a few days. You’re going to have a lot of stitches.”

Alexis felt her stomach turn over. She really hated hospitals, doctors’ offices, blood, gore and anything close to it. And she’d feel really awful if he had to take sick leave from his job.

Jared just shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m opening a couple restaurants and it’ll be a few weeks before I have to actually do anything in the kitchen. I’ll be fine.”

Dr. Patil was busy cleaning the wound. “So you’re a restaurateur. Is this your first one?”

Jared winced as the doctor gave him a shot to numb the area in preparation for the sutures. “I have six. When these are finished, I’ll have eight, maybe nine because I’m thinking about putting one on Hilton Head.”

He winced again as Dr. Patil put another shot in the same area. “This is the worst part,” the doctor assured him. “In about ten minutes I’m going to stitch you up and you won’t feel a thing. Your fiancée can hold your hand and it’ll be over before you know it.”

As if she didn’t have any control over her movements, Alexis went to his bedside and took his free hand, holding it tightly as though she’d been doing it forever. Jared gave her a wicked wink and kissed the hand that clasped his.

“That’s it, baby. I feel better already.” His hand tightened on hers slightly and he looked at her intently. “God, you’re pretty. You’re absolutely beautiful, I hope you know that.”

Normally Alexis would have jerked away her hand and left the room, but she went along with it and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “I’m going to get you back,” she warned him in a whisper.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” he murmured with an even sexier smile.

\* \* \*

In a few hours, Alexis found herself on the receiving end of an inquisition. She was finally at home, facing both her sister and Sherri. Her car was safely home, too, thanks to Alana. She’d listened to her voice mails and had come to the rescue. The fallen tree limbs had been moved so that the car could be driven away, so she arrived at the hospital in time to see Alexis emerging from the emergency room entrance with a tall, gorgeous blond man in

a wheelchair. Alana's calm demeanor didn't slip a bit, even when the man was referred to as Alexis's fiancé. She merely raised an eyebrow when Alexis informed her that the man, Jared, was going to need a ride home because he'd been given a painkiller that made it impossible for him to drive.

Sherri had also showed up at that point and after a short discussion, it was decided that Sherri and Alexis would take Jared to his rented loft and that Alana would meet them afterward at Alexis's house. Alexis was all too keenly aware that Alana was killing herself not to laugh at the situation, especially after Jared grandly informed her that he was looking forward to having her as a sister-in-law. Sherri drove to Jared's building and it took both her and Alexis to help him to the elevator and into the big, barely furnished loft. It would have been a clean escape for the two women had it not been for Jared's kamikaze-like move that resulted in Alexis getting a good-night kiss from him.

"You saved my life," he informed her with a goofy grin. "That means I belong to you now."

"Jared, tomorrow morning, when the medication wears off, you're going to have a totally different perspective on this." Alexis was trying to be pragmatic and logical, but he looked so sweet and charming that it was difficult.

"Nope. I know what I know and I know that you're mine." And before she could utter another word, he planted a big, delicious kiss on her surprised lips.

"Jared, you must lay down. Your prescriptions are right next

to the bed and I put a big glass of water there for you. If you get dizzy or nauseous, call the E.R. or call me. I left my number there, too,” Sherri said in her most professional doctor voice.

“I just need Alexis’s number. We’re getting married, you know.”

“So I’ve heard,” Sherri said cheerfully.

Alexis had reached her limit. She made her small hand into a gun and pointed the forefinger at her temple, silently mouthing the word BOOM. She took one of Jared’s long arms and Sherri took the other and they walked him over to his bed.

“Go to sleep or the engagement is off. Call me in the morning and I’ll come take you to your car. Where are your pajamas?” She looked around in vain for anything that resembled sleepwear.

“I sleep au naturel. Wanna see?”

“Sherri, what the hell did they give him? Is he ever going to recover or is he just crazy?”

Jared was finally lying across the bed and looked as if he was about to nod off. Sherri was biting her lip to keep the laughter that was building up inside her to a minimum.

“He’ll be fine. Some people just react very strongly to those kinds of meds. We’ll leave the light on for him and you can check on him tomorrow. Now, let’s get out of here and get you home. You got some serious splainin’ to do, sister.”

And that’s how Alexis found herself seated across the table from her sister and her best friend, recreating the evening’s events. They were deriving a great deal of enjoyment from her

explanation and Alexis had to admit that it was pretty funny when she told them how it came to be.

