

## Chapter 1

I wrote my first blog today. I thought it sucked, but Scotty loved it. He looked up from the laptop screen, turned to me with his wide, knee jerking smile and winked. "Sweetie, you've got a winner," he said in a sexy baritone voice.

I gazed at him in wonder, momentarily lost in the blue of his gorgeous eyes. Too bad he was gay. "Do you really think so?" I wasn't sure if I should take his compliment at face value. He was, after all, my best friend and bound to be biased. But I didn't have time to muse about this for long because I was distracted by the tinkling of the bell above the shop door, announcing we had a customer. Scotty rushed forward to greet them and I was left alone with my thoughts, even though my eyes followed him.

The customer was a well dressed, elderly woman who seemed to fall under Scotty's spell immediately. He had that effect on people, both gay and straight. I smiled. If only I could say the same thing for myself. After my recent break up with Josh, I wasn't sure that I "had it" anymore. But I didn't even want to go there right now—better to stay focused on my blog. While Scotty helped his customer with a Queen Anne cake platter, I leaned on the shop counter where the laptop rested and read from the screen.

### Cat Ryan's Dating Blog #1

*Gen Y'ers are doing it. So why not us old fogies? Yes, you guessed it. I'm talking about internet dating. Now, before you recoil in horror, keep an open mind and read on. The worst that can happen is that you learn something new.*

*What's so special about internet dating? Well, for one thing, it's low cost, as opposed to going through a professional dating agency that will often charge exorbitant fees and put you through a bunch of psychological profiling questionnaires; only to end up matching you with your ex-husband! Before you snicker and shake your head in disbelief, let me tell you that it's true. Why do I know this? Because it happened to me—and what are the chances? A million to one, right? And yet it happened, and I didn't even get my \$3000 fee refunded. So my advice is: STAY AWAY FROM DATING AGENCIES!*

*Another reason why internet dating is so cool is that you get a chance to shop around and get a feel for the person before you meet them. You can check out their profile, see their photo and even chat with them online. So you might say you get to test run the car before you buy it.*

Not too bad. I wasn't exactly over the moon with it, but it wasn't that bad. Plus, the bit about being matched with the ex was true. When I was in my late twenties, after my marriage broke up, I had gone to a dating agency, against my will but at the urging of my friends. Just like I'd written in the blog, after a series of tests with a relationships counselor—the agency claimed they wanted to get a feel for their clients—I was matched with my ex-husband. After this, I gave up on the program. They promised six introductions to professional men for three thousand dollars. This was an exclusive agency and not one that introduced you to riff raff. But hey, they'd introduced me to my ex, and while he was a professional business person he was still riff raff as far as I was concerned.

The old lady let out a whoop of laughter and I looked up to see her hand resting on Scotty's forearm. "You're so naughty! Look at me, I'm blushing," she said to him. I assumed he had paid her some outrageous compliment.

Scotty is like that. It's all a part of his charm. He patted the lady's hand and then picked up a lovely Art Deco mirror in the shape of a half moon. The lady's eyes lit up at the sight of it and I knew Scotty had made another sale. I smiled and looked back down at the computer screen. The rest of my blog went on to discuss some statistics I had researched about the increasing number of Gen X'ers and baby boomers who were getting into internet dating, then finished off with some do's and don'ts to keep in mind when dating through the net.

Scotty came back to ring the sales through the cash register and I slipped out to the small office at the back of the shop to make coffee for us. "So how many items did you sell to that poor woman?" I asked when the customer left and I handed him a mug of coffee.

His dazzling smile almost knocked me over with the power of its sex appeal and I had to remind myself yet again that he was gay. Scotty and I had known each other for years, since we met at an antiques fair and he asked me to work part-time at his shop. It had been a match made in heaven—it gave him the chance to go to auctions and estate sales, and me the opportunity to start writing my book on Renaissance art, while at the same time have what I called a "bread and butter" job.

From day one Scotty and I became fast friends and of late he'd come in very handy when I needed a date after my break up with Josh, my ex-fiancé. My heart contracted with pain for a moment, but I quickly refocused my attention back to Scotty.

"She purchased the cake platter, the mirror and an exquisite Clarice Cliff tea set," he said, pleased with himself. "Oh, and speaking of tea sets..." He disappeared for a few moments, only to return with a lovely Moroccan tea set, complete with a small brass platter table top and hand worked wooden stand. "What do you think?" He asked as he set down the small table in front of me.

I took in the wonderful craftsmanship of the pieces. The engraved brass tray had intricate motifs that complemented the hand carved wooden base with its musharabi decorations. A silver tea pot with hand worked legs and a high conical lid completed the set along with six glasses, worked in colours of red, green or blue on the top half of each delicately carved glass. It was a beautiful set. "Moroccan caravan tea set?" I ventured.

Scotty nodded, rapture in his eyes. "It's at least two hundred years old."

"Wow! I love it. But where did you find it?" I ran my fingers gently along the intricately carved wooden stand.

"Estate sale in Forestville. Remember the one I went to about a month ago?"

I nodded as I picked up one of the tea glasses. The piece was fragile, the glass wafer thin. "Well, I have to say it's absolutely gorgeous."

"I know. Rick's going to love it."

