

**Love Never  
Dies**

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# **Love Never Dies**

**by**

**Loren Lockner**



# Prologue

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“You don’t have to do this,” stated Angus O’Leary decisively. No one knew better than he how things could go so terribly wrong within a split second and he feared greatly for his younger companion.

His somber counterpart’s hand rested resolutely upon the black sedan’s door handle as he turned his lean serious face to the man he’d contacted only six weeks prior and had come to like and respect.

“I know,” he said mildly, “but the wheels are turning quicker than expected and time is short. If I don’t go in there and make an appearance all our hard work is for not.”

“I’m worried about your safety,” said Angus gruffly, finding it difficult to verbalize his heartfelt words.

“There is so much more at stake now than my own personal safety. I trust you Angus with my life, as well as Mandy’s, and because of that and your incredible dedication to an often thankless job, I will

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complete my task. For once I have a chance to do something really right in my life and I can't let your concerns for my well-being derail our mission."

The blustery late afternoon breeze was scattering autumn leaves everywhere around Toronto's Humber Bay on Lake Ontario. The wind over the massive lake promised an early winter and Angus adjusted his wool coat accordingly, even though he wasn't vacating the comfortable warmth of the car's gray leather interior anytime soon. The younger man took a deep breath and his steel gray eyes met Angus' reassuringly.

Unfortunately Angus didn't feel remotely reassured. "It's just that this isn't your field or forte. You're doing this more as a favor for the police. If something happens to you I'll never forgive myself.

"All will come right," the raven-haired man promised softly. "You just wait and see. Besides, we've covered our bases and constructed a surefire backup plan." He straightened his shoulders confidently and firmly opened the car door, his obscuring gray trench coat disguising the tall, well-built man he really was. He turned for a brief moment and smiling, lifted a casual hand to Angus before trudging down the darkened street to fulfill his destiny. Angus suddenly had a horrible premonition of danger, but knew nothing could now halt those measured methodical steps, and he wished, not for the first time, that he'd told the quiet man headed so determinedly

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down the damp street how much he admired both him and the stand he'd taken. Unfortunately now he might never get the chance.

# Chapter One

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The first moment Julia Morris laid eyes on Seth Hayes she knew she was in big trouble. She'd been lounging around her twin brother's new condominium watching her brother Paul valiantly move his sparse furniture this way and that, trying unsuccessfully to fill up the huge vacant spaces.

“So what do you think Julia? Does the couch go better here or over there near the fireplace?”

“The love seat,” corrected Julia, “looks really nice by the fireplace. Unfortunately you need to have a couple of accompanying chairs to fill up the empty spaces. It doesn't matter what you do Paul, this place is far too big for what little furniture you have.”

“I know,” grumbled Paul, surveying the enormous, brand-spanking-new condominium he'd moved into only a week ago. His mother had often told him about his eyes being bigger than his stomach in relation to food, but he felt that concept might pertain

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to his taste in living accommodations as well. The first time he laid eyes on this particular condominium located so close to the zoological gardens; he'd vowed to own the overpriced accommodation. He'd borrowed, begged, and disinvested all of his ready cash to make the down payment, but now that he was in, Paul recognized he could barely meet the monthly house payment, much less eat! Not only did he not have enough furniture, but his position as a computer analyst at Tri-Tek was probably not going to be enough to cover the rent, utilities, and buy enough furniture to even hold a decent party.

His twin sister Julia grinned at him maliciously out of identical dark green eyes and for a moment he hated her. After all she had been the one who'd said, "I told you so." But this time Paul David Morris was one step ahead of his attractive younger sister, if a twin can really be considered younger at four minutes and thirty-eight seconds, and had placed an ad in the Santa Barbara Herald seeking a roommate. So far he'd only received three responses to his advertisement and if somebody didn't follow through soon and come up with some cash, he was going to have to do the most dreaded thing he could possibly think of, and that was to borrow money from his sister.

His twin now lounged on his only other couch, twisting her blonde head in accordance to his restless movements as she watched him pace the large interior

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of the beautiful and spacious condominium. Paul had no doubt his sister would lend him the money if he asked her; in fact he'd even suggested discreetly that she move out of her small apartment and take up residence with him. After all, the condominium did have three bedrooms, two of which overlooked the lush zoological gardens, as well as a huge kitchen that was a chef's dream, a lovely fireplace, and a beautiful dining room. Too bad there wasn't a dining room table to occupy the empty parquet floor!

Julia languidly removed herself from the brown and red plaid couch and followed her brother into the echoing dining room where he stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the empty chamber. So far one tiny house plant sat forlornly upon the windowsill opposite the beautiful built-in bookcase, which housed only twenty or so volumes. Paul sighed drearily.

"I think cherry wood would go beautifully in here," said Julia, casting an appreciative glance around. It had always been her secret desire to fill a dining room with beautiful antique cherry wood and Paul smiled indulgently at his twin. They were so alike in many ways, each possessing the same steady green eyes and straight nose they'd inherited from their grandfather. While both had rich, luxurious hair, Julia's was blonde and streaked golden and white by the sun, while his was a dark dusty brown, admittedly cut a little too long for his mother's taste, but highly

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attractive to his girlfriend, Angie Carter, who also happened to be his sister's roommate.