“I left the book club and I was thinking about the book we’d discussed when I got a flat. The lightning and thunder didn’t bother me, but that nasty slap-slap-slap noise a flat makes scared the crap out of me. I called AAA, then I tried to call Alana, but I couldn’t get you. So I was ready to wait it out and I was wondering how a sane woman could get hooked up with a vampire and then Jared tapped at my window and I screamed ‘Vampire!’ because that’s the first thing that popped in my head.”

Alana couldn’t hold it in anymore. She started laughing and it didn’t look as if she was going to ever stop. All of the Sharp women looked somewhat alike; slender with perfect cocoa-colored complexions and beautiful teeth. Alana’s hair was longer than Alexis’s. It was shoulder length and she often wore it in a ponytail to keep auto paint, grease and other kinds of soil out of it. She not only owned Custom Creative, she worked there everyday. No one looked less like a mechanic than Alana, but no one was better at her craft.

“You called him a vampire? Oh, that’s too much!”

“He looked like a vamp, thank you very much! He was all wet and his eyes were all funny looking and he’s so pale he glowed in the dark! Yeah, I called him a vampire! We had just been discussing *Dead to the World* and it hit home, that’s all.”

Sherri had to get her two cents in at that point. “He didn’t look wet and drippy when I met him. He looked a little ruffled, but

that man is really handsome! He couldn't keep his eyes or his hands off you, Alexis. So are you going to date him or what?"

Alana laughed again and the sound was beginning to grate on Alexis's nerves. "They don't have to date, they're engaged, remember? He kept calling her his fiancée and told me he couldn't wait to be my brother-in-law," she said with an evil grin.

"I told you, he said that so I could stay in the examining room with him. He wasn't serious. It was just a little joke between us that got a little out of hand when that pain medicine kicked in. In any case, I'm going to call him in the morning and get him to his car, if necessary, and that's that."

Alexis left her seat and began taking off her nasty, bloody clothes right there in the kitchen. "I should send him the bill for dry cleaning this outfit, but he did change my tire so I'm going to let it slide. But no, we won't be going out. He's not my type."

Alana's phone went off and she answered it as she walked to the living room, leaving Sherri and Alexis alone. "How do you know he's not your type?"

"I just do, that's all. He's not attractive to me," she said firmly.

"You need to pull out the list and see how many of your desired characteristics match his personality. You might be surprised."

Alexis ignored her and went to her bathroom to get the robe that was hanging from the hook on the door. "Sherri, I love you and I love my sister but you are both dead wrong about this. Jared VanBuren seems to be a nice man, but he's not the one. Nope.

Now, while you pick up Sydney from wherever you stashed her to come rescue me, I'm going to take a shower. And tell my big sister to go home and read *Car and Driver* or whatever she does at night. Thanks to both of you but I've had a hell of a day."

Sherri wasn't that easy to dismiss; she had to have the last word. "After you get out of the shower, make sure you take a look at your list before you decide Jared isn't the man for you. That's all I ask, just take a look."

"Yeah, right, whatever. I'll get right on it."

#### Chapter 4

The morning after his adventure with Alexis, Jared woke in a great mood. His forearm still ached after getting the stitches, but as injuries went, it wasn't too bad. He'd gotten many worse injuries in the restaurant business, other cuts and burns that required trips to the E.R., but none had resulted in meeting a woman like Alexis. He stretched lazily under the sheet that covered him and smiled. He was enjoying the feeling of his morning arousal as much as the memory of kissing her. She probably thought he was crazy, but that was okay. He'd exaggerated the effects of the painkiller slightly, but it was so he could get her guard down and make her feel at ease with him.

Alexis Sharp was gorgeous, funny and sexy, and he was going to get to know her better while he was in Columbia. He was going to be living here on and off for months, until his two newest restaurants were up and running and he saw no reason to go without companionship for the duration. The restaurant

business could be grueling, especially if you were the executive chef and owner. He was lucky that he had good business partners. His brothers Lucas and Damon and his best friend, Roland, were excellent partners which is why their empire was growing so rapidly. They were aiming for steady, sustained growth as opposed to flooding the market with a bunch of quasi-gourmet-of-the-month franchise eateries. His dream was unfolding as he desired, but a lot of personal sacrifice was involved, as well occasional inconveniences.