"One of your clients?" I asked. Scotty always scouted around for his regular clientele. He had a long list of wealthy buyers and collectors.

"Yes, Rick," Scotty replied, and the look on his face was one of romantic contemplation.

I laughed. "You're a big flirt, Scotty. But what about the delectable Mark? Where is he these days?" Mark was Scotty's on-again, off-again boyfriend.

Scotty threw me a look of mock derision. "You're jumping to conclusions too fast, as always."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “So you keep telling me. But what am I supposed to think when you look like you’ve seen a young version of George Michael?”

He turned his nose up at me. “Okay, I’m putting this back now.”

I knew he was just pretending to be upset and I followed him around the floor as he headed toward a corner of the store and behind a large, hand painted Chinese screen, where he stored pieces already spoken for. “So what’s going on?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Well, if you must know, Rick is the owner of Rick’s Café,” he stated, as if I was supposed to know the significance of this. Scotty sighed at my look of ignorance. “Like Casablanca,” he added, and waited for me to react.

I still didn’t know what he was trying to say. “Okay. So?”

Scotty threw his hands up in the air, giving up on me, and made his way back to the sales counter with me in tow. “Honestly, darling, where have you been?”

“Too busy wallowing in self pity,” I said before I could help myself. Scotty saw the threat of tears in my eyes and dropped his guise of indignation.

“Oh, come here. Come to Scotty,” he said, his arms beckoning me. I sniffed back the tears and moved into the circle of his arms for one of his comforting hugs. It was wonderful to be held by a gorgeous man, even one who was my dear friend and not in the least bit interested in me, aside from our friendship. But it was still good for the sake of my self esteem. Josh had really done a job on me.

“I know it’s only been a few months,” Scotty said as he held me. “But you’re just going to have to make an effort and move on. I mean, look at you. You’re an attractive woman who can have any man.”

*Not quite*, I said to myself. I couldn’t have Josh. So what was the point of being attractive? Josh had said I was beautiful. Yet that hadn’t stopped him from cheating on me.

“Well, perhaps you’ll meet someone through this internet dating project of yours,” Scotty remarked.

My head shot up and I stepped away from his embrace. “Now, let’s get one thing straight. I picked up this gig because my ex-editor wanted me to do a bit of freelancing for the magazine’s blog.” Prior to my decision to write a book, I had been writing for a women’s magazine as a regular contributor. The magazine ran a popular blog and they were doing a series of articles on internet dating. My editor, with whom I still kept in touch, had contacted me to see if I was interested in doing the blog posts. The money was good and every little bit helped.

After my break up with Josh, I’d had to move out of his lovely Double Bay townhouse, and all I could afford was to rent a small studio atop an art Gallery near Scotty’s shop in Paddington. At the time, Scotty had suggested that I move in with him and share his beautiful terrace, but I didn’t want to get in the way of him and his stormy relationship with Mark. So I opted for living nearby instead. Though Mark was a flight attendant and hardly ever around, I still would have felt like a third wheel if I’d moved in; and the fact that I would be around them all the time might have had an effect on my friendship with Scotty.

The blog gig was for a period of three months and I had to write one blog post per week, plus reply to any comments from readers. The editor wanted me to date through the internet and write about my experiences. In exchange for this, I was paid five hundred dollars per blog post. Not bad, even if it was going to be a short lived job. The good thing was that if the blog started to get plenty of hits, the editor might extend the time frame. This was welcome news, seeing as I

was now paying for rent, groceries and bills whereas when I had lived with Josh I had paid nothing.

He hadn't wanted me to pay for anything, perhaps out of guilt. Up to that time, my part-time job at Scotty's shop had been more than enough to provide me with personal expense money while I worked on my book. But then things changed. I had only been living with Josh for about a year, when I became aware of his infidelity; and then I left him. Luckily, Scotty was able to give me a few more hours of work per week and this helped with my finances. The blogging work really came in as a bonus. So I had managed to cope financially since my break up—only just.

"I know you're not really ready to date yet," Scotty said, unaware of my thoughts. "All I'm saying is that you should keep an open mind. You just never know who you're going to meet out there." He grabbed hold of my arm and marched me to stand in front of a gilt edged Venetian mirror. "Look at yourself. You're young and vibrant. What man wouldn't want to go out with you?"

I attempted a smile as I took in my appearance. Almond shaped green eyes looked back from a youngish face framed by short blonde hair. High cheekbones and a pair of pouty lips completed the picture. "I have crow's feet," I announced.

Scotty laughed. "You're joking, right?" I shook my head. No, I wasn't joking. "You're crazy," Scotty went on. "You're blessed with the best of both your parents—Italian complexion from your mother, silky soft and olive skinned; and gorgeous green eyes from your Irish father."

"And beautiful blonde hair from the hairdresser," I added impishly, "in order to hide the emerging grey." I tried to smile again, but my lips had other ideas and I looked like a sad smiley icon.

"Okay, so what?" Scotty remarked. "We all need a bit of cosmetic help." He only said this because he had just turned thirty and was in his prime, while I was on the cusp of forty. I moved away from the mirror and went back to the sales counter.

"You didn't finish telling me about the Casablanca thing," I reminded him. I wanted to steer his attention away from the topic of dating and my looks.

