

Dating in the Desert  
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Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction.

## Chapter 1

Steve Campbell walked into the hotel and was immediately taken aback with all the pink streamers and heart-shaped balloons. His first thought was that two people had found true love and the hotel was decorated for their wedding reception. Then he spotted the banner announcing the 17th annual romance writer's convention. He shook his head and exhaled a soft "Oh my god," under his breath. He really couldn't believe women still read those kinds of books. It was so contradictory to everything he'd been experiencing since his divorce a few years ago. He couldn't complain though. It seemed every woman he met seemed perfectly content to just jump into bed with him with no strings attached. Before he got married, there was the three-date rule: you had to take a woman out three times (actual dates) before she'd have sex with you. Now, he just had to go online and ask a woman to meet him for coffee and he had someone ready to jump in the sack.

Of course, he did remember what it had been like to be in love and get married. But then he also remembered the pain of betrayal and divorce. Because of that, he vowed to never let himself get close to someone again. When he first got divorced, he hated the idea of going *back out there*. After the first couple of online dates when he realized how easy it was for him now, he had to admit he loved the world he found himself in. If this was how it was going to be for him, then he was perfectly content to stay in this world forever with no attachments.

Imagine his luck that this hotel was swarming with women! He got lucky that his marketing assistant set him up here. Then again, knowing Josie, she probably knew a romance writer's convention was going on here. Of all the hotels in Savannah and she picked this one. In fact, she probably thought it was one big joke -- putting him up in a hotel with hundreds of women who believed in true love, living happily-ever-after, and all that nonsense. Well, this would suit him just fine. It just meant hundreds of vulnerable, sappy women who would believe anything he said. It was going to be one fun night! He scouted the lobby to see who he could chat up. His eyes settled on a sophisticated, petite brunette sitting in a quiet corner. She had that long wavy hair, classic black dress that accentuated her curves, and killer legs in sexy high heels. He could never resist a good set of legs! There was an open seat beside her. Either she was waiting for someone or, if not, then he had the perfect opportunity to make his move.

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The waiter had just come by to take her drink order when she saw what was probably the only man staying at this hotel. Boy, he was gorgeous, she thought. She could tell from where she was sitting that he had the look that she loved -- tall, broad shoulders, dark hair, and chiseled jaw. She loved to admire good-looking men from afar. Truthfully, that's where she liked them -- far away. For the past year since she had stopped dating, she had kept men at arm's length. She had learned that she loved the attention, the compliments, and how they chased her because she simply wasn't interested. The more she said 'no', the more they pursued. She then got the satisfaction of shooting them down with a well-practiced toss of her hair. She especially loved rejecting the player types and this guy had player written all over him.

She could tell from the way he stood surveying the room that he knew how to command a presence. She noticed that all the women were turning their heads and not just because he was the only man in the room. He was attractive and well-dressed in a black suit with a crisp white shirt and just the first couple of buttons undone at the collar. Justine knew he could have his pick of any eligible woman -- except her! She'd made a promise to herself that she was off the market. She had sworn off dating (and sex) and that's where she was going to stay. She was

perfectly happy living life vicariously through the characters she wrote about. Just then Justine realized she had also been staring at him and felt herself blush like a teenager as he glanced her way.

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Justine had no idea why she had blushed and could feel her body temperature soaring, so she quickly bent back down to her laptop to busy herself with answering posts on her author's blog. With her first book bringing in good sales, it was clear that women still wanted to read about people dating, falling in love, and living happily-ever-after. She was thrilled that her stories were giving women hope. Justine knew that just like herself and her other single friends, women had a hard time meeting anyone genuine, especially because of the online dating scene.

True, she had done her share of online dating over the years. In fact, she had met her last boyfriend online. Well, in her mind, he had been her boyfriend. She figured that if they had made it to three months, they were on their way to being serious. Of course, when he told her he couldn't see a future with her and only wanted to see her for sex, she quickly told him where to go. The surprised look on his face gave her all the satisfaction in the world. When it seemed he could sit there forever with his mouth open halfway to the floor, she got up, flipped her hair, and walked away exhaling a staunch *'take that'*.

After that evening, she just started blogging about all her fantasies of the perfect dates. In her stories, her heroines got to go on what she called *'real dates'*. Men picked up the women at their house and brought them flowers. They went to fantastic restaurants for dinner, were wined and dined, and the men never stopped wooing. Before she knew it, she had gained a following and then was offered a book contract. Now she spent her time writing and attending conferences and only going on dates in her imagination. Of course, her new reclusive habits forced her oldest college friend, Joan, to nickname her the *'born-again virgin'* but so what?

Whenever she thought of online dating now, she always quickly remembered an economics class from her college days and hated being thought of as a commodity. She also remembered that if the market is saturated, then the value is reduced. There were just too many people online, vying for each other's attention. So she was done with the whole online dating or dating otherwise scene!

Just as she was about to respond to a question from a reader about her daily writing inspiration, she found herself inhaling a wonderful citrus scent and heard a deep voice beside her that sent a tingle up her spine. "Excuse me. Is this seat taken?" Justine was taken away from her thoughts. She glanced up and saw the man she had admired standing just beside the empty seat. "Oh no, go ahead," she said casually as she remembered she needed to maintain her untouchable look, and do the hair toss before she walked away. She started to close her computer so she could pack up and leave in a couple of minutes, but just then the waiter returned with her glass of champagne.

"Can I get you anything, sir," the waiter asked.

