

Dedicated to all victims who have not survived abuse and obsessive relationships and to those who survived.

CHAPTER 1

Chance Encounter

Crystal Reed waited for her latte to be ready with no clue that her life was about to take a perilous turn. She was so lost in thought, the barista had to call her name twice.

She stirred cream into her coffee, then meandered toward the seating area with her head down. Not paying much attention to where she was going, she almost collided with a strikingly handsome man. When Crystal looked into his piercing blue eyes she felt a shiver run down her spine. The stranger had an air of mystery and allure she couldn't ignore.

"Hey, it's a good thing you had a lid on your coffee. I would have hated to see it damage your outfit, or worse yet burn you."

Even his voice was wonderful.

It took a moment for her to be able to answer. Even then she was nervous, which was strange because her friends always said she was totally together—unflappable. But not at that moment. "Um, yes, I guess I was lucky," she managed to say.

"I'm the one who's lucky. Say, it's pretty crowded, but there's a table over there," he said. "Would you like to share it with me. That way I can get acquainted with the beautiful woman who almost knocked me over."

Even though their eyes only locked for a fleeting moment, the intensity those eyes projected was enough to spark a strange connection. She actually felt a magnetic pull that drew her closer to this stranger. Somehow she couldn't resist taking a step toward him although she was not the type of person who looked for casual hookups.

At that very moment a sequence of events was set in motion that would affect their lives in ways Crystal could have never foreseen. *Did the universe conspire? Was bumping into this stranger destiny's grand design?* The only thing she knew at the moment was that he was devastatingly handsome, gave off an irresistible charisma and her heart felt like it was about to jump out of her chest.

They made their way to a table in the corner. This was about as much serendipity as

any single thirtyish woman could hope for.

He stretched his long legs and settled into the chair opposite her. "Let's start with introductions. I'm Mark Hunter, fairly new to LA, and I'm very happy to meet you."

She extended her hand across the small table for a friendly shake. "Well, I'm Crystal Reed, native Angeleno, and if there isn't a significant other I'd be happy to show you around."

Crystal thought that was a clever way to find out if he was attached. As it turned out, he wasn't.

Their conversation flowed effortlessly, and it felt as if they had known each other for years. She was keenly aware of an undercurrent of excitement and intrigue, like two puzzle pieces finally finding their perfect match.

Crystal had no way of sensing Mark's hidden darkness. Subtle hints of possessiveness and obsession simmered beneath the charming exterior, but had not yet surfaced. Little did she know that this seemingly innocent meeting would lead her down a treacherous path—one that would challenge everything she thought she knew about love and the human psyche.

Until that day there was nothing remarkable in Crystal's existence. True, she had once been engaged a few years before, but got cold feet at the last minute when she pictured herself locked into a marriage to an average-looking guy with a dull job and almost as dull a personality. At first she had said yes when he asked her to marry him because of that conditioned feeling about not becoming what used to be called an old maid. There were no interesting guys on the horizon at that time, but Crystal realized she was not quite ready to settle. A little voice deep down kept telling her not to do it. She finally listened and broke off the engagement. Since then, she had gone on some dates, but nothing or no one special.

Meeting Mark in this chance encounter was exciting, and she wanted more. When he asked to see her again she was elated. Forgotten was the boring day, the predictable job, and the exhaustion she felt as she waited in line for her latte.

As if responding to her thoughts, he said, "I would love to see you again. I have to leave now because I'm already late for an important meeting."

He held out his phone and punched the contacts button. "If you will give me your number and your full name, I'll call you when I know my schedule."

She quickly keyed in her number and handed the phone back to him.

As the door closed behind him, she wondered if he would call, or if it was just an

excuse to leave.

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