"That's right," he said, and glanced at his coffee mug. "How about a refill while I finish off with my paperwork? Then, I'll tell you all about it." But he didn't have a chance to tell me anything because another customer walked in and the rest of the day kept us busy. By the time we had a chance to stop and take a breather it was close to five in the afternoon.

"I'm going to an interstate auction on Thursday and I'll be taking the weekend off and staying on in Brisbane. Mark is flying in and we need some time together. I was wondering if you'd house sit for me and look after Henry," Scotty said as I was getting ready to go home.

"Sure," I replied without hesitation. After all, I had nothing planned except for working on my next blog post, and trying to scare up an internet date so I would have something to write about. "Do you want me to keep the store open right through?" The weekend was the busiest time.

"If you don't mind," Scotty said. "I'll pay you overtime."

"No need," I replied. "Just pay me my normal rate. I'll be living at your place and making sure I eat you out of house and home." I smiled. Scotty was a fair boss and he'd been so wonderful to me since my break up with Josh that I didn't have the heart to accept extra for working on a weekend. Besides, I would be writing for the blog in between customers. "By the way, you must tell me if anything has changed in Henry's diet," I reminded him. Henry was Scotty's big marmalade cat, who was spoiled rotten but lovable all the same. Scotty loved the cat

as if it were his own child and, being an animal lover myself, I could relate to it. Besides, I was Henry's honorary aunt, as Scotty put it, and loved the big cat. He was soft and fluffy and a hell of a lot better company than Josh had ever been.

"Diet's the same: kangaroo meat one day and tuna the next. Biscuits all day long with plenty of drinking water."

I put on my coat as it was cold out even though we were in the middle of spring and picked up my handbag in preparation to go. "Okay. Have a good trip and give my regards to Mark," I said.

Scotty looked up from his paperwork. "Will do. And before you go, can you do me a favour on Friday after you close?"

I nodded.

"I need you to deliver the tea set to Rick," Scotty said, writing out the contact details and address of the customer. "I told him I'd do it, but now I'm not going to be here."

"Okay, I'll do it," I said, taking the paper from him and reading the client's name—Rick Blake. "Aaahh," I added, with sudden understanding. "No wonder he named his place Rick's Café. It's his name. Just the change of a few letters at the end of the surname and you get *Rick Blaine* from *Casablanca*." I was referring to the name of the character played by Humphrey Bogart in the movie.

"That's what I was trying to tell you," Scotty said. "Rick's not gay, by the way." He gave me a knowing look that made me sigh with impatience. He never gave up.

"Forget it," I said. "If you're trying to—"

"I'm not trying anything," Scotty interrupted. "It's just that it's a big coincidence, about the movie and all that. Plus Rick's from New York, just like *Rick Blaine*."

"Big deal," I dismissed the whole thing. "Lots of people are from New York."

Scotty threw me a dazzling smile that only served to remind me how sex starved I was. Oh God!

"Sure lots of people are from New York, but not many are named Rick Blake and have a cafe called Rick's Café. I'm telling you, it's like *Casablanca*."

I rolled my eyes and grabbed the spare set of keys from the register drawer. "Have a nice trip," I said, and planted a kiss on his cheek on my way out.

Outside, I clutched the lapels of my coat close to my breast in order to keep out the chill wind as an image of Bogie popped into my head. I started to walk down the street humming "As time goes by".

## Chapter 2

Henry eyed me with a calculating look in his amber glare and in an instant jumped up on the suede camel coloured lounge. He proceeded to turn repeatedly in circles as he tested the softness of the sofa with his paws and then nestled down against my thigh. He would have settled on my lap if I hadn't had my laptop resting on it.

"Does your father let you climb on the furniture?" I asked the fluffy orange cat as he began to groom himself, starting with his front paws. "Stupid question, of course. You probably own this whole place, right?" The cat looked up at me for the briefest of moments and then returned to his grooming, as if to say: "Ask a stupid question and you'll get a stupid answer."

I turned my attention back to the computer screen and read through yet another profile on the internet dating site. God, I'd been at this since I'd finished dinner two hours earlier and out of the tens of profiles I'd read through I couldn't settle on anyone in particular. My second blog post was due in the next few days and I still didn't have a date. I sighed with exasperation and looked around the room in order to distract myself from my gloomy thoughts.

Being an antiques lover you'd think Scotty would own an antique style home. Surprisingly, his terrace in Paddington had been renovated to reflect modern contemporary decor, with off-white walls and a white ceiling sprinkled with down lights shining on fine New Zealand wool carpet in a cinnamon colour. The house consisted of a large, rectangular lounge room, medium sized formal dining room and eat-in kitchen downstairs and three bedrooms upstairs—the main one opening onto a Victorian veranda overlooking the tree lined street below.

The whole place was furnished with modern furniture, but Scotty did bring in some eclectic pieces that he couldn't live without. One of them, was a black lacquered papier mâché bonheur du jour, circa 1840, that he had purchased as a birthday present for Mark during his last trip to London. This was a small, narrow "day desk" supported by spindly legs, beautifully inlaid with painted papier mâché, mother of pearl, tortoiseshell and ivory; all forming an intricate Oriental design. The price for this piece would have been around ten thousand dollars.

