

XZA

· a novel ·

by

Cassandra Leuthold

XZA: A Novel
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to Josh for his constant support and unending humor;

to my friends and family for all the great memories I wove into this book;

and with grateful acknowledgement to Kris Torrey for her thoughts on an early draft

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Ten Years Ago

Xan

I didn't notice him until he was third in line. The line was mostly women, ages twelve through fifty-five. A lot of them talked while I wrote brief inscriptions, sharing how much my stories meant to them, how they identified with my characters, and why they hoped I kept writing the same kinds of books. These conversations were sometimes punctuated by much more personal stories about abuse and coping with becoming a woman, which usually made any men in the vicinity squirm to get away. It was a rare man who braved my readers to get an autographed copy for his daughter, wife, niece, or himself.

This was an even rarer man. His attractive face loomed over the shoulders of the two women in front of him. His dark hair fell in half-curls and waves almost to the base of his neck. He had either just rolled out of bed or he knew how to style his hair so the effects looked effortless. His skin was almost as pale as mine, the slightest tan stretching across his clear complexion.

I stopped ogling him to sign copies for the woman in front of me, who wanted them addressed to her daughter. I chatted with her for a minute until she went on her way, watching the man take a step closer. He didn't fidget as the men sometimes did, their eyes swimming everywhere but the line. I spotted a worn copy of Satan, My Father in his hand, which told me he was a longtime fan, not one of the new initiates clutching a shining copy of my latest work. He stopped reading the nearby book titles on the shelves and started paying attention to me. I shifted my focus to the teenage girl at the head of the line, signing my name in her crisp copy of my newest book and sending her out into the world again much better prepared for it.

My curiosity buzzed. The closer this man came, the more I noticed how good-looking he was. The ceiling lights gave warmth to his hair, revealing it for chocolate brown instead of the black I thought it was. He stepped up to the table and held out his book. I took it and set it in front of me, not ready to sign yet. I was much more interested in the man.

"How are you?" I asked, my pen dangling uselessly between my fingers.

"All right. How are you?" His voice was delicious, heady like wine and gently raspy. I couldn't keep from smiling. "I'm fine. What brings you here today?"

"My name is Michael Singer." He gave the slightest pause. "I work for Underrated Media dot com. I write book reviews."

My eyebrows slid upward. "Really?" I had been interested. Now I was rapt. If he wanted his book signed, he hadn't written any bad reviews of my work. I swept my eyes over his face, taking in the unique details of his features. His nose, although straight, had a slight bump below the bridge. I moved on to his lips, the well-defined kind I always said were too nicely shaped for a man's, although I appreciated every pair.

His eyes, the caramel color of worn leather, watched me above his warm but professional smile.

My expected, innocent questions probed for information. "Have you reviewed my books?"

"Of course."

"You liked them, I assume."

He nodded.

“How long have you been reading me?”

Michael pointed at the book in my hands. “Since the day that came out. That’s a first edition hard cover.”

“I know.” My fingers smoothed the dust jacket.

“I think I picked it up the day it came out. I’ve read it several times.”

“That’s what I like to hear. I’ll have to stop by the site and see what you’ve been saying about me.”

“It’s all good,” he assured me. “The reviews are still up under the books section. They’re some of the easiest I’ve ever done.”

Michael wasn’t giving me the answers I really wanted. I couldn’t tell from his tone if he was being polite or if he was flirting with me as much as I was flirting with him. “You said it was a site called Underrated?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think my work is underrated?”

“Far too much. It’s well written and well planned. There’s no part of life that you’d ignore, and I admire that. Too many books focus on what everybody already knows, and they never push to move beyond the way things are.”

I opened the front cover of the book, but I was stalling. I had one more trick to try. “Would you like an interview? Is that something you do?”

Michael’s eyes widened, and he leaned forward. “Yes. I’d be very interested.”

“Are you available when the signing is over? We can talk over coffee.”

“That’d be great.”

“You don’t mind waiting for me?”

“No, not at all.” Michael checked his watch. “It’s only about an hour.”

“There’s a coffee bar in the back if you want to meet me there.”

“I will.”

I poised the tip of my pen over a blank space on the title page. “Should I make this out to Michael?”

“Yes. Please.”

In the neatest version of my chicken scratch I could manage, I wrote beneath the title, *For Michael, as underrated as I am*. I closed the book and handed it back.

He gave me a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

“Thanks for the interview. I’ll see you in an hour.”

Michael walked away, and I leaned back in my chair to watch him. His jeans were loosely cut but hugged his butt closely enough to show me a drool-worthy shape. Out of the corner of my eye, the next three women in line stared with me. Michael disappeared between the shelves, and I leaned toward the waiting women.

“Do you think we could talk him into becoming a gynecologist?” I said.

The women laughed. A teenager with braces peered out from between them. She stretched her lips in an uncertain version of our shared smile. It might take several years for the joke to make sense to her, but it would make her laugh all the harder.

I met Michael in the small café as agreed, but I didn’t want to stay there. With copies of my books on display and my picture on posters throughout the store, I didn’t want the interview to be interrupted. Usually, I welcomed opportunities to meet my readers, but

Michael counted as a fan and a business contact. He deserved my undivided attention for his credentials if not just his looks. I offered to drive, and Michael climbed into my car.

Michael nodded his head down the road. "I think there were stores down this way."

"It's been a few years since I've been here," I admitted, squeezing my purse between my thigh and the car door.