He'd planned on opening a restaurant here months ago, but he couldn't find a property to his liking so he had to build from the ground up. He also couldn't locate the right equipment for the kitchen, so construction was currently held up while he waited for the delivery of the custom ovens and cooktops from England. It was a pain in the behind, but it gave him time to search out Hilton Head Island for a potential spot and better yet, it would also allow him time to get to know Alexis better. That chocolate-colored skin, those flashing eyes, her luscious lips... He groaned and stretched again. She was a great kisser. Kissing her could be a part-time job as far as he was concerned.

He smiled again when he heard "Soulful Strut" by Young-Holt Unlimited playing; it was the ring tone he'd chosen for his phone. The smile got bigger when he looked at the caller ID and saw it was Alexis calling. "Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

A slight pause let him know that he'd caught her off guard. "Actually, I did sleep well. And you?"

“I was drugged into oblivion, thanks. I owe you another thanks for dragging my lanky self home. Most people would have left me in the emergency room to fend for myself.”

He could almost feel her smile over the phone. “I’m not most people, I’m special. Besides, I’m in your debt. You rescued me and got injured and I felt responsible. In fact, I should probably pay your hospital bill.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Don’t be silly. You owe me nothing. Besides, I have insurance. What I could use, however, is some assistance getting the Rover back home.”

He was so enthralled with the sound of her voice that he barely listened to her reply. Her voice was velvety and rich like chocolate ganache. It had a low, sexy pitch and he wondered if she sang. She had to; just hearing her talk was like listening to a song. He was so caught up in his enjoyment of her sultry tone that he had to yank himself back into the moment when she repeated a question.

“Sure, yes, I can be ready. You really don’t mind coming to pick me up?”

“Not at all. I’ll be there in about thirty minutes, is that okay?”

“Perfect. See you soon.”

Now he was totally energized. He got out of bed and went to the kitchen for plastic wrap to cover his bandaged arm so he could shower. His habit was to do as much as possible in the shower to save time and water, so he brushed his teeth, shaved and bathed, emerging from the huge stall clean and cheerful. He

dressed quickly, in jeans, a chambray shirt that was so old it was more white than blue and a pair of Crocs. They weren't the most attractive shoes in the world, but for someone who was on his feet most of the day, they were lifesavers. He combed his blond hair and thought about getting a haircut. It was down to his shoulders and it didn't bother him, but it drove his mother nuts. Her current aim in life was to get him married and she was sure that his hair was sending out the wrong message. He could hear her words as clearly as if she was in the room with him. "Sweetheart, I think you need to cut that hair. You'd look much sexier and sophisticated with a really good cut. How are you going to meet the right woman looking like a scruffy line cook?"

His eyes crinkled in a smile. His mother never bit her tongue when it came to expressing her opinion on anything, especially when it came to marrying off her oldest son. He ran his hand through the long, drying strands and shrugged. Since he wasn't trying to land a wife, he saw no reason to worry about the length or style of his hair.

Turning on his iPod, he glanced at the clock on the docking station and decided that he had enough time to make Alexis something delicious for breakfast. There was no point in being a Cordon Bleu-trained chef if he couldn't impress a beautiful woman with an impromptu repast. He set to work, getting out the ingredients for biscuits, sausage and omelets. The *mise en place* was critical to any good cook; having everything at one's

fingertips made the process of meal preparation much easier.

A knock on the door surprised him. Surely that couldn't be Alexis already? He didn't know any prompt women other than his mother and his two sisters. He thought that timeliness was a genetic trait because he'd never witnessed it outside his family. He answered the door and there was Alexis, fresh and sweet-smelling like a spring flower. He was so taken with the sight of her that he almost forgot to say hello, but his innate good manners kicked in.

“Good morning, Alexis. You look absolutely beautiful.”

She was wearing a short trench coat in a soft gray color and under it he could see something in a tangerine color that made her complexion glow. Her hair was sleek and glossy and she had three earrings in each ear, a tiny gold post and two small gold hoops. She smiled at him and remarked that he used the word beautiful a lot.

“Only when it's appropriate, as it is now.” He held out his hand to her and led her into the large room that comprised the main living space of the loft. “Please come in and let me take your coat. Since you were nice enough to help me reclaim my car, I thought a little breakfast was in order.”

Alexis looked as if she was about to refuse but the smell of the coffee coming from the kitchen area was too enticing. “That's right. You told Dr. Patil that you were opening a restaurant. You made breakfast for me?”