Another fine piece was an Italian ivory painted and marble side table from the 18<sup>th</sup> century with a dark green and yellow antique marble top and an elaborately carved frieze with scrolling foliage and flowers. This alone had cost him around fifty thousand dollars at auction in Sotheby's London.

I figured that I was in a home with at least half a million dollars worth of antiques, just sitting around with a large marmalade cat as a guard. I smiled as I pictured Henry scurrying away inside the nearest wardrobe in the event that burglars should break in. My musing thoughts were interrupted by the little chime on my computer, signifying I had email. The message was from the dating site I was perusing, notifying me that someone had sent me a "let's meet" request. I clicked on the link that would take me to the profile of my cyber admirer and prepared myself to read yet another lot of personal information.

The guy's name was Thomas. He was forty two years of age, civil engineer, divorced with two kids. He lived in the southern suburbs of Sydney and loved going to the movies, the beach and playing tennis. I scrolled further down on his profile page, but there wasn't much more information about him. His photo revealed an average looking guy with brown hair and blue eyes, and a nice enough smile.

I looked up from the profile and sighed yet again. I knew what the problem was. I was comparing everyone to Josh and this is why I couldn't make up my mind about who to date. Cheating aside, Josh was a good looking man; tall, athletic build with handsome boyish looks

and a successful architect to boot. He loved fine dining, arts and culture, expensive cars, travelling to exotic destinations and he was a sharp and stylish dresser. Josh had class. But where had that class got me? Nowhere. And it hadn't even stopped him from being a cheat. I looked back down to Thomas's profile and decided to click on the "let's meet" request. After all, they all seemed to be Thomases this evening and I didn't have the time or the heart to keep searching. I needed a date and fast.

I sent my reply, giving him access to my email address so we could make arrangements to meet up for coffee. While I did this, I remembered my own dating do's and don'ts. **Do** meet in a public place, preferably for coffee, so if things don't work out you only have to finish your drink and move on. **Don't** let him pick you up or give you a lift home. Meet him at the venue and make sure you have your own transport.

Once done with my reply to Thomas I decided to turn in for the night. Tomorrow was Friday and I had a long day ahead of me, running the store and then having to deliver the Moroccan tea set to Scotty's customer. Henry followed me to the bathroom and watched as I went through my getting-ready-for-bed routine. Then, he promptly jumped on the bed and nestled next to me after I pulled the quilt over my shoulders. It was still cold, but not enough for a heater. Besides, the purring mass of fluffiness next to me kept me warm.

"Good night, Henry," I said as I flipped off the light, and was rewarded with a soft meow and a little sandpaper tongue licking the back of my hand.

The following day, I was flat out at the shop selling a number of items to Paddington's elite. Scotty was sure to be pleased. I off loaded five expensive items: a French provincial armoire, a shabby chic buffet hutch, a sterling silver Russian samovar, circa 1880, a Venetian crystal chandelier from early 1900 and a delicate English knee hole ladies desk. Good work.

When I glanced at my watch I was surprised but pleased to see it was closing time. All I had to do now was deliver the Moroccan tea set and then I could go home, order a pizza and put my feet up. Scotty had a wonderful range of movie classics and I was itching to watch Casablanca seeing as I was dealing with its owner—or at least, a real life restaurateur who had chosen to name his place after a fictitious character.

I locked the shop's front door and switched off the showroom lights, then went to the small office where I proceeded to wrap the tea set with bubble wrap. The shop was quiet and I was already in down mode and starting to relax when the telephone on the office table shrilled, making me jump. It was one of those 1930s black Bakelite phones with a high pitched ring. I snatched up the receiver before the third ring, my heart still in my mouth. "Good evening, Sheppard Antiques," I said into the phone.

A rather deep timbered male voice spoke. "Scott Sheppard, please."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sheppard is not here," I informed the caller in my best business voice. I heard a sigh at the other end of the line.

"So where is he?" the caller asked, his voice impatient.

His tone got my back up and though I wanted to maintain my professionalism I couldn't help myself when I replied, "And who are you?"

There was a pause as if the caller was taken aback that I was challenging him and then I was left listening to an engaged signal. He'd hung up on me. How rude. I slammed the receiver down on its cradle and finished wrapping the tea set. I couldn't believe the nerve of some people. I looked at my watch and hurried. It was close to six now and my stomach was protesting for food. I'd only had a tiny sandwich at noon and hadn't even had a chance to have a coffee during the day. The caller forgotten, I rummaged through my handbag to find Rick Blake's details; then

left the shop through the back door that led to a narrow alley where my little Hyundai Getz hatchback was parked. I deposited the tea set carefully in the back and drove off to make my delivery. Rick's Café was in trendy and very expensive Woollahra, so I had no doubt that I was heading to an up market establishment.

On the way, I wondered whether the tea set was for use in the restaurant or for its owner. Scotty hadn't had time to tell me much about the place, except that the word "café" was simply adopted because of the theme of the place, but in reality the establishment was a renowned and well frequented restaurant that served modern Australian cuisine fused with Moroccan and a touch of Asian.