"I've never been here. I just remember them from the drive in."

We followed Michael's hunch to a local coffee shop. It was mostly empty, and walking in put us first in line. Hand-written chalk-on-blackboard signs offered an impressive mix of old classics and more complicated specialties. Michael ordered first, a flavored, sugary concoction topped with whipped cream and a dusting of cinnamon. I asked for coffee straight and black.

The young man behind the counter glanced at the coffee maker. "I'll get a fresh carafe going. That coffee's probably burnt by now."

I put my hand out. "Don't throw it away. That's what I want."

He shook his head as he rang up my order, but he didn't argue with me. I tucked two extra dollars into the tip jar.

I tasted it as soon as I got it. The coffee wasn't scorched, but it was close.

Michael and I settled in at a table halfway across the room, not drowning in the noise of small drink machines or tucked too intimately into a corner. He pulled a palm-sized digital recorder out of his coat pocket. "I hope you don't mind. It's easier than trying to type everything into my laptop."

"That's fine."

"I don't want to miss anything." Michael set it on the table between us.

"Are you the only one who listens to it?"

"Yes." Michael's eyes twinkled at me. This was more than an interview, and he knew it. He had to. His thumb pressed the round red recording button. "Thank you, first of all, for agreeing to this interview."

"How could I resist?"

"I wasn't expecting it. I came as a fan, not for business reasons."

"I appreciate it either way."

"I wanted to start with a quote you gave several years ago. It was always one of my favorites. You said the phrase, 'A woman only needs four animals: a tiger in her bed, a mink around her shoulders, a Jaguar in the driveway, and a jackass to pay for it all,' should be the phrase by which all women live their lives. How facetious were you?"

I laughed. "Only partly. The other part of me was extremely serious. I think a lot of women – and men – could benefit from cutting loose and getting some of what they want."

"That's the opposite of what most people would say."

"And that's the problem. When you've got a restriction or a constriction of some kind, it creates a fixation." I formed a circle with my hands over the table. "It puts a bull's eye on whatever it is. Sex, drugs, music, clothing, movies. It makes it a target, either something to strive for or something to avoid. The problem is that most people are confused, so they say they're trying for one thing but they really want the other. That's how you end up with hypocrisy."

"Hypocrisy is something you deal with a lot in your books."

"It's one of the few things I really can't stand. Heavy traffic I can deal with. Blow

your cigarette smoke in my face. I'll deal with it. But hypocrisy is so dangerous on the individual and the social level. It reminds me of another quote. 'The greatest trick the devil ever played was to make us believe he doesn't exist.' Hypocrisy is the real devil. People think if they pretend they're being honest that they're being honest."

Michael folded his arms on the table and shifted his shoulders. "Walk me through, if you don't mind – I like this theme – your two books and how hypocrisy plays a part in each of them."

"Sure. In Satan, My Father, you've got a huge disconnect between how the family wants to be seen and the way they are. It's not just the father. There's a much bigger smokescreen going on. He's pretending he's a good person when he's not. The mother refuses to accept what's going on, as if turning a blind eye will make it cease to exist. The one major character who's not a hypocrite is the narrator. She hates what's happening from word one. She never denies the horror of it. She's simply powerless to change her situation."

Michael nodded, intrigued and patient, his eyebrows relaxed and solemn.

I went on. "As far as F*CK, F*CK, F*CK, it's kind of the same thing, except that Chessa's more culpable. She's hurting herself and keeping silent so she can keep doing it. What makes her a hypocrite is that she wouldn't let any of her friends hurt themselves like that, but she's also a victim of other things going on in the book."

"You've also said survival was a common theme."

A smile tugged at my face. "You know a lot about what I've said."

"I spent most of the last hour looking you up on the Internet, refreshing my memory."

"Thank you. You have no idea how many interviews start with where I'm from or what my name is."

"What is your name? Why do you write under your initials?"

For once, I tried not to sound too forward, even though I relished the answer. "My name is for friends and lovers only."

Michael echoed my coyness back to me. "I see."

"I write under my initials because it's fun. It's confusing and eye-catching. It lets me keep some privacy, although most people aren't that interested in who I am. I think they'd like to learn some terrible secret about me, but I don't have any, so they'll always be disappointed."

Michael took a sip of his sweetened beverage, making a brief grunt of remembrance at the top of his throat. "I had asked you about survival."

"I want to draw a line between surviving and thriving. Survival is important, but it's not the same thing as thriving. It's what gets you through to a point where you can start to thrive and open up and enjoy what's going on around you. Both of these characters, the narrator and Chessa, are stuck in the survival stage. It's not until the very end that we start to see some possibility for anything better than that. It's much closer for Chessa. The narrator might never get there."

"Is this a mode you found yourself in at some point? Or am I getting too personal?"

I gave Michael a genuine smile. "Get as personal as you like. I was in survival mode for many years, but writing was always a great way to work through my problems. I always wrote characters who were worse off than I was, so my problems didn't seem so bad."

“There’s no bulimia in your past?”

“No, but I get asked that a lot. Every book signing. Almost every interview. It’s a lot easier to answer when it’s a scared, desperate teenage girl than when it’s a hardened, crusty reporter.”

“Have you had many crusty reporters?”

“More than I wanted to deal with, if I’m being honest.” I drank more of my coffee. “There’s a big difference between asking me out of real interest and asking because it’s the popular, controversial question. It’s not as immediate, which rubs me the wrong way and brings us back to hypocrisy again.”