“I'm just getting started. Can you stay or do you need to go

to work or something?”

“Actually, I took the morning off. And I love to eat, so you may be creating a monster here. All I ask is that you let me watch. I like to cook,” she confided. “Any time I can pick up some techniques from a pro is a good time for me.”

Jared helped her remove her coat and felt a tremor of arousal as he saw that the tangerine color was a soft, thin tunic sweater that wrapped around her slender frame like a lover’s caress. Her slim-fitting black jeans made her butt look spectacular and he had a hard time taking his gaze away from her. After he hung up her coat, he took her hand again and walked her to the kitchen area. He was pleased to see her eyes light up as she observed his array of utensils and ingredients. She went to the sink and washed her hands thoroughly.

“Mise en place before anything else? That’s the way I try to do it. Not just because I’ve read about it so often, but because if I don’t, things get a little catastrophic,” she admitted.

“Then you have good basic skills. That’s one of the first things you learn in culinary school.” Jared rummaged around in a small closet and emerged with a big white chef’s apron which he proceeded to put on Alexis. It covered her entire front and almost came down to her ankles.

“I don’t want anything to happen to that beautiful sweater. The color is fantastic on you, by the way.”

Alexis laughed softly. “You could bottle that charm and make some serious cash,” she teased him. “So what are you fixing

today?”

“I’d planned on omelets with sausage, sweet potato hash, biscuits and peach preserves. How does that sound?”

“It sounds fabulous. What do we do first?”

“First we make the sausage. I normally make links but I haven’t found a supplier for the casings I like, so I’m going to make little patties. I hope you like salmon.”

Her eyes widened. “My absolute favorite. I’ve never had salmon sausage before.”

“I like to make home-style food. I’m not too crazy about trendy food and weird ingredients. My aim is to make the best American-style food with the freshest ingredients possible. I make several different kinds of fish sausages, as well as chicken and turkey.”

Alexis looked mesmerized as she carefully watched everything he was doing. His knife skills were amazing. Alexis was pretty good with a knife, but compared to Jared, she was a rank amateur. “Where did you study cooking?”

“After I graduated from Indiana University, I went to Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. I’d made a deal with my parents. If I finished my business degree and I still had a passion for cooking, they’d pay for me to go to Cordon Bleu, since I was nice enough to get a full scholarship for undergrad. I’ve always known I wanted to be a chef, but Pop wanted to make sure I could do it right as far as the business side was concerned.”

“What does your dad do?” Alexis asked curiously.

“Pop is chief of surgery at John Stroger Hospital in Chicago. My mom is an educator in sociology. You would think that they’d discourage a nonacademic pursuit, especially for the oldest son, but they’re not like that. They always encouraged us to follow our passions and it’s worked out for each of us. I have two sisters and two brothers and we’re pretty diverse, but we’re all happy. Do you want to make the patties while I start the hash?”

“Oh, absolutely! But I want to watch you make the hash, too. I’ve never had it before. You’re very creative with ingredients, aren’t you? When did you get the urge to cook?”

“Watching my mother and my grandmother. Pop wasn’t much of a cook, but my mom could throw down in the kitchen. In everything, actually, she’s an amazing woman. When her mother came to live with us, I saw where she got it from because my gran is like a magician in the kitchen. So that’s where I got started.”

They continued to talk and prepare the meal together and the time just flew. In less than an hour they were seated at the breakfast bar, dining on Jared’s amazing menu of plump, fluffy omelets with shallots, red peppers, spinach and Parmigiana-Reggiano cheese with smoked salmon, a delicious hash of sweet potatoes, fingerling potatoes and more shallots with Granny Smith apples and a bit of cream. The salmon sausages were bright with flavor and his biscuits were so light they melted on the tongue. Jared loved watching Alexis eat. Her obvious enjoyment of everything was turning him on to an amazing extent. He was far too used to women who picked over their food or followed

some strange diet that prevented them from partaking in a good meal without a running commentary on how many calories and carbs they were ingesting. Alexis certainly wasn't cut from that cloth.

“You know, all we've done is talk about me. Now we're going to talk about you,” he said firmly. “What kind of work do you do?”

Alexis took a sip of her excellent coffee and sighed with repletion. “I should be a competitive eater because I do love good food. I own two spa salons here in Columbia, Sanctuary One and Two.”

“And how did you decide to go into the beauty business?”

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.