I turned left into Queen Street from Oxford Street and drove along the main drag, which was flanked by specialty shops, trendy cafés and expensive looking restaurants. At this time of evening there was absolutely no parking to be seen and once I reached my destination I drove around the corner, hoping there would be parking for patrons behind the restaurant. Luckily, there was and I managed to grab the last spot. I parked the car and carefully picked up the expensive tea set. I knew it had cost close to five thousand dollars so I had no doubt that the piece was for the owner rather than to use in the restaurant.

Walking back to the main street, I stopped in front of a whitewashed stucco building of Moroccan design with hand worked timber window shutters and a heavy and intricately carved wooden double door for an entrance. A red neon sign with an Arabic looking font lit up the top of the entrance way and read "Rick's Café". I stepped inside the foyer with its ochre coloured tiled floor and had a glimpse of a high ceilinged room with several curved arched exits that lead to what looked like other, more intimate, dining alcoves. There were potted palms all around casting mysterious shadows on the white walls. From the ceiling hung elaborately worked Moroccan brass lamps, shrouding the place in a muted golden light and giving it an atmosphere of intimacy. Octagonal tiled topped tables with bentwood chairs were interspersed around the rooms and some of the more intimate alcoves had plump cushions on which to sit, for diners who chose to dine Moroccan style and sit on the floor. At one end of the main dining room, there was a long, lacquered timber bar with shiny brass fittings and mirrored shelves on the wall that were full of spirit and wine bottles. Directly in front of me was the Maître'd greeting station, which consisted of a timber stand beautifully worked in musharabi.

The place was virtually a recreation of the 1942 movie set of Casablanca, except that this was a lot more sophisticated and, right now, buzzing with activity. Waiters wearing white shirts and pants with red cummerbunds passed by holding brass trays high up above their heads filled with dishes of food and drinks. There were diners at almost every table, even though it was still early for dinner. Meanwhile, a trio of musicians in one of the alcoves was gathered round a baby grand piano setting up their instruments in readiness for the evening's entertainment.

I noticed that some of the patrons were simply having coffee and cake, so it seemed that Rick's was not only a quality restaurant, but also a café for the discerning "café culture" crowd.

"May I help you?" A black man wearing a white tuxedo jacket with black pants and bowtie addressed me.

I was still taking in the whole atmosphere of the place and felt myself transported back in time to the Morocco of WWII. At any moment now, I expected to see Humphrey Bogart moving toward me. Instead, I saw Hugh Jackman walking across the floor in my direction. My heart did a double somersault. Wow, this place was really buzzing—even celebrities came here. But what was Hugh doing, wearing a white tuxedo jacket with a red bowtie, similar in fashion to the one of the man who was standing in front of me?

“What’s going on, Mohsen?” Hugh addressed the black man from a few feet away.

“Mr. Blake, sir, I’m just trying to help this lady,” Mohsen replied, and my jaw dropped. I quickly readjusted my focus and realized that the man walking toward me was not the actor, Hugh Jackman, but Rick Blake, Scotty’s client.

Rick Blake stood facing me and I closed my mouth. “How can I help you?” His voice had a familiar tone to it and I experienced a moment of *déjà vu*. There was the slightest of American accents in his rich, deep timbered... Oh my God! It was the rude man who’d hung up on me less than half an hour ago. I was tongue tied and desperately wondering how the hell I was going to get out of this one without being embarrassed.

I realized that Rick Blake was waiting for an answer and he had a faint look of impatience about him. I couldn’t do anything to help the situation now; it was too late. Luckily, I found my tongue. “I’m sorry,” I said, and cleared my throat as it threatened to shut down my vocal chords. “I’m from Sheppard’s. I have your tea set.” I nodded toward the packages in my arms and hoped I wouldn’t drop anything breakable.

Rick Blake addressed his employee. “Mohsen, please take the packages to the office. I will look after this lady.”

Great! He was going to give me a dressing down in private. Well, at least I wouldn’t have to suffer the humiliation of being told off in front of another person. Mohsen took the packages from me and walked off while Rick Blake motioned for me to follow him.

We crossed the floor and went toward the back of the bar where there was a cozy booth, almost hidden from view of the public. The booth was shielded by a lovely timber screen inlaid with mosaics forming an arabesque design. The seats were lined with red velvet and the table was made of timber with mosaic inlay, similar to the screen. There was a small brass lamp on the table casting an intimate glow. Rick Blake waited for me to take a seat and then sat opposite me. “Can I offer you something to drink? Coffee or something cooler?”

“A cappuccino will be fine, thank you,” I said as I momentarily lost myself in his smooth brown eyes. I still couldn’t get over his resemblance to the actor and I was having a difficult time trying to maintain my composure. This Rick was nothing like Casablanca’s. For starters, he wasn’t in black and white—he was in full cinemascope colour and in 3-D! Not only that, he was doing things to my body that I didn’t care to analyze, and he hadn’t even touched me. Don’t even go there, I said to myself. When was the last time I’d had sex? 1932, my brain screamed back at me. I squirmed in my seat and tried to remain focused on the present.

Rick Blake ordered a cappuccino for me and an espresso for himself from the waiter that came to take the order and then turned to me with a dazzling smile. My knees felt weak. “I guess you’re the person I spoke with earlier on the phone.” I nodded stupidly and he went on. “I want to apologize for hanging up. We’re having a record night tonight with a big function plus the regular crowd, and I’m short staffed by three. So I guess you could say we’re having a stressful night. This is why I was calling Scott. I wanted to tell him not to bother coming round until Monday.”