“What would you say set off the worst of your survival years?”

The rest of my smile faded. The interview was getting real now. I appreciated Michael’s honest questions, but I had not expected this to turn so bleak. “My uncle died when I was a kid. We were very close.”

“I’m sorry.”

Michael’s lips remained parted, as if about to say he’d move on to another question. I continued before he could speak. “I wasn’t even thirteen. It was very unexpected.”

Michael repeated his apology.

I stayed on the subject. “He was the one who gave me my name. My mother was too exhausted and drugged from medication after she had me, and my father was off somewhere getting food or getting the car ready for the trip home. The nurse wanted to know what my name was for the paperwork. My uncle was there, and he gave her the name he thought was best for me. Alexandria Zenobia Alexander. Such a Russian thing to do, make my first name so close to my last.”

“It’s very Gogol.”

“Exactly. I waited my whole school career for a teacher to make that joke, and no one did. I was very disappointed.”

“Did you take Russian literature?”

“No. I didn’t think I had to. I inherited my uncle’s books. Most of the authors were Russian. I read *Lolita* for the first time the summer after he died.” The pain was still palpable, and I forced myself to stay in the present. “So now you know my name. One of numerous cities named for Alexander the great, and a Syrian queen, also used for a character in Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance*.”

“Not Russian literature.”

“No. It’s a typical American idea that a group of people who set off to make the perfect society would be so flawed that it would fall apart from the very beginning.”

“That’s what your books seem to focus on, the destructive aspects of society rather than the collaborative or constructive.”

“I don’t do it to be pessimistic, but I don’t want to write to make people feel good. I write to let them know I see the problems that are going on, and I want the people who are in those situations to know they’re not alone. Reaching out is more important to me than putting a smile on someone’s face. If I see a smile, it’s because somebody knows I understand, not because I can make a clever joke.”

“What about people who think you write for shock value?”

“They must have no knowledge of the world or any creativity of their own. What I write isn’t about them or their preferences. It’s about uncovering things that people shouldn’t have to go through in the first place. If it’s that shocking to you – and it should

be – go volunteer. Go out and prevent and help stop these things from happening. Then I wouldn't feel such a compulsion to write about them.”

“Are there things other than teenage girls in bad situations you want to write about?”

I narrowed my eyes playfully. “Are you trying to find out what I'm currently working on?”

“No. Well, maybe. I think any of your readers would want to know what you're working on.”

“I'm sticking with that theme for now. Hypocrisy and the teenagers it affects. That's all I'm willing to say.”

“I understand.”

Michael's smile still had a coyness to it that intrigued me. Was he trying to seduce me, or was I just being hopeful? I glanced at the digital recorder on the table. It was time to really test the waters. “Well, you got what you wanted. You lured my name out of me. Which do you want to be, Michael? A lover or a friend?”

He rubbed his chin, the squared bone structure making it the most rugged of his features. “I wasn't expecting questions directed to me.”

“Let's be honest. You've read my interviews. I can spot a single man from fifty feet, and you find me attractive.”

Michael hesitated. “I can't deny it.”

“So which is it going to be?”

Michael's grin wavered, interested but weighing the consequences. “You're serious?”

“Why not? We're two adults, like everybody else. I'm sure you can write a professional, unbiased article whether we fuck like rabbits or not.”

Michael reached out and turned off the recorder. His eyes shone. “I'll do my best. Lovers it is.”

We collected our things, and Michael tucked the recorder into his pocket. We discarded our cups in the trash and moved outside to my car. We said very little. We'd decided everything that needed to be known: he thought I was a genius, and I thought he could give me a much-needed good time.

I started to appreciate that stretch of over-commercialized road. Past a dozen restaurants and an outlet mall sat a compact but adequate hotel. The sun was already setting, getting stingier with its light as it moved toward the darker half of the year. We registered at the desk, using his lesser known name and my credit card. We rode the elevator to the fourth floor and unlocked our door.

What the room looked like didn't matter. A clean bed waited in the middle, and that was good enough for me. We pushed the door closed at the same time, his lips finding mine as the door clicked shut. I pulled him closer by his open jacket, the zipper teeth pressing into my palms as his hand warmed against my neck. He kissed me with an urgency I was glad for. I wouldn't have to spend the next few hours alone and bored. I had met the right match in Michael Singer.

Michael tugged at my jacket sleeves. Like him, I'd unfastened the front in the too-warm lobby. I shed it, letting it slip to the floor as we stumbled toward the bed. The breathing in the room was audible, almost desperate. Michael's unhurried conversation had tipped me off to his single status, but his eagerness told me he'd been single for some time. The possibility he might've turned me down seemed ridiculous. He needed relief as

much as I did – badly.

Michael stripped away the V-neck and black wide-leg trousers I'd chosen so carefully. I was more intent on getting him naked, ditching the polo shirt and jeans I thought too conservative for his hair if not his impetuous actions. His body deserved better, his light tan stretching across his sturdy chest and flat stomach. Dropping his jeans revealed long, muscular legs.

I edged Michael toward the bed and eased him into a sitting position. He bent his head and nuzzled his face against the exposed inner curves of my breasts. His hands wandered up and down my sides, over my stomach and across my lower back. I unhooked my bra and let the warm flush of Michael's breath heat my chest. His mouth closed around my nipple, and my fingers tightened in his hair to keep him close. He shifted to my other breast, and I exhaled grateful curse words under my breath. When he pulled his face back, I set each knee up on the bed to straddle his legs. Michael fell back, and I leaned my hand against his chest to keep him there. I scooted forward to grind against him as he moved against me.