He surveyed his sister now as she strolled around the spacious room, admiring the beautiful timbered ceiling and rough-textured wall that gave the room its Tudor-like ambience. Diamond-cut window panes completed the effect and Julia had to admit the room, even without furniture, was simply stunning. Julia Ann Morris stood five-foot-seven in her stocking feet, and while deceptively slender, was strongly built. In her fourth year as a second grade teacher at the local elementary school, her strong sense of humor and gentle, encouraging ways had made her a favorite at Hyatt Elementary. Parents and students alike loved her and Paul could easily see why; not only was she kind and generous, but beautiful to behold, with high cheekbones, an angelic mouth, and their inherited steady green eyes that on Julia appeared ever so much more exotic and interesting than on him.

Julia's hair was cut three inches below her shoulders in a carefree layered manner and today she'd tied it back in a nonchalant, haphazard braid, causing her to appear windblown and delightfully sexy. Paul had to admit that almost everything about his sister was carefree and windblown, and sometimes wished Julia would take a little more notice of her appearance. Why, just look at her now, dressed in those sloppy old green sweatpants half-covered by an oversized yellow t-shirt

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with a smiling face upon it. Julia didn't look like the femme fatale he knew she could, but perhaps that was for the best, since he wasn't always around to beat off unwanted suitors like he'd done in high school and college.

Julia had left her sandals on the doorstep and walked around barefoot, enjoying the warmth of the parquet floor beneath her toes. At twenty-eight years of age, she appeared to possess no worries and enjoyed every day to its fullest. She felt no rush to hurry into marriage even though countless men eyed her as she strolled by, remaining exasperatingly unmoved by their intense looks of admiration. Paul's friend, Tim Stevens, had expressed an overt interest in Julia, but Paul's twin remained aloof, seemingly content to accompany Paul and Angie for a movie or dinner instead of finding a boyfriend. She only occasionally dated and Paul often accused Julia of being halfhearted about her love life, to which his carefree sister would simply shrug a nonchalant shoulder. Paul had to admit that his sister's present lack of love life took a backseat to the more serious problem at hand.

“You know Julia, I've had a couple of interested guys call up and ask about the condominium. Unfortunately, two told me flat out that what I want is way too expensive.”

“So what are you asking to rent this place?”

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“Two hundred twenty-five a week and half the utilities, but they get their own garage space, a beautiful en-suite bathroom, a wonderful kitchen, and an incredible view.”

“I know, I know, it’s indeed lovely Pauli, but I’m just not sure that this was the time in your life to buy, and now I’m afraid you’re going to end up in serious financial difficulty.”

Paul turned a frustrated eye on his perceptive sister. “Your point is well-taken, but I wanted to have something to offer Angie, when and if I ever ask her to marry me. And don’t you go and tell her I’m even considering matrimony.”

“My lips are sealed,” said Julia, deciding then and there it was high time to help her brother out. Angie was the best thing that ever happened to her brother and she wasn’t about to let her beloved twin fail to woo the woman he loved. Julia, however, planned to let him sweat for awhile, not willing to let Paul off the hook so easily, since her brother had proverbially once again ‘leapt before he looked’ when he’d bought the too-expensive condo.

“Anyway,” continued her brother, not realizing his sister was really on his side. “I’m going to try and set up my ornery computer. Do you think I could coax you into making some of that delicious lemonade you always seem to whip up so frightfully

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fast? I have some fresh lemons. Maybe that will cheer me up.”

“No problem,” said Julia, and she strolled into the modern kitchen, smiling affectionately after his preoccupied departure into his office.

It had crossed her mind more than once to move in with him and help relieve the burden of the cost of this new condominium, but she was happy living with Angie in their modest two bedroom flat, ten minutes from her brother’s condominium. A loan was a much better alternative she decided. Besides, what was she going to use the money for anyway? She had just finished squeezing the lemons and was adding a brimming cupful of sugar when the doorbell rang.

“Pauli, there’s somebody at the door,” she called, but apparently her brother was too deeply immersed in the wiring of his computer to hear, so she ambled to the entryway herself, swinging the door open wide without so much as a single thought to inquiring who it might be first.

It was with almost a physical blow that she recoiled from the tall man standing before her, dressed stylishly in a smoke gray three-piece suit, his eyes matching the color of the tailored suit precisely. The stranger’s dark hair hung long and layered, nearly reaching his shoulders, and he carried a briefcase in one hand and a newspaper in the other. He appeared startled at her appearance and his eyes flicked

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downward to the newspaper folded in quarters in his hand as if he'd made a serious mistake.

“Um, is this the Morris residence?” he asked hesitantly in rich tones.