“Oh.” This was the only word that escaped from my lips and I silently told myself to snap out of it.

“But where are my manners? I’m Rick Blake, the owner,” he said, and held out his hand.

I shook it and felt his cool, firm grip and wished myself a hundred miles away from him. The last thing I wanted was for him to pick up on my desperate hormones, jumping up and down and demanding a good shag.

“Cat Ryan,” I managed to reply. “I...uhm. I’m sorry about earlier.” I smiled uneasily and almost jumped when a cappuccino appeared in front of me. “Thank you,” I said to the waiter who delivered it. “Mr. Blake, I—”

“Rick. Please call me Rick,” he said as he stirred sugar into his espresso.

“Rick, then.” I savoured his name on my lips and took a sip of my drink to buy time in order to regain some kind of composure.

“Look, don’t worry about anything. Put it down to a misunderstanding,” Rick said, and sipped his coffee. He threw me an easy smile and my heart did a flip.

I have to get out of here, fast. “Well, Rick,” I said, in between sips of coffee. I wanted to finish the drink quickly so I could leave. “Scott’s in Brisbane for a few days, so he asked me to deliver the piece. I can see I’m keeping you from your busy evening, so I better go. Thank you for the coffee.” Good call, I praised myself on my newly found composure, even though my legs still felt like jelly and my tongue stung from drinking hot coffee too quickly. I stood up, nonetheless, and held out my hand to him. He shook it.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Ryan,” he said, and stood up with me. “I’ll walk you out.”

I prickled at his confident tone. How did he know I was a “Miss”? “Please, call me Cat,” I said, all graciousness while all I wanted was to run out of the place and never lay eyes on him again.

We reached the front door. “Well, Cat, nice to meet you. I hope to see you again, if you drop by the café,” he said. “Otherwise, I’ll probably run into you at the shop. Scott tells me he’s got a new shipment coming in soon that might be of interest.”

Right now, I could kill Scotty for doing this. He must have known the effect that Rick Blake would have on me. I was sure this had all been a plan to throw me in Rick’s path, hoping that I would simply get over Josh in an instant.

“Yes, well. Until next time,” I said politely, and almost winced when the band struck its first notes of “As time goes by”. Just my luck. I left abruptly, with Rick’s eyes burning holes into my back.

### Chapter 3

By the time I got back from Rick's I was famished. Henry accosted me as soon as I walked in through the door and proceeded to tell me all about his day in a series of very loud meows, ending with a particularly squealing one that signified that I hadn't fed him yet and he wasn't too happy about it.

I dropped my shoulder bag on Scotty's sparkling white polyurethane and Caesar stone kitchen counter and went to the fridge to get the cat's kangaroo meat, all the while trying not to trip over him as he padded in a figure eight pattern in between my legs.

"Henry! Be still," I said to him, and got back that amber gleam that told me I had better get on with it and feed him or else. He pounced on the meat the moment I put it into his bowl and I went straight to the phone and ordered a ham and pineapple pizza from Dominos. Not my first choice, but it was now close to eight and I didn't have the inclination to go looking for a wood fired pizza place around Paddington. Dominos was far quicker.

I changed from jeans and shirt into pajamas and then opened a can of Coke. Great diet, I wrinkled my nose. I'm sure this is all going straight to my waistline, but who cares. I'll work it off during the weekend. I enjoyed jogging at Centennial Park and it looked like we were in for sunny weather.

While I waited for the pizza to be delivered, I decided to check my emails. There was one from Scotty, telling me he had picked up a truckload of goodies from the estate sale and was arranging to have the whole shipment delivered to the shop by next week. This'll keep me busy, I thought. There would be the whole process of unpacking, cleaning, cataloguing details in the stock register and pricing. I was sure Scotty was going to ask me to work extra hours, which was great except that I had to write my next blog post.

There was an email notifying me of a comment made on the blog. A woman wanted to know about dating etiquette when it came to paying on a first date. I wrote back saying that in my opinion if it was a matter of coffee I'd expect the man to pay, but if the date progressed to dinner it would be better to "go Dutch". This took off the pressure from anyone having to feel obliged to the other person in some way. If, however, the man asked the woman on a second date, then the person who did the asking—in this case, the man—should pay. I opened this as a discussion for anyone else who had an opinion on this very touchy subject.

My third email was from Thomas, my potential date from the internet dating site, "Let's Meet". He wrote that he would love to have a coffee and was happy to meet me at *that great café in Woollahra*—Rick's Café. Oh no! Of all the cafés in all the suburbs around Sydney, he had to pick this one. I smiled at the irony of this and very quickly typed back a reply to try and dissuade him from meeting there.

I then went on to check the rest of my emails, but Thomas happened to be online and he contacted me through Yahoo chat. He said he particularly wanted to go to Rick's because he had heard so much about it, and would I mind. I sighed and gave in. What was one coffee, after all? I made arrangements to meet there on late Sunday afternoon, keeping in mind that I had to work first. I was glad that at least I'd been able to scare up a date so I was going to have something to write about.