I hadn't figured out how to solve the underwear problem when Michael turned us onto our sides, rolling me onto my back. He slid his hands down my hips to catch the sides of my underwear. I raised my butt off the bed, and he slipped off my only remaining clothes. I wasted no time, keeping Michael from making his next move. I hooked my fingers under the waistband of his underwear and pried them down. Michael lay down next to me, and I stripped off the last piece of clothing between us. He started to sit up, but I pressed him down again. I straddled his hips, running my fingers over his chest and his stomach. His eyes closed for moments at a time, savoring each sensation. I gripped my hands firmly around his staff, and I got his full attention, a continuous gaze full of intent. His hands met mine, and I lifted my hips to help him guide it inside me.

Relief flooded my muscles, softening my mood and heightening the tension. I laid my hand on his stomach, steadying myself as I followed my body into a rhythm. Michael moved with me in an unerring sense of timing, and even though I wanted the sex to last, I didn't have the patience. I leaned back, deepening every feeling inside me. I obeyed the rhythm until the spasms clenched and rippled through my body. Michael exhaled, his fingers gripping my thighs. He came in a series of moans, and I was surprised to feel my body respond with a second wave of pleasurable twinges. I slowed the rhythm of my hips until we both stopped moving. I felt almost triumphant sitting on top of Michael. Two hours had passed since we met, and I'd gotten everything I'd wanted since the moment we met.

My skin began to cool, and the temperature of the room pricked at my pores. Michael pulled the comforter toward us from the head of the bed, and I gave up my conquering position. Michael drew the comforter back far enough to slide under it, and I hesitated. Cuddling was not something I condoned on the first night or most other nights, but I did like Michael. He wasn't a hopeless romantic with puppy dog eyes. He knew what this was. I climbed under the soft sheet and stiff comforter beside Michael, my body languid with happiness and my mind blank with contentment. I closed my eyes with a sigh, letting random thoughts come and go as they pleased. The book signing had been successful enough for as small as it was. I'd planned to drive straight home afterward, but I wondered whether I should spend the night in town now that my body was closer to sleep than awake.

Michael was silent, and I was thankful for that. I liked talking to him, but I avoided after-sex conversations at all costs. They were often awkward and unnecessary.

Michael cleared his throat softly. "What do you think about love at first sight?"

I pushed a resentful exhale through my nose. At the first hint of the L word, I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the mattress. I kept my back to him, looking over the hotel room for the first time. The mauve carpet was slightly worn. The wallpaper was a shiny striped mix of cream, turquoise, and pink. A large painting of Victorian ladies carrying parasols through a park hung above the cheap wooden desk. A threadbare armchair sat past it in the far corner by the window.

Michael spoke up again. "Let me clarify that. I'm not saying that's what I feel."

My answer remained the same, irritated and cold. "I believe in lust at first fuck." I crouched over the floor and sorted through the scattered clothes, piling my own at my feet.

"Don't be like that. I just asked you a question."

I stood up to face him. My hand sliced the air for emphasis. "I don't do love. Not in my books, not in my life. Not in interviews, not in post-coitus questioning."

"I'll take that as a no, then."

"It's a no." I lowered myself back onto my haunches long enough to scoop up my clothes. I dropped them on the desk and pulled my underwear on first, a red thong outlined in scalloped lace, apparently wasted on Michael. "It's a no at first sight and all the other sights."

"How did you get so bitter?"

I hooked my bra behind my back with quick, practiced fingers. So I was seeing the real Michael now, as romantic and self-possessed as he was flirtatious.

Michael propped himself up on his elbows. "The usual high school tragedy?" he prompted.

I pulled my pants on and zipped them up. "I've managed to avoid tragedy in that area, thanks to being observant as a child."

"Is that so?"

I put on my socks. "People say I was jaded before I could get my heart trampled on, but I think I was just correctly informed."

Michael laughed, genuinely enjoying my attitude. "Why are you getting dressed? Get back in the bed and let me explain myself."

"You can explain yourself from there. I never get back in the bed after the L word comes out. I'm done with this."

"I feel a connection with you. That's all."

"Connections lead to relationships, which never lead anywhere good." I pulled my shirt on and adjusted the fit of it to hug my body in the best places.

Michael raised his eyebrows high. "Are you saying you've never had a relationship?"

"I've had *relations*, just not relationships."

"That's crazy. You have to be my age. When did they warn you against relationships? In kindergarten?"

My mother's voice popped into my head, as sarcastic as Michael's. "Preschool."

"That must've been some bad relationship you saw."

It wasn't really a relationship that came to mind. It came down to one sentence,

really, uttered by Uncle Grigori when it was all over: *I loved her, Xan, and she broke my heart.* His grey eyes had been so dark, focusing farther than they needed to, avoiding my young face. His hair, usually combed with neat precision, was left disheveled over his forehead and the tips of his ears. I circled his neck with my thin, insignificant arms. *I love you, Uncle Grigori. I'm still here.* It might have comforted him later, if the harsh sting of his rejection wavered, but it barely tilted the corners of his lips away from a frown. I was thinking more of Uncle Grigori's girlfriend than the end of their relationship when I answered Michael. "It was ugly."

"And you swore you'd never get hurt?"

"It wasn't that dramatic." I moved closer to the door, where I'd left my shoes. "Get dressed, and I'll drive you to your car."

