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*To Mark.  
There's no way I could do this without you, and without you none of this would mean anything. I  
love you!*

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ALL your messages and comments!

## Prologue

Drowning in the reality of this impossible nightmare, Damian stared at her, the words coming out of her mouth nothing more than a droning buzz. Only one thing mattered right now: Could this really be true? He'd convinced himself for weeks that this was all in his head, that there was no way it could be true. As he stood there after hearing that it was even worse than he'd suspected, his heart still held out hope that there was some kind of explanation.

Taking her abruptly by both arms, because his heart couldn't take even a second more Desert Heat: A Novel of this, he stared into her tearful eyes, his own vision beginning to blur Desert Heat: A Novel now, too. "Just tell me one thing. One fucking thing, Bethany. It's all I need to know. Is it true?"

Her pinched brows over her pained and flooding eyes said it all. The very weak nod was the final confirmation. Just like everything else that had happened between him and Bethany—at lightning-fast speed—the lava in his veins was instantly frozen, and the murderous rage he had felt just moments ago was replaced by something so numbing he could barely breathe. His heart was still fighting it, but there was no way around this. No reasonable explanation. Not anymore. Damian had no choice but to accept it now. The relationship he'd dived into so impulsively, never imagining he'd fall as profoundly in love as he had so quickly, had been viciously pulled from under him like a rug flipping him over on his back and knocking the wind completely out of him.

## Chapter 1

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## ***Speed dating—The day they met***

### ***9 weeks Desert Heat: A Novel earlier***

Why the hell had he agreed to this? Damian drummed the Speed Ticket, a booklet they were all given in which to take notes when they got to the hotel banquet room. Desert Heat: A Novel The whole thing was such a joke. Damian's eyes bounced around from one desperate sap to another, all sitting there with their badge numbers on their shirts. He Desert Heat: A Novel glanced down at his and nudged Jerry. "Hey, man. I changed my mind. I can't do this."

"Why?" Jerry leaned toward Damian.

"This is so stupid. Look at these losers."

The guy with the thick glasses next to Damian sat up straight and fidgeted with his tie.

Jerry elbowed Damian and whispered, "Just give it a shot." He frowned before reminding him, "You promised, Damian. Besides, you owe me."

Damian sank Desert Heat: A Novel back in his seat. The door to the waiting room opened, and the same woman who had assigned them their badges and given them their Speed Tickets walked in, once again overdoing the smile.

"Okay, guys, we're ready for you." She winked. "If you follow me, the ladies are anxious to meet you."

Damian turned to Jerry as they all stood up. Jerry gave him an optimistic smile, but Damian could tell he was nervous as shit. Glancing back at the exit, he knew this was his last chance to make a mad dash out of there, but Desert Heat: A Novel obviously knowing Damian too well, Jerry shoved him forward.

They were herded along with all the others into the large banquet room with tables set up all around. All the tables were numbered, and there was a woman sitting at each one. Damian did everything he could to avoid eye contact with any of them. So far the only one he'd glanced at looked to be in her early to mid-thirties, and her hair was shorter than his.

The hostess stood at the front of the room as they Desert Heat: A Novel all finished filing in. "I'll explain how this works quickly, and we'll get started," she began. "As you've noticed, I'm sure, all the tables where these lovely ladies are sitting are numbered. Gentlemen, your badges all have numbers on them. If your badge number has a number one, you will start at table number one. If it's a two, then you sit at table two, and so on. After four minutes I will ring a bell, and you'll Desert Heat: A Novel be given a few minutes to take notes on your Speed Tickets." She held one up for everyone to see, and again she was back at it with the overdone smile.

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Damian easily tuned her out. He glanced around the room as she went on. None of the girls were what he considered attractive. There was something a bit odd about each of them. He took in one that might pass for cute, but just the fact that she was here, doing *this*, was enough to turn him off. They all looked older than he was, too. Damian was twenty-seven, but for his dating taste, they had to be at least a few years younger than he was. The older ones were just too set in Desert Heat: A Novel their ways or carrying a load of baggage he didn't have the patience to deal with.

His patience was already running thin, and the damn thing hadn't even started yet. This was ridiculous. If Jerry weren't his best friend and hadn't helped him out of so many jams, Damian would be at J.T.'s Desert Heat: A Novel right now, having a cold one and watching the game.

Well, being here was one thing. He didn't have to take it seriously, and he certainly didn't plan to. Jerry had told him to give it a chance and that he might actually meet someone worthwhile, but the more he looked around, the older each chick looked. No, thanks.

Jerry, on the other hand, liked them older. He said the younger ones were too wild and unpredictable. Damian never understood his taste in women or why he liked trying all these goofy dating things.

"C'mon," Jerry said, snapping Damian out of his thoughts.

The hostess was done talking, and all the guys were making their way to their respective tables. Damian hadn't even bothered looking at the number on his badge. Jerry pointed at it. "You're number eight. Over there." He motioned to the table with the big eight on it. The girl sitting at it was a mousy little thing. She had shoulder-length, light-brown hair that was straight and parted in the middle.

As soon as Damian sat down, he noticed two things: her big, chapped lips and her nails, which were chewed down to the raw nub.

Desert Heat: A Novel

"Okay, everyone," the hostess announced. "Your time starts now."

Damian glanced over to Jerry. He was sitting with a blonde two tables down from him. Damian looked back at the girl at his table, and she smiled.

"Hi," she said sheepishly.

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