“Yes it is,” answered Julia, noting the serious glint to his eyes and striking features of his face. Lean and broad-shouldered, he carried himself well, though his face was a bit too somber and reserved for complete attractiveness. That incredible reserve suggested a man most would find frustratingly difficult to know, and Julia decided then and there she wished to become better acquainted.

“I’m here to answer the ad about the condominium...” he questioned tentatively, and suddenly Julia realized he was one of her twin’s prospective roommates.

“Oh, please come in. You’re looking to rent one of the rooms. I’ll get Paul.” She rushed away, suddenly conscious of her worn sweatpants and oversized t-shirt, never realizing his lips twitched appreciatively at the sight of her bare, hurrying feet. Her brother squatted upon the plush carpet as he bent over his uncooperative computer mumbling incoherently to no one in particular.

“There’s a man here about the room and I let him in. I don’t know what his name is, but he looks really interested.” And *interesting* Julia added silently to herself.

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Paul jerked up so rapidly that he hit his head on the desk and rubbed it absently. "So someone finally came. If he asks, tell him there's furniture coming," he muttered conspiratorially to his sister as he preceded her out the doorway to survey the tall serious man standing in the foyer.

"Hi," said Paul, wiping his hand on his blue jeans before extending it to the stranger. "My name's Paul Morris and I take it you're here about the ad?"

"Yes I am," returned the businessman. "I'm seeking a place that is quiet and removed from the city center and your ad suggested this place has lots of great amenities."

"This place is peaceful all right, mostly because the condominium next to us isn't even occupied yet and the zoological gardens border our grounds. If it's quiet you want you've come to the right place. You are?" her brother asked politely.

"I'm sorry," said the other man contritely, "my name is Seth Hayes. I'm a junior architect with the firm Bastam, Hughes, and Glickstern. I'm new in town and desperately need a place to live. I've been camping out in a hotel and was hoping to find a place right away."

"You could have immediate occupancy here, though as you recall from the ad, you'll have to supply your own bedroom furniture."

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“I can do that,” said the man mildly, and flicked his eyes over Julia who smoothed the front of her droopy sweats and wished the floor would swallow her up. Never before had she met a man so attractive or with such a beautiful a voice and of course she looked positively despicable herself. However, he seemed to take no notice of her appearance in the least and returned his silver gaze to her brother.

“So you still have a room available?”

“Two as a matter-of-fact. You can have your pick. Would you care to see them?”

Seth nodded and followed Paul down the wide hall. Paul opened the first door on his right, which revealed a spacious bedroom with immaculate en-suite bathroom facilities. While it didn’t have a view of the Zoological gardens, the large balcony overlooked the complex’s huge oval pool, tastefully manicured gardens, and an unusual waterfall feature connected to a Koi pond. Seth surveyed the large room with its built in bookcases and wide window seat before opening the mirrored doors of the huge walk-in closet lined with cedar.

“It’s truly an exceptional room,” he commented. “I believe this would do nicely.”

“I think before you make a decision you should check out the other room,” said Paul. “It’s located at the end of the hall and just down from my office. My room is the last one on the left and there’s a guest washroom just there. One of the reasons I bought this

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place is that three of its rooms have a view of the zoological gardens; the master bedroom, the office next door, and this bedroom on the right.”

The next chamber, though slightly smaller than the beautiful suite already shown to Seth, had a similarly wide balcony with a lovely view of the vast gardens and its towering trees, brick walkways, and occasional peacock. Sunlight poured into the large room and an open doorway revealed a modern, spacious bathroom with a skylight and sparkling chrome fixtures.

“Very tasteful,” said Seth, after emerging from the tiled bathroom complete with clean gray tiles, huge built-in Jacuzzi tub, and double spray shower.

A medium-sized brick fireplace faced the room, which also contained a nice-sized nook leading onto a huge balcony whose wide expanse could easily house a table and four chairs and whose view could not be faulted. Seth stood quietly and observed a stately peacock strut under a gum tree for a moment while a trio of mallard ducks quacked in the distance.

“You’re asking two hundred and twenty-five dollars a week, and half the utilities?”

“Yes. The only drawback is the place is pretty much unfurnished.”

Seth set down his briefcase and analyzed the room once again, his silver eyes appreciating the vaulted

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ceiling, numerous plant nooks, and subtle mushroom-colored walls.

“I suspect you use the office yourself. Would there be any way I could get a telephone line in here?”

“It’s not a problem. I was planning to get a DSL line anyway, though it might be a couple of weeks before it’s functional. You know how the phone company is.”

“Yes,” said Seth quietly to himself. “This will do quite nicely. You indicated I could move in right away?”

Paul’s green eyes lit up delightedly, “You can move in today if you want, but unfortunately there’s no furniture.”

“And when will your furniture be arriving?”

Julia crossed her arms and glanced down at the floor, but not before Seth caught her muffled grin.

“Well,” stumbled Paul, “the furniture is coming in stages.”

“I see,” said Seth, and Julia was certain he did.