"You're really not getting back in?"

"Why should I?"

"It's still early. There's more fun to be had before I drive back to Chicago and you go where you're going."

"I'm going home to my empty house."

"You don't have any pets?"

"Why would I want that responsibility? What would I do with them on book tours? What would I do with them when I'm trying to write and they want to climb all over me?"

"You could get a fish."

I picked my purse up off the floor.

"Dogs make very good companions," Michael added.

"Is that what you have?" I asked with distracted interest.

Michael nodded. He was still in bed and hadn't ticked a muscle toward getting out. "Jack Russell terrier."

"What's his name?" I liked to think I could tell a lot about a person by the names they gave their pets.

"Jack."

The obvious simplicity was almost a let-down. Michael probably liked its overt irony, and on that point, I did, too. But Michael had destroyed the mood by dropping the L word. I wasn't climbing back into bed with him because he was clever. "Are you getting up, or are you walking?"

Michael took his time sliding out of the bed, his once-hard cock no less impressive for having returned to its resting state. "Should I walk down there naked and see who else I can pick up tonight?"

"Do you know what would happen if I gave in to everybody who thought I was smart and sexy? I'd be dating until the end of time."

Michael stepped over his clothes and walked up to me. "You said let's be people, let's be adults. I'm being myself. I like your writing, and I like getting to know the real you even more."

It was a good speech, but my mind was made up. "I'm sorry you ruined things, Michael. I liked talking to you, too."

He watched me, and I hoped he wouldn't try to kiss me. He walked back to his clothes and got dressed, still moving in his unhurried pace. He put his jacket on last and lifted the recorder out of its pocket. "I don't have to post the interview if you don't want

me to.”

“It’s up to you. I trust you to keep the flirting between us.”

Michael slipped the recorder into his pocket. “It’ll be erased by noon tomorrow.”

I felt a little disappointed that the evening had soured, but I reminded myself the L word had been dropped. There was no recovering from a mistake like that. “Are you ready to go?”

“I have all my stuff.”

I felt bad for him, but it proved my point. I lowered my voice. “This is why I don’t do relationships.” I opened the door.

Michael walked ahead of me into the hallway, and we made our way back to the bookstore. I was grateful he pointed out his car without me having to ask which one it was.

“The little grey one. Over there.”

I pulled in next to it, missing the curve and squeeze of Michael’s ass already. “Good luck editing the interview,” I said.

“Good luck on your book.”

The tone in Michael’s voice reassured me. It was candid and bright. There were no hurt feelings here, but his eyes gave him away. Even in the hazy lamp light of the parking lot, they were serious and preoccupied.

“Have a safe drive to Chicago.”

“I want to see you again.”

“That’s not a good idea.”

“Based on what? We both have literary backgrounds. We know we have chemistry.”

I tried to make a flimsy excuse sound valid. “Chicago is a few hours from where I live.”

“I’d make the drive. I’m as determined as you are to get what I want.”

“Nobody’s as determined as I am. Thank you for the interview. I do appreciate it.”

“I do, too.”

“Goodbye, Michael.”

He tilted his head amicably and stepped out of the car. I waited until he unlocked his car and opened the driver’s door. I backed my car up and sped out of the lot.

In the morning, I was plagued by memories of dropping Michael off at his car. I could see his eyes and the unspoken thoughts behind them. He hadn’t suddenly given in to me. He was plotting something. I picked through the day-old mail on the entrance hall table. The seal on the front door lost suction as it opened, and my part-time assistant stepped into the hall. Instead of my usual “Good morning,” I grumbled an order. “If anybody named Michael calls, I don’t want to talk to him.”

Melody’s agreement couldn’t hide the lilt of confusion in her voice. “Okay.”

I looked up from the mail. Melody studied me, surprised by my mood. She closed the door behind her. Her copper hair was secured in a streamlined ponytail, and her glasses gave her the look of an older, more accomplished secretary.

“Which Michael?” she asked. “I don’t want to drop the wrong call.”

“Michael Singer. He’s a book reviewer from Chicago.” I lifted the unexpected home décor catalog off the table. It was worth a flip through before I dropped it in the recycle bin. “The rest of the mail can be put in the shredder.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’ll be in my office. Start some coffee for me, will you? I’m running behind.”

I left the back half of the hall, turning in front of the kitchen and taking the short jaunt to my office at the rear of the house. I opened the blinds to the backyard and turned on the computer. I ignored my email for the time being and opened the current draft of my novel in progress. I’d left a note on the desk about a paragraph I’d added before leaving for the book signing, and I returned to scrutinizing its intricate wording. It needed just the right tone.

Unnumbered minutes slipped by before Melody knocked on the open door. She held the cordless phone to her chest, and a smile stretched across her lips.

“It’s Michael,” she said in a pleased, breathy voice.

My eyes narrowed. “Hang it up.”

“Xan, he sounds so sophisticated, and his voice is so sexy.” Melody carried the phone to me, still pressing the microphone against her white t-shirt. “Why wouldn’t you want to talk to him? I don’t understand what happened.”

I resented stealing time from writing to explain my private life. “He said the L word to me, and we’re not speaking.”

“He thought you were a lesbian?”

“He said love.”

“He wants to talk to you.” Melody held out the phone. Her crisp brown eyes lit up with hope and encouragement.

I didn’t want to waste any more time arguing with her. I snatched the phone from her hand. “Hello?” I croaked.