"Thanks, I'll have whatever blonde beer you have," Steve replied. Justine rolled her eyes. Of course, he'd have a *blonde*, she thought. Up close, she guessed that he was probably in his mid-30s. He definitely kept himself in shape too, she observed. She could see muscle definition beneath his shirt and there was no evidence of the beginning of a potbelly. She definitely sensed the player about him, though. Anyone who looked that good was either single and kept in shape to keep himself attractive, or else he was a gigolo, or worse he was married but cheated on his wife at every opportunity.

Just the thought of what kind of man he was made her mad, despite his gorgeousness. Besides, the nerve of the man who could just walk up and ask to snag an empty seat next to her, like she wasn't waiting for someone!

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Steve wasn't going to sit quietly and pretend to look at his phone. He was going in for the kill. He had sized her up out of the corner of his eye. Despite the killer high heels, this one looked kind of sweet. She had that heart-shaped face with big brown eyes. She also didn't wear much makeup, just a touch of lip gloss, he noticed. Up close, she really looked wholesome. He probably only had to tell her she was the most beautiful woman in this room, that he'd never seen a more beautiful woman, and she'd be putty in his hands.

"So, are you here for the romance writer's convention," he asked as the waiter returned with his drink.

"I am," she replied tersely. Then, she went back to her computer, wondering if she really had a tattoo on her forehead that read, *'Naive. Easy target.'*

"So do women still read romance novels?" Steve asked sarcastically.

"Of course we do!" Justine was incredulous. "Do men still read the swimsuit edition of Sports Illustrated?"

"Well, we're not really reading it," he said using those silly quote marks on reading. This man was a piece of work she noticed. He was sitting back clearly relaxed and smiling at her smugly like he'd just won a round of Jeopardy!

Steve could tell she was irritated. She struck him as the kind of woman who usually always had the last word. However, he couldn't resist how cute and sexy she was.

Justine glanced up coldly. "I think the fact that you're asking that question should make you understand why women read romances." Steve shook his head. He still didn't get it. "It's like this. Good men are like an urban legend. We hear that they exist, but we never ever meet them," she explained. "So with romance novels, we can read about meeting our Prince Charming."

Wow, Steve thought. "You've never met a nice guy," he asked incredulously. "Well, tonight's your lucky night because you've just met one. I'm Steve," he said extending his hand.

Justine looked at his hand suspiciously then couldn't resist reaching out to shake his hand. As she did so, she felt a shock course through her arm like a bolt of lightning.

"I'm Justine. So, I'm supposed to believe you're a nice guy just because you say so?" she asked coyly.

"Why don't you believe me?" he asked. Although, he knew it wasn't true. He had stopped being a nice guy when he came home from work early one day to surprise his wife on their first-year wedding anniversary. The surprise was on him when he had found her in bed with the neighbor. That was the end of that. Ever since, it was one random one-night stand after another.

Justine leaned in close and whispered in his ear flirtatiously, "Because I'm fairly certain I've already met you and dated you."

"What?" Steve racked his brain trying to remember her. How could he have met her before? He was staying at the hotel on business and she probably was from out of town, too. Then again, maybe she traveled often and he had met her once before on one of his business trips. It was possible, he reminded himself. After all, he truly couldn't remember how many women he'd been with after four years of woman after woman, but he was certain he'd have remembered her.

"No, not literally," Justine loved the look of amazement on his face. It confirmed her suspicions that he'd probably been with more than his share of women lately. "I mean I've probably already dated someone *like you.*"

“Wow! You’re incredible judging me like that,” he said surprised by how she was challenging him. He took another look at her now. Truly, he did think she was beautiful. Her big brown eyes were smiling and teasing him.

“Ok, well, let’s start over. I know I’ve never dated you, but I can’t deny that I’d want to. Can I buy you another drink,” he asked as he noticed that she was on the last sip of her drink.

“Um, no thanks. I have to get going,” she said realizing the time. “I’m the keynote speaker at the breakfast tomorrow. Have to be up early.”

Justine waved at the waiter to bring her bill, even though it was only 10 in the evening and the night was young. Steve tried to hide his disappointment, but he would try his luck with her or someone else tomorrow afternoon. After all, he never struck out and he had a late checkout so he still had his hopes. He knew he could be charming. Just as the waiter put down her bill, Steve snatched it up. “Why don’t you let me get this for you. After all, it’s the least I can do to show you that some men still have manners,” then he added with a twinkle in his eyes, a half-hearted attempt at a southern drawl “ma dahling.”

Justine smiled patiently and thanked him politely. She had to admit that it had been so long since a man had bought her anything, she had almost forgotten how to say thank you. Then with a toss of her long hair, she quickly said ‘bye and walked hurriedly away before she lost her cool composure.

Justine stood at the elevators and took a deep breath. She was a little flustered and didn’t know why. She realized that despite his sarcasm, the banter had excited her. And, god, a man in a suit who looked like he could have been on the cover of a romance novel was exhilarating to behold. However, she had vowed that she was no longer dating -- not that a drink would have been a date. She just knew that whenever a man bought you a drink, even though many of her online dates hadn’t done that, there was an expectation. She didn’t want drinks or coffee. She wanted someone who wanted to wine and dine her. In short, she wanted to go on one of the dates from her own stories.

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Steve glanced around the room. The crowds of women from earlier had thinned out a little. He saw one group of giggling, perfectly coiffed blonde women, but for some reason he didn’t have the energy to strike up another conversation. Besides, he had an important business meeting in the morning. After all, that was the reason why he had traveled across the country from Phoenix to Savannah and he needed to be on top of his game tomorrow to close the deal. After he finished his drink, he decided to go back to his room and realized this was the first time in many years he was going to bed solo, especially while traveling on business. As he walked through the pink streamered, heart-shaped balloon-filled lobby once again, he noticed the conference poster of the keynote speaker. It was her, Justine Langlois.