“Let me show you the rest of the place,” said Paul eagerly, afraid his prospective roommate might vanish because of the so obvious lack of furniture. Seth followed him into the beautifully modern kitchen with its double oven, center island, and walk-in pantry; the lovely empty dining room; and finally, the echoing living area with its massive fireplace and lovely

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timbered ceiling. Paul even showed him the hall closet and guest bathroom.

“So the furniture is coming in stages,” observed Seth. “You know, I have a few additional pieces just sitting in storage. Would you mind if I brought a dining room table, a few chairs, and some miscellaneous pieces until your other furniture arrives?” His handsome face remained serious, never once reflecting the humor of the moment.

Paul cleared his throat, his cheeks slightly pink. “Furniture would be appreciated.”

“Then I’ll move in this weekend.” The two men shook on it and as Seth retrieved his checkbook from his briefcase to write Paul a deposit, Julia decided it was high time to leave.

“I’ve got to go,” said Julia suddenly. “I’ll see you tomorrow Paul.” She placed an arm around her brother and kissed him soundly on the cheek.

“Give me a call later,” said Paul, so obviously relieved by his incredible luck that Julia found it hard not to laugh.

“Of course.” Julia nodded a head to the professionally dressed Seth, once again acutely aware of her sloppy but comfortable attire. “It was very nice meeting you Mr. Hayes. I hope you enjoy living here with Paul.” Her brother walked her to the door and she whispered under her breath for only him to hear. “You lucked out you this time Pauli! See if you can get him to sign a year lease.”

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With that she departed as quickly as decently possible. As she hurried out to her aging Taurus she determined that she'd have to visit her brother again very soon with some sort of housewarming gift. Next time, his new roommate Seth Hayes, would catch her in something much more stylish than discarded gym wear and bare feet.

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Seth Hayes remained true to his word and moved in within forty-eight hours, bringing with him a lovely dining room table and six chairs in beautiful mahogany with a matching sideboard, as well as a large and ornate mirror, which he and Paul hung in the living room. He also supplied two dark brown recliners, an overstuffed rust-colored leather sofa, and an incredible ornately carved grandfather clock. His generosity also included a unique Indonesian end table, a glass and oak coffee table, a full set of copper cookware, a coat rack, and Paul's favorite items; two large beautiful and worn Persian rugs, one which he spread under the dining room table and the other before the comfortable leather sofa. Its muted red designs complimented the couch and the room, and suddenly the condo had gone from bare and echoing to warm and homey.

Seth furnished his own bedroom with a beautiful mahogany bedroom set whose high four-poster king-sized bed dominated the lovely room. A matching

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dresser and chest of drawers hugged the left-hand side wall and a huge entertainment center, upon which rested a gigantic TV, DVD player, and stereo system, set near the alcove by the window. Seth used the comfortably sized nook as an office and placed a large ebony desk near the French doors. He set up his own computer and promised to wait patiently for the new telephone line. Best yet, his check for the first and last months rent, as well as a hefty deposit, had already cleared the bank. Paul could now afford to pay the mortgage and eat!

On Monday night Angie and Julia put in an appearance. The dark-haired Angie strolled around the condo in justified amazement at its incredible transformation.

“This place is absolutely stunning,” she said after kissing her lover and admiring the Indonesian table with its delicately curved legs and intricate carvings of exotic birds.

“It is indeed,” said Julia, gazing first at the beautiful mirror and secondly at the healthy philodendron resting on the end table near the tall coat rack.

“So where’s your new roommate?” she asked her brother, who sniffed the air appreciatively before answering. His sister smelled very nice indeed.

“Not home from work yet.”

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“So what’s he like?” asked Julia, as nonchalantly as possible.

“Ah ha, so you *are* interested!”

“I never said I was interested; I just wondered if he’s working out that’s all.”

“Oh, he is,” said Paul grinning. It wasn’t often he’d seen his sister so dolled up or so inquisitive about a member of the opposite sex. “He seems to be the quiet sort. I don’t hear much from him because he rises early each morning. Seth takes an early morning jog, eats yogurt and fruit for breakfast, dresses to the nines for work, and takes his very expensive briefcase along with him with little or no fuss. He’s not very chatty, but when he asks a question, I get the feeling he actually *listens* to the answer. He’s not a very smiley man if I do say so myself, but his money’s good and the place looks great. Best yet, do you know what he can do?”

“What?” asked Angie, placing an arm around Paul’s slim waist, delighted her boyfriend appeared so thrilled.

“He can cook! He asked me yesterday morning if I’d like him to whip something up for dinner, and lo and behold when I came back, he’d made this incredible lasagna with a tossed green salad and garlic bread. I didn’t even know he’d gone to the market. I had leftovers today at work and it was absolutely wonderful. There’s still some in the refrigerator; would you like to stay for dinner?”

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“Maybe his culinary skills will rub off on you,” said Julia, always amused by her brother’s hopeless attempts at cooking, as she helped her brother and Angie set the table for dinner. Within minutes Seth arrived, appearing slightly put off at the slight of the two girls. Angie ogled the tall man dressed impeccably in a slim black suit with wide lapels.