The pizza arrived as I was planning points to cover in my next blog post. I put away the laptop and went to answer the door. After dinner, I tried to keep working but started to nod off,

especially as Henry cuddled up to me on the sofa and the rhythm of his tranquil purring made me relax. I had a busy day ahead of me at the shop tomorrow and Sunday would be the same, so I picked up the cat and went to get ready for bed.

Saturday passed in a blur of customers asking a million questions about items and resulting in sales for the shop. Sunday was a bit more sedate and I had time to have lunch and start working on my next blog post, though I had nothing much to say until I met up with Thomas. I groaned at the thought of my upcoming date. I was tired and all I wanted to do was to go home and sleep, but the lure of earning such great money for writing a blog was too much and I needed the income badly if I was to build up my savings for the proverbial rainy day.

I closed the store promptly at four, made myself presentable by applying make-up and lipstick, and with ten minutes left I rushed to Rick's to meet Thomas by half past the hour. I was first to arrive and stood outside the place, not wanting to go in by myself in case I ran into its attractive owner. It was a good thing I had arranged to meet Thomas out in the street. Ten minutes elapsed and I started to pace up and down, hoping Thomas wasn't going to be running too late. He had my mobile number but hadn't called, so I figured he might be trying to find parking somewhere. Even on a Sunday it was difficult to find a spot around here.

At quarter to five, I started to think that perhaps Thomas had changed his mind and hadn't bothered to call. Meanwhile, my legs were tired from standing all day at the shop and I was cold. Though the sun was still out, there was a chill wind blowing in from the nearby coast that seemed to cut through to the bone. I was practically salivating at the thought of a nice, hot cappuccino and maybe even a blueberry friand.

"Hi, sorry I'm late," a voice said from behind me, making me jump.

I turned and there was Thomas, standing up to his full height of five foot four, even though he'd said on his profile that he was five eight. Hmm. Other than this, the only thing different from his profile was that he was balding, which wasn't the case in the photo he'd posted on the site. This was a good point for my blog—beware of misleading information and old photographs. Good thing I wasn't really looking, otherwise I would have told the very unpunctual Thomas to go take a hike. "Did you get lost?" I asked, wishing he truly had got lost.

"No, it was the parking," he replied, and extended a hand. "Anyway, I'm Thomas. Great to meet you."

I shook his hand and noticed that all this time his searching eyes came to rest on my breasts. I cursed myself for having worn a T-shirt, especially as the chill wind made my nipples stand on end, and I couldn't wait to go inside and run to the bathroom to wash my hands. Thomas's handshake reminded me of a wet fish.

"Likewise," I said as I led the way in, no longer caring if Rick was about the place. Right now I wanted to get the coffee over and done with so I could go home.

Mohsen, the black Maître'd, was on duty and after raising an eyebrow in surprise at seeing me again so soon he led us to a quiet alcove instead of the open space of the main dining room. "I'll have the waiter come to take your order," he said as he handed us two menus.

Once he left, I dispensed with the menu and excused myself to go to the ladies room. I asked Thomas to order me a cappuccino and decided to forget about the friand. I took a while in the ladies, until my nipples had time to defrost, and I washed my hands twice before I went back out. By this time, my cappuccino was waiting. "Sorry I took so long," I said to Thomas as I took a seat directly opposite him. "There was a bit of a line-up in the loo," I lied.

Thomas had ordered a macchiato for himself and he was almost done with it. I stirred one sugar in my coffee and thanked God that the lights in the alcove were dim; at least he wouldn't

keep looking at my breasts. I hated it when men did this. Instead of looking at your eyes when speaking, they spoke directly to your breasts. What a turn off.

Thomas and I had nothing in common, as I found out in the next ten minutes of inane chit chat and I was relieved when I'd finished my coffee and it was time to go. To my horror, Thomas went on to take out exactly three dollars from his wallet to pay for his coffee. I tried to keep a straight face. So much for my advice. Still, I wasn't here to date for real and so it didn't matter. In fact, without knowing, Thomas made things easier for me. I paid for my coffee and prepared to leave immediately on the pretext that I had more work to do at the shop before I went home and I didn't feel any guilt at having put our meeting to an end so abruptly.

Thomas told my breasts that he was happy to have met me and that we'll probably see each other online sometime. I took this to mean that he wasn't interested in me, only my boobs, and did everything I could to keep a smile on my face while resisting the urge to whack him one across the head. What a drip!

I quickly stepped out of the alcove with "boob watcher boy" following, when I almost collided with Rick—to think that I had been congratulating myself on managing to evade him up till now. Rick put out two hands to steady me and his touch on my bare arms sent such an infusion of heat surging through my body that I was taken aback and was sure I must have blushed like a virgin on her wedding night.

"Cat Ryan," he said, and smiled, showing white teeth against a tanned face. My heart plummeted and I wished I could disappear, especially as "boob watcher boy" walked into me as I collided into Rick. I pulled away and tried to recover my composure as quickly as possible by turning to Thomas and introducing him as "a friend". The men shook hands and I wondered whether Rick was going to rush off to the bathroom to wash them as soon as he could get away from us.

"I have to go now," Thomas said to me. Thank God! I thought. "Nice to meet you, Rick. You have a great place here." These were his parting words before he disappeared through the main dining area and out the door.