Michael’s voice, as sexy as it might’ve been, wasn’t as welcome in my ear. “Good morning.”

“How did you get this number?” I was vaguely aware of Melody slipping out of my office, her sneakers squeaking across the hallway’s wooden floor.

“I called your agent in New York.”

So Sheryl had betrayed me, too. “I’ll be calling her later. What did you say to her?”

“I told her the truth. We had an interview, and I had more questions for you. She was ecstatic about the interview, by the way.”

“I’m sure she was. I’m also sure your questions have nothing to do with my books.” I heard Melody rummaging in the kitchen, closing cabinet doors and sliding drawers open. “You charmed my assistant, too. I told her I didn’t want to take this call.”

“I wanted to call you before you forgot how much you like being with me.”

“You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you?” I turned my chair away from the computer, unable to concentrate on my book. Outside the window, the sun had come up over the rest of the horizon, lighting up a summer blue sky in the autumn landscape.

Michael persisted. “Am I lying?”

I didn’t answer for a long time. I never liked admitting the truth when it didn’t serve me. “No.”

“How about this? We meet again, and we fuck like rabbits, and I won’t use words that annoy you anymore.”

I sat through a longer silence. It was an intriguing idea, but I wasn’t sure he could do it. “I wouldn’t mind seeing you again for a short visit, but I have my doubts.”

“About what?”

“You get attached too easily. You seem like you’re ready to jump into a relationship with the first person who interests you enough to look twice, and that someone can’t be me.”

Michael chuckled. “At what point did I give you the impression I couldn’t just sleep with someone?”

“The second you dropped the L word.”

“That was a slip, I promise. It’s not what I meant.”

“Just the same, when was your last relationship, and how long did it last?”

“An actual relationship, or one of those three-week things?”

I thought for a moment. Even I was capable of a three-week fling if he was busy and independent. I could forgive those. “A full-on relationship.”

“I was with Janelle seven years. That ended four years ago.”

“I’m checking for rebounds.”

Michael laughed. “You’re checking for serial monogamy.”

“Yes, that too.”

“Believe it or not, I am not the Casanova of Chicago.”

“It’s a good title, though, for a book or a person.” I turned to my desk and picked up a pen and notepad I always kept nearby. I scribbled down a note: *Casanova of Chicago*.

Michael pressed on. “If you want to see me, there’s no reason we can’t get together. Do I pass your screening?”

“Surprisingly, yes. It has more to do with your performance last night than anything you’ve said this morning.”

Michael didn’t answer, and I imagined him grinning like a fool.

“Don’t be smug. If you’d called when Melody wasn’t here, I wouldn’t have talked to you. I know how to screen my calls.”

“Why did you take it, then?”

“You are nicely built, Michael.”

He laughed harder. “You make me sound like a boat.”

“You were a very good ride.”

“I’ll take that, if that’s what it takes to see you again.”

I needed to give him another test. I still didn’t believe him. “Do you want to see me for pleasure or conversation?” I asked.

Michael paused slightly. “Mostly for pleasure.”

“You’re learning fast.”

“The interview will be up on the site by tonight, so we won’t have as much to talk about.”

“People shouldn’t say more to each other than what gets them in bed. All that other stuff is what gets people in trouble.”

“That’s a great quote. Do you mind if I write it down?”

“Go ahead.” I gave Michael several seconds to get started. “When did you want to get together?”

“It’s early yet. How about tonight?”

I wondered if he assumed I’d label this as more evidence of his clingy personality. I found it a relief, the thought of seeing Michael so soon and finishing the tryst I shouldn’t have started. “That’s fine.”

“I could drive down.”

“All right.” I liked his willingness to please me, but I realized this meant either paying for another hotel room or inviting him into my home. I looked over my office, a room no one but Melody and me had been in for years. Books packed the built-in shelves I’d had custom built after moving in. The plant in the large ceramic pot by the door was yellowing and starting to wither, in need of more attentive watering. Could I see Michael here? Did I want to see Michael here? His silence dragged on, and I thought he might be mulling over the same question of where to continue our ill-imagined coupling.

“I could pay for the hotel this time,” he offered.

Hearing it made it sound silly. “No. My bed is better.”

“That’s a fact?”

“Yes. I know where to spend my money.” I lingered over the books, crammed onto the shelves more than they were stacked. The vertical rows served as shelves for thinner layers of horizontal and diagonal volumes. A sentence slipped out of my mouth I was surprised to hear myself say. “You might be interested in the extent of my reading collection.”

“I’m sure I would be. I don’t usually get invited to writers’ houses.”

“You don’t sleep with that many writers?” I joked.

“Posers, mostly. Everybody says they’re working on a novel, but maybe it’s only an excuse to get me back to their apartment.”

“I can understand that.”

I gave Michael my address and told him it was the white one outside the city with the white door and wholly unoriginal white fence. “I keep meaning to replace it.”

“I’ll find it,” he assured me.

We set a time and said goodbye. I laid the cordless on the desk.

Melody poked her head in the door, leaning her body against the frame. “So what happened? What’d he say?”

“You’ll be gone before he gets here.” I picked up the cordless and held it out to her.

Melody skipped across the office and took it from me. Her bright smile was impossible to ignore. “You’re having an affair?”

“Did you think I didn’t have them?”

“I don’t usually get exposed to them when they’re going on.” Melody stayed in front of me, clutching the phone to her chest.