Paul growled irritably. “This is my girlfriend Angie Carter and my sister’s roommate. You, of course, met Julia the other day. I hope you don’t mind, but I’m serving up the rest of the lasagna you baked last night.”

Seth, strangely disconcerted, glanced from one young woman to the other. Angie gave him a big smile, the pretty dimple in the middle of her chin reflecting her sunny disposition and open nature. Dark-haired and more endowed than Julia, she possessed an attractive smattering of freckles across her nose. Angie had been Paul’s girlfriend for over two years and an acquaintance of Julia for nearly five. A devout Catholic, she had adamantly refused to move in with Paul, much to both sets of parents’ relief. Seth’s steel gray eyes studied Julia’s.

“I didn’t realize you were Paul’s sister,” he stated quietly. “I thought you were his girlfriend.”

“Nah,” said Paul, sidling up to his sister and giving her an affectionate punch on the arm, “she’s my little sister.”

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“Oh give it a break Paul,” scolded Angie. “She’s only four minutes younger than you.”

“Twins,” verified Seth softly, a strange expression flitting over his handsome face as he examined them both closely. “Yes, I do believe I see a family resemblance. Twins are an amazing phenomenon and they run in my family as well.” He didn’t expound on his quiet comment and later, when it was far too late, Julia was going to wish she’d queried Seth more about the twin situation in his family.

Twenty minutes later they sat at the beautiful mahogany table in the newly furnished dining room devouring Seth’s delicious lasagna.

“So he can cook too,” chortled Angie, smiling happily at Seth who for one had barely touched his food. He seemed rather distant and didn’t contribute to the merriment of the trio at the table.

“You’re awfully quiet,” stated Paul a few minutes later. “Tough day at the office?”

“You might say that,” agreed Seth. A man of few words, there clearly existed an overlying aloofness he appeared determined to maintain. Seth put up with the forced company of Angie and Julia, but when the first opportunity arose, he retreated to his room after taking his plate into the kitchen and placing it inside the dishwasher.

“I’m sorry, but I have some paperwork to do. It was very nice meeting you Angie and you again Julia,”

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he said softly before fading into the dim light of the hall and shutting his bedroom door.

“I’ll help you with the dishes Paul,” said Angie, following her boyfriend into the kitchen.

Julia picked up her utensils and plate, feeling vaguely disappointed. She had consciously made herself more presentable this evening, donning sea foam green pants and a matching top and brushing her hair until it shone before fastening it back with a pretty pearl-beaded clip. She had even filed her finger and toe nails, painting them a subtle pink, but it hadn’t made any sort of impression on the aloof young architect so she tossed her head dismissively. He might possess the most incredible eyes she’d ever seen, but he didn’t appear in the least interested so she might as well not waste her time.

It was probably better in the long run since she was subject to popping in on her brother unexpectedly, and if there wasn’t any attraction between them her constant visits to her brother would be much less awkward. So Julia tried, and nearly succeeded, to put Seth out of her mind.

The next few times she arrived at her brother’s condo Seth was home. A reserved man, he never joined in their conversation, often removing himself to his room within a few minutes to do paperwork, or whatever it was he did there. Twice she heard noise coming from his room; once in the haunting lilt of classical music and the

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other as canned laughter from a nightly sitcom. Seth never made apologies for his behavior or tried to be more sociable; he simply remained distant. His strange behavior caused Julia to wonder if he'd suffered some sort of personal loss, but she decided not to waste any more time speculating upon his anti-social behavior, which was easier said than done.

For Paul, he was the perfect roommate; quiet, responsible, and neat. If Paul noticed his sister's begrudging attraction to the aloof man, he never commented on it, instead focusing his attention upon upgrading his condominium. Angie often visited the condo and Seth seemed more inclined to talk to her, often querying Angie about her hectic job as a pediatric nurse at the Santa Barbara Community Hospital.

Angie told him all about her little patients and how they dealt with life and disease and Julia could hear the depth of his compassion in his beautiful melodic voice. In contrast, Seth neither asked Julia anything about her work as a teacher, nor ever commented upon the warm relationship she maintained with her brother or parents who often visited the condominium as well. It was as if her lifestyle and career were too dull to warrant even a polite question from him and her unbidden attraction to the tall, dark-haired man almost turned into a form of hostility.

Julia's father, much to Julia's chagrin, became casual friends with Seth. Several times Seth shared

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with Jim Morris some of his blueprints for a local duplex development he was currently working on for Lenny Glickstern. Her dad mentioned him once again as Julia sat at a late night supper with her parents after a back-to-school night. It was mid-November and the weather had turned chilly, raining dismally over the past three nights and dampening her normally upbeat spirits.

“I believe Paul’s roommate Seth is one of the best architects I’ve ever met,” observed Jim Morris.

Julia picked at her broccoli and cheese stuffed baked potato disinterestedly. “Is he now?” she asked exasperatedly.

“Yes. He seems to have a real grasp of how to blend multiple building styles, but never disrupt the Mediterranean and Spanish red-tiled standard that has exemplified our city all these years.”