I sighed with relief and noticed Rick's eyes on my face and thankfully not on my boobs. "Just a casual acquaintance who wanted to drop by your renowned establishment." I felt compelled to explain.

"And?" Rick asked, with suppressed laughter in his warm brown eyes.

"And he loves the place." I managed a smile. "It seems Rick's is well known all over Sydney."

"We have a good reputation," he said. "It's nice to see you again, by the way. Friday was such a busy day that I didn't even get a chance to chat with you for long. Do you have time for another coffee?"

Oh, the temptation was too much, but I wanted to leave. This man was dangerous and my heart was still in "healing mode". The last thing I wanted was an entanglement with the sexy Rick Blake. My body thought otherwise, however, and this is the reason why I had to remove myself from his magnetic presence. "Perhaps some other time," I replied. "But thank you."

He didn't say anything and just regarded me as if trying to make out whether he'd read me wrong. "Scotty's got a truckload of stuff coming through and I have to make room for it at the shop," I blabbed on, once again colouring under his gaze. "I'm sure he's going to call you next week and ask you to come and have a look around. By the way, how did you like the tea set?" By steering the conversation to the subject of antiques, I felt more in control of my emotions.

“It’s beautiful,” Rick said. “I’m remodeling one of the dining alcoves to resemble a Moroccan caravan and I thought the tea set would set off the decor to perfection.”

So he was going to use it in the restaurant, but not for patrons to drink from. “It’s just right for that kind of thing. Do you often use real life antiques for this purpose? Aren’t you afraid someone might break something?”

“We’re insured,” he said, and smiled. “Well, if I can’t persuade you to have a coffee, then I better get back to work.”

The man is not subtle, I thought. This was a very direct signal and he was dismissing me. I wondered why he even took the trouble to invite me in the first place. It was obvious he wasn’t interested in me that way and for all I knew he was married with ten kids. “Well, goodbye,” I said, and made to go out the door.

“I’ll see you again sometime soon,” he said, sounding confident.

How dared he. “Perhaps.” I threw over my shoulder and left. The man had a nerve.

~

That night, Scotty arrived home just after ten and the look on his face told me that all was not well. When he walked in through the door, Henry jumped off the sofa where he had been nestling on my lap and regaled his owner with loud meows of welcome. I switched off the DVD I had been watching and took in Scotty’s appearance. Stunning blond and blue eyed looks, smudged by dark circles of worry under the eyes. “What’s Mark done now?” I asked, and offered coffee. To which he nodded as he bent down to pick up Henry and then followed me into the kitchen.

Scotty sat at the shabby chic kitchen table and sighed. “We argued,” he said, his tone subdued.

“What about?” The fragrance of freshly roasted coffee beans made me think of Rick, but I quickly brought my mind back to Scotty and went on preparing the coffee in the Italian cappuccino maker.

“He’s seeing someone else,” Scotty announced, burying his face in Henry’s fur.

“I’m sorry, Scotty,” I said, patting his shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I know how you feel.” I sympathized with him and at the same time was reminded of Josh and the day I found out he’d been cheating on me. I felt a knife cutting into my heart. It was obvious I was still smarting from the betrayal. I finished making the cappuccinos and joined Scotty at the table.

“Is this the first time he’s done this?” I asked tentatively, not wanting to push him if he didn’t want to talk.

“We’ve been through this once before,” Scotty replied. He seemed glad to be able to confide in someone; and who better than a close friend. “We managed to get past it, but the trust is never there afterwards, you know?”

I nodded and waited for him to go on. “Lately, I noticed he’d become more distant and every time he flew to London he took time out for a break. So I put two and two together and asked him if he was seeing someone else. He denied it. But then a friend of ours ran into him in London and when I saw him last week he told me that he’d seen Mark being lovey-dovey with Eric.” His mouth was downturned and he regarded me with a look of pain in his eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Scotty.”

“The worst part is that Eric is my ex.” Scotty dropped the bombshell and I winced. Not that Eric! Eric had been Scotty’s love for years, but the two broke up about a year ago when

Mark came on the scene. Then, Eric had moved to London to start anew and now he was supposedly Mark's lover. It suddenly occurred to me that Eric might be on the rebound and using Mark to get back at Scotty.

A long sigh escaped from Scotty and he stood up. "Thanks for the coffee. I'm off to have a shower and then bed. I'm exhausted."

"Okay," I said. "I'll go home then."

"Stay over if you like. You're welcome company and Henry likes to have his aunty around, too." This at least brought a smile to his face and my heart warmed. It was so nice to feel needed.

After Josh, it was great to have family around me. Scotty was my only family, seeing as I had lost both parents to illness within a few months of each other when I was in my twenties. I had no other family in Australia. Apparently, I had a string of cousins in Italy and Ireland, but I'd never met any of them and didn't even know who they were. My parents had lived in a little world of their own and when they passed on they'd left me an orphan.

"I'd love to stay," I replied with a smile. "Come here and give me a hug goodnight."

We hugged for a long time, both deriving comfort from each other's touch. Then, Scotty turned in for the night while I cleaned up in the kitchen and afterwards went back to finish watching my movie. I'm a glutton for punishment, I thought, as I switched the DVD back on and Casablanca appeared on the screen.