I didn’t want to linger on the cordless or my recent call. “The plant needs watering.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Where’s my coffee?”

“It’s coming. I’ll bring it.”

My voice lowered into an ominous, cranky warning. “Now, please.”

Melody smiled as she swept out of the room, taking the accursed phone with her. I returned to the books filling the far wall, wanting them reorganized but knowing I would have to do it myself. Melody would have no way of knowing which were my favorites and which I kept out of obligation for various reasons. Some were old and tattered, smelling too strongly of must and mildew for me to read them. Some were the compact trade paperbacks I loathed for the boxy feel of them in my hands but tolerated for transportability. Soon Michael would be here, scanning the titles, clicking his tongue at them and telling stories about his own reading history. I was ready for that, but I wouldn’t

let him break the spell of this room. Books and their material were boundless. They belonged to everyone. This office was mine.

I heard Melody's rubber soles on the hardwood floor and called out before I saw her. "I need all my books moved out to the living room, please. This afternoon. Before you go."

Melody turned into the office, a substantial mug streaming steam from her delicate hand. "All of them? To the living room?"

"Exactly. I'll go through them later, but I need you to move them for me."

"All right." Melody eyed the massive shelving unit taking up the entire wall. The shelves were only interrupted by a row of white cabinets at the bottom used for storing printed manuscripts and office supplies. She seemed to be counting the books, not in their number but the number of trips, the number of hours it might take her to move them. The intimidated tilt of her eyebrows belied the cheerful tone of her voice. "I can do that."

"Coffee, please."

Melody set the mug on the desk. "When is Michael coming?"

"Why does it matter? You're not meeting him." I sipped the coffee to make sure it was pure and bitter, knowing it would be too hot to drink by the mouthful for several minutes.

Melody was practically bouncing up and down. "It's exciting. All I'm doing tonight is reading the rest of The Ya-Ya Sisterhood, eating ice cream, and going to bed. By myself."

"He's not staying here. He's just coming over."

"You're saying I'll never get to meet him?"

"No, you won't. Not in my house. If you're so interested, go to Underrated Media dot com. His picture's probably there with a cute little bio."

Melody brightened her smile.

"He's more your type than mine. He comes across as desperate." I tasted my coffee again, craving the caffeine but hoping not to burn my tongue.

"You mean affectionate? Loyal?"

"Smothering."

"Don't you like to feel needed, Xan?"

I dipped my face for another sip of coffee, but my lips stopped above the edge of the mug. I raised my eyes to Melody's hopeful expression. "Have you read my books? I prefer to feel sane and grounded. Save the plant and move the books. I have to finish this chapter, or I'm going to waste the whole day."

Melody left the room, and I swiveled the chair back to the computer. I put the coffee down and returned to the handful of word choices I'd jotted down as questionable. Most readers wouldn't notice the difference, but I would, and I took it as a personal responsibility to represent my ideas as clearly as I could.

Later that night, if Michael insisted on bringing up his feelings or future meetings, I was prepared to make myself clear. We had no future. I had no future with anyone, nor did I want one. If he could have sex without strings attached, he'd better be prepared to have it with me. That is all that had ever interested me.

Ten Years Later

Chapter 1: Xan

Annoyance tightened my chest, the same tension that plagued me every time I argued with my mother. Her familiar opinions squawked into my ear from the phone. I knew what all of them were without listening. I stood in the foyer, not sure when I'd wandered there during the long conversation. The phone's unforgiving plastic sent a burning soreness through the ridge of my ear. My elbow ached from its bent position even though I'd switched hands several times. My jaw clenched in defense as I started listening again.

"How can you not think of getting married?" my mother asked. "You're forty-three. What are you waiting for? Your death?"

I jumped right back into defending myself. "That's the one question left, isn't it? You can't ask me about having children anymore. You had a good run with it, though. Over twenty years."

My mother huffed. "Is it such a strange question to ask? Is it such a horrible thing for me to want for you? All of my friends have the cutest little grandbabies to play with. I'm the only one who doesn't except for Sofia, and you know how sad that was." My mother let a few beats pass for Sofia's daughter's miscarriage, which was a heart-rending situation. "I don't understand why you were so opposed to the idea of having children."

I'd been over it a thousand times. "What part of it was supposed to entice me? The lack of sleep, the diapers, the drool?"

"The love, daughter. The pride of seeing your child grow and succeed. The fulfillment that comes from raising a child into independent adulthood."

"Tell me, then. How fulfilling was it?"

My mother remained upbeat despite her firm honesty. "With you, awful, but there were some good years. We had good times together. You remember them, too."

"Yes, those were such good times before I learned to talk."

"It wasn't your talking that got you into trouble, at least not until you were in school. It was walking that gave me the most to worry about. When you started reading, you were easier to keep in one spot. I always knew where you were."

"Don't romanticize my reading habits." My eyes fell on the wide doorway to the living room, and I glanced behind me the length of the foyer to make sure no one was coming through the house. I liked to keep my arguments with my mother as private as possible. "You didn't like what I was reading any more than you like anything that I've written."

"Your books," my mother sighed, defeated. "I don't want to talk about them today. You know how I feel. The things they tell me your books are about. It makes the family look awful. Your father's heart can't take it."

"I'm not surprised you only know about my books from other people. I don't think you've read any of my writing from the day I wrote my first poem." It had been about daisies when I was eight. My writing had changed considerably since then.

"Would it be so difficult to write about something else?" my mother insisted. "Don't you care at all about what you're doing to us? The image you're giving our family?"