Santa Barbara was indeed a lovely old town, originally built around the mission developed by Father Jun’pero Serra and still hosting one of the most famous missions in California. That, coupled with the fact Santa Barbara was a huge university town boasting an extremely lovely beach, made it an enchanting place to reside. Though a bit pricey, Julia balanced that against her evening jogs on the beach, the vibrant night life available from a city that catered to the university students, and the close proximity to her family. Right now, she couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.

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“Seth’s voice is so unusual, not quite northeastern or Canadian. He told me he hailed from upstate New York, but his accent doesn’t quite ring true and I suspect he’s traveled a great deal. Have you gotten to know him well?” her father asked, as he cut a slice off his rare steak. Jim had managed to coax his wife Helen into giving him steak even though he was supposed to be watching his cholesterol.

“No, I’ve only seen him a few times and he seems very quiet and distant. I don’t think he likes me much at all.”

“Really?” asked her father, cocking his head at Julia’s mother. “He’s queried me all about what you were teaching, that sort of thing you know.”

“That’s right,” asserted Helen. “The last time I visited Paul, he probably asked at least twenty questions regarding you. What you taught, the age group, where you’d gone to university. He seemed very interested indeed. In fact it sounded like you guys were great friends. You know,” said her mother, crinkling her sharp green eyes. “You could do a whole lot worse.”

Julia frowned at her mother’s red hair. “You can quit your matchmaking, Mom. First of all he’s not interested and second, remember what happened when I dated Tim Stevens? I certainly don’t want a repeat of that situation, so I’ll pick my own boyfriends thank you very much.”

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Tim Stevens had been one of Paul's best friends since high school and currently served as a manager of one of the Rite-On Drugstores downtown. He was well-to-do, tall, and slightly balding. He came across as one of the sweetest men Julia had ever met; sweetest and most boring, until he'd started groping her in his fancy car and wouldn't take no for an answer. To her, Tim was like some sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character; sweet to her family and a monster to her.

Julia had gone out with him many times at the encouragement of both her brother and parents, who'd been acquainted with his family for years. After one particularly hideous evening where she'd actually been forced to punch him the mouth to get him to back off, Julia vowed she'd never date anyone her parents or brother set her up with again, no matter how well-meaning they were. She realized how a man appears to his buddies and her parents, isn't always a guarantee he'll treat a woman with respect.

Now, because she was attracted to Seth herself and her father spoke so highly of him, Julia felt doubly on guard. It irked her that the young architect always ignored her, which compelled Julia to say something nasty about him.

"He seems very egotistical and stuck up; not my type at all."

Her father observed her shrewdly and set down his knife and fork while Helen Morris made a show of

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adding more seasoning salt to her baked potato. “I wasn’t asking you to go out with him Julia. I just thought that maybe you were friends or something since he’s obviously so interested in your routine. It was my mistake sweetie, thinking there might be something more there. I promise I won’t bring him up again,” he stated, and moved on to other subjects.

Later, however, when she had time to think about it, her father’s words disturbed her. Just why did Seth avoid her every time he saw her, but later pump her parents with questions about her life? Could he be interested in her after all? She made up her mind then and there to figure out what made Seth tick, if it killed her.

The Tuesday before the Thanksgiving holiday Julia knocked on her brother’s door and he opened it with a wide grin before appearing sheepish.

“Oh hi Sis,” he said awkwardly. “You are, um, coming for a visit?”

“Well yes. I thought I’d pop in for a few minutes if you don’t mind. I want to talk to you about Thanksgiving dinner at Mom and Dad’s and what you’re supposed to bring. Are you busy or something?”

“No, not at all,” said her brother and let her in. He seemed tense and out of sorts and as she followed him into the beautiful living room Julia observed Tim Stevens sitting upon the couch. He flashed his wide toothy grin and Julia felt her heart sink.

## **Loren Lockner**

“Long time no see,” chirped Tim. “Just where have you been keeping yourself Julia? I’ve missed your beautiful face Sweetheart.”

Paul beamed as Julia winced. She’d never informed her brother about Tim’s inappropriate advances so Paul smiled delightedly, still hoping Tim and Julia would make the perfect match.

“Been working,” said Julia evasively. “How’s everything going at Rite-On Drugstore?”

“Great. We’re opening another store real soon in Montecito. I may have to go over there and train the new manager. It’s quite a position of responsibility you know,” he boasted.

“I can imagine.”

Tim’s eyes focused upon the front of her peach blouse and Julia squirmed. “Anyway, maybe you’d like to check out the new store sometime? It’s near the golf course and because of the large retirement community we cater to retirees. We have a larger than usual pharmacy, as well as lots of additional foodstuffs just to help the seniors in case they don’t want to run to the market for the milk or whatnot.”

Julia pretended interest and settled across from him in one of the coffee brown recliners Seth had added to the room. The chair was comfortable and warm on this chilly day and her brother had lit a fire in the brick fireplace, infusing the condominium with warmth and hospitality. Paul had added a few paintings

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of rustic mountain scenes and a beautifully framed photograph of her deceased great-grandmother and grandfather who'd arrived in San Francisco by wagon over 110 years ago.

"Can you stay for dinner Julia?" asked Paul exuberantly, warming to his role as matchmaker.

"Uh, well, I'm not sure Paul. Since it's so dismal and rainy, I'd better hurry home before it gets too dark."

"Ah come on. It's going to be simple, just tacos, and then you won't have to cook and eat a meal all by your lonesome. Say you'll stay?"

"Oh alright," relented Julia. She'd secretly hoped to see Seth, determined to get a handle on the mysterious man she was so reluctantly attracted to. "Is Seth here?"

"Nope, hasn't showed up," answered Paul. "I'll just trot to the kitchen now and start getting the tacos ready. Maybe you and Tim can set the table?"

"We'd be happy to," declared Tim, leaping up and following Paul into the kitchen. It wasn't until Paul was halfway through making the tacos that he discovered he was missing two key ingredients; meat and refried beans. This was typical Paul, always plunging ahead without making sure he was really ready.

"Not to worry," he said. "The market is only five minutes away. I'll run down there and if you'll make the salad I'll be back lickety-split."

## **Loren Lockner**

“Um, maybe I’ll go,” said Julia, not wanting to be left alone with the over amorous Tim.

“It’s my fault that I don’t have the ingredients so I wouldn’t dream of making you go out in this weather,” said Paul, grabbing his coat and keys and scurrying out the door before she could protest. Tim grinned his too-friendly smile and Julia could do nothing but hope the distraction of making the salad would keep the store manager’s mind off of her.

After they finished making the salad, Julia moved to the snapping fireplace and held her hands before it even though she wasn’t cold, uncomfortable with Tim’s close proximity.

“I’ve missed you,” said Tim quietly behind her, placing his hands upon her shoulders. Julia tried to shrug them off but he only moved closer, his breath nuzzling her ear while the overpowering scent of his too-liberally applied cologne clogged her breath.

“I don’t know why you keep running away from me Julia. We’ve always had an overwhelming attraction to each other.”

“Speak for yourself,” retorted Julia. “I’m not remotely attracted to you Tim. I could like you as a friend but you’ve made any sort of relationship intolerable because of your continuous advances. Now please could you move away?”

“I know you could love me if you’d just give me a chance,” said Tim, moving even closer. “And our

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families would be so thrilled.” He looped his arms around her torso, locking her in an embrace, as he forced her back against his chest. His hot breath was insistent as he leaned forward, whispering dirty suggestions in her ear. Neither heard the door open nor noticed Seth entering the foyer. He stopped to wipe his wet shoes upon the doormat and hung up his umbrella, suddenly tensing as he heard Julia’s adamant voice.

“I’ve told you before to leave me alone, now get away from me,” demanded Julia, slamming an elbow into Tim’s stomach. He snarled as she pushed away from him, forcibly turning her and kissing her passionately, grinding his teeth against her protesting mouth. Julia leaned back and slapped him violently across the face, which only enflamed him more. He restrained her one arm and reached for her breast, totally beyond reason. Julia fought violently, realizing she was in real danger of being raped.

“Stop it Tim!” she ground out, trying to move her head away from his questing mouth. “I told you before I’m not interested; why can’t you get that through your thick head!”

She was suddenly slammed against the brickwork of the fireplace and Tim ground his hips against her while kissing her bruised mouth as she struggled and tore at him, managing once to scratch his face.

“The lady said let her be. I suggest you do it mister.”

## **Loren Lockner**

If Seth's deliberate tones ever penetrated Tim's lustful preoccupation, the store manager didn't respond. Instead he continued groping Julia who fought furiously. Seth placed a hand upon Tim's left shoulder and pulled him back, his fingers tightening cruelly upon the bony shoulder. Tim retorted and swung, hitting wildly at whoever dared try and thwart his enflamed actions. Julia had never seen a man move so fast. One moment Tim struck out at Seth and the next lay flat on his back, his nose spewing blood over his disbelieving face. Tim groaned and grabbed the protruding member between his hands as blood gushed out, staining the parquet floor.

"I do believe the lady said no more than once," stated Seth nonchalantly, peering down at the man he'd just brutally slammed to the ground, a very self-satisfied expression on his perfect face.

"Who the hell are you?" cried Tim, managing to sit up straight though his freckled nose still streamed blood.

"I'm Paul's roommate and a friend of Julia's, and I suggest that if you don't want Paul to personally toss you out of his condominium after using you as his private punching bag, you'd better leave while you can. It probably goes without saying that I don't want to see your face around here ever again." Seth by this time had returned to the coat rack, and picking up

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Tim's blue windbreaker, waited for the thin man to rise awkwardly from the slippery floor.

Tim gazed long and hard at Julia before finally shaking his head violently. "You ain't worth it babe," he scoffed scornfully; grabbing his coat from Seth's outstretched hand. The door was already open and Seth slammed it behind him. Reaction to the incident finally hit home and Julia, from where she remained before the crackling fire, shivered as if from cold.