"I write for women, not for the family."

I heard the footsteps I'd been dreading, crossing the linoleum of the kitchen at a slow

but steady pace. I turned my back to them, turning down the volume on the phone to keep my mother's tirade inside my ear.

My mother scoffed in disbelief. "You write for women? Women don't want to read about such things. We want to read about shopping and dating and food. My friends are reading these funny little mysteries that come with recipes right in the book. Why can't you write something like that instead of this trash?"

Michael set his hand on my shoulder, ducking his head to kiss the free side of my neck. His lips moved close to my ear. "Is that your mother?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"Have you been talking a long time?"

I shifted the phone away from my mouth and answered him. "Interminably."

"Let's put her on speakerphone." Michael dropped a fingertip onto the phone base on the table. Where I was tired and irritated, Michael was fresh and casual. "Hello, Anna, it's Michael. How are you?"

My mother's terse tone barely softened. "Hello, Michael. I'm fine. How are you?"

"Good. What are you two lovely ladies talking about today?"

I set my hand on my hip, leaning closer to Michael while I watched for changes in his expression. "She wants me to think about getting married."

Michael started to laugh but turned it into a smile. "Anna, be honest. Would you really pick me for your son-in-law?"

"No, I would not."

"You know Xan does things in her own time." Michael paused. "Remember how long it took for her to warm up to me? It was years before I moved into the house."

"We've had our talks about that, too."

Michael set his hand on the table. He smoothed his voice over even more, all but crooning into the phone base. "Come on. Don't be angry with me."

My mother relaxed, but I could hear the distance, the resentment. "We don't all have your patience, Michael. I wish I did."

"It's not about patience. It's about respecting what Xan wants."

"Forgive me, but what Xan wants hasn't always made sense to me or most other people. I'm still trying to convince her she should find new subjects for her books."

"I don't think she should." Michael straightened up and wrapped his arm around me. "I love her books the way they are. Her fans would riot if she changed what she wrote about."

My mother turned to pleading. "Are you sure you can't talk her into toning it down? There must be something else that interests her, something else she could write about."

What other subject did I like enough to write about? "Erotica," I muttered.

Michael stifled a chuckle and left a kiss on my cheek. "The literary community, not to mention society, needs more writers like Xan with honesty and persistence. These are stories that need to be told."

My mother's tone lowered to a more serious one. "Don't placate me with your ready reviews. I always considered you the more practical of the two."

"Practical, yes, but my loyalty is to your daughter."

"I hope it serves you well, Michael. I'd hate to see you waste your life. I've spent over forty years trying to reason with Xan and give her what she wants. You might find out as I have, that above most things, Xan doesn't want to be reasoned with."

I eyed the red button on the phone base. It would be easy to press it and end the call right there. My mother wouldn't bother to call back to argue with me twice in a day.

Michael carried on, his voice light and assuring. "It's not wasted, Anna. Don't you worry."

"I hope not," my mother replied. "Just because I wouldn't want you for my son-in-law doesn't mean I don't like you."

Michael was finally stumped, and I met his glance with a shrug. She'd rendered me speechless and confused my whole life.

Michael's response wasn't as easy and prompt as the others, but it came out pleasantly. "Thank you. I appreciate that. Have a good rest of your day."

My mother hesitated, realizing Michael was brushing her off and ending her conversation with me. "You, too. I'll talk to you later, Xan."

I had nothing more to say. I was glad she was taking the graceful way out instead of asking to talk to me again. "Bye."

Michael pressed the button I'd been eyeing, and the phone fell into silence. He shifted half a step away from me. "I was only out back for half an hour. How did she get through the weather and family health to the M word so quickly?"

I couldn't explain it. It made my head spin to follow her deft weaving between subjects. "She's got years of practice. She always says exactly the same thing. She blames me for Dad's heart problems instead of his diet. She doesn't know what my books are about."

"Maybe you should mail her some copies."

"I will if I want to see them covered in dust the next time I'm there."

Michael pulled me into a warm hug, his long hair brushing my cheek. "What makes you think she wouldn't mail them back?"

I rested my temple against Michael's shoulder. "She could never look that ungrateful. But she'd put them in the basement where they couldn't bother Dad and his sensitive heart."

Michael kissed the top of my forehead. "Your readers know none of those things ever happened to you."

"For Mom to know that, she'd have to read my interviews. That's asking too much of the woman who gave birth to me. She got me here. Now she's done with me."

"I can try explaining the difference between fiction and non-fiction again."

I pulled away. "You've told her that every year for the last ten years. It hasn't changed anything."

Michael smoothed over the air with his hand. "Your mother's like a rock. She has to be worn away slowly over time."

"Wake me up in a million years, then, when she's finally accepted modern literature and us living together."

"She's predictable, isn't she?"

"Yes." Knowing my mother's favorite subjects didn't keep them from exhausting me. I was glad Michael had inserted himself into our conversation and come to my rescue. How he could soothe and tame my mother, I'd never know. "You could've been a hostage negotiator."

Michael laughed with amiable appreciation. He stepped in close and kissed me. Ten years hadn't softened the effect he had on me. The silky strands of his hair still caught my

attention and kept my hands there. His lips moved with a pressure and familiarity that reassured me and kept me wanting more.

But this wasn't a spare moment in my day I could stretch into more. My mother had interrupted me making lunch between work and more work. I leaned away from Michael as much as I hated to. "I should get back to my book."