Seth approached her, the smug expression fleeing his face. "Are you alright?"

"If you hadn't come along I think . . . I think..."

"I think you're right," said Seth soothingly. "Here, sit down. I'll get you something that's certain to make those shakes disappear." His hands gently pushed her onto the comfortable recliner positioned before the fire and he hurried into the kitchen. Julia heard the slosh of some liquid being poured into a glass as she stretched her suddenly cold hands toward the revitalizing flames.

Seth knelt before her, handing her a brandy glass whose amber liquid beckoned enticingly. "Drink this up, it'll help."

Julia swallowed a gulp of the strong, warming liquid, gasping as it burned its way down her throat.

"Did he hurt you?" asked Seth tightly.

"I think I'll have a few bruises, but I'm alright. Please, please don't tell Paul."

## Loren Lockner

“On the contrary,” countered Seth, leaning back to examine her tear-streaked face. “I believe you should inform your brother. He’s probably not aware of his friend’s unwanted advances, and unless you enlighten him, you can be certain that Tim will do it again, if not with you, then with someone else. It’s important everyone’s righteous indignation toward sexual abuse is clearly relayed to animals such as Tim.”

Julia recognized the validity of his words and nodded, a single tear trickling down her cheek. Seth leaned forward and wiped off the warm drop. “I guess he felt some of *your* righteous indignation,” she managed to quip.

Seth grinned smugly and fumbled in his pocket for his handkerchief, which he handed her gently.

“Thank you,” Julia mumbled before glancing down, unable to meet those beautiful gray eyes. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes, grateful he didn’t belabor the point.

“No thanks necessary. I’m just glad my timing was right. I’ll tell you what... I’ll relate what happened to your brother if that will make you feel better. You sit here and finish up the brandy. I noticed a couple of blood droplets on the parquet and I’ll wipe them up before your brother arrives.”

Seth headed to the kitchen and returning with a wet dish towel wiped up the evidence of Tim’s broken

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nose. Later, he sank upon the love seat across from her and analyzed her with his silvery eyes.

“Feeling any better?” Before she could respond the door opened and her brother’s loud voice echoed through the entryway.

“I not only got beef and refried beans; I found a little guacamole and sour cream. These are going to be the best tacos I’ve made in a long time.” He stopped short at the sight of a Seth but no Tim. “Where’s Tim? Is everything okay?”

“I’m afraid your friend Tim had to go home. Julia, why don’t you take the groceries into the kitchen for your brother? Paul, could I speak to you for a moment in my room?”

Paul glanced from Julia to Seth before handing the plastic bags to his sister.

Ten minutes later he emerged from Seth’s bedroom, rage reddening his face while his hands curled into white-knuckled fists.

“If Tim ever tries anything with you again Julia, you let me know. He’s not welcome in my house, my parents’ house, or anyone else I know for that matter! I’m planning to tell mom and dad what he did and ask them to relay his despicable actions to his parents. If we let him get away with this kind of stuff he’s just going to do it again. I wish you’d have told me earlier about the real reasons you didn’t like him.”

## Loren Lockner

“I tried,” answered Julia as she spooned the guacamole out into a small blue ceramic bowl and placed it upon the table. “You just didn’t want to listen. Mom and Dad knew how I felt but I couldn’t seem to get through to you.”

Her brother sidled forward to enfold her in a warm embrace and kissed her on the forehead. “I’m so sorry. Sometimes I’m just not alert to things like that. Please forgive me. Thanks Seth for explaining it all to me, *and* arriving when you did. I’m just glad it put a stop to his unwanted advances and that he took your advice and left.”

Julia eyed Seth as he gave a tiny shake of his head, realizing Seth hadn’t revealed how Tim had been requested to leave. She smiled broadly. “Yes, it was very fortuitous Seth showed up when he did and since we’ve made enough tacos for three, won’t you please join us for dinner?”

Seth studied her dark green eyes for a long moment before answering half-reluctantly, “I’d be happy to.”

Darkness engulfed Seth’s room as he sat alone and contemplative upon his beautiful mosaic bedspread. He gazed moodily through the window at the few stars flickering valiantly as they tried to break through the heavy cloud cover. Seth rubbed the back of his stiff

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neck and sighed. This was a dangerous game he played. He'd knowingly embarked on something best left dormant, allowing himself the joy of Julia's company this evening. It'd been pleasurable to watch the twins banter, so comfortable in that natural camaraderie they always shared. He'd tried to ignore her, to distance himself from her undeniable beauty and wit, but tonight fate had intervened and forced him near the most attractive woman he'd ever met.

Seth had no doubt Julia could have handled the situation by herself and suspected Tim may have achieved worse than a broken nose after she'd finished with him, but had wanted to step in. He'd wanted Julia to know he wasn't immune to her. So he sat forlornly on his big bed, knowing he shouldn't think about her but powerless to stop. He tensed, suddenly afraid that after all this time he'd finally run across his soul mate and at a time he could least afford.