Once More
with Feeling

BY

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2013
PART ONE
CHAPTER ONE

Laura tucked the warm box of fried chicken under her arm and grabbed her purse off of the front seat. Through soggy grass she dodged the water sprinkler that had chosen to oscillate in her direction. She hurried up the steps of her mother’s house where the faint smell of gardenia blossoms met her in the living room.

“Did you get all white?” her mother called from the kitchen. “You know how I only like the white.”

“Yes, Mother.” Laura set the box of chicken down on the dining room table. “You’re watering. It’s supposed to rain today.”

“You didn’t get corn on the cob!” Mrs. Davenport said as she rummaged through the box.
“I’m sorry. They were out.” Laura made a mental note to always show up with corn on the cob when she brought chicken. “I’ll make a salad.” She watched as her mother wrestled with an ice tray. Laura resisted the urge to help her, reminding herself how well she obviously got along without her during the rest of the week. They sat down at the table and dealt out extra napkins and tiny ketchup packets.

“I’ll take a wing,” Mrs. Davenport said, passing her plate. “They have so many moving parts, it’s almost like eating a toy.”

Laura smiled. “I’m a breast kind of girl myself.” The moment the words were out of her mouth, she knew she had made a mistake. She could feel the stare drilling into her like a laser beam from across the table, but she dared not look up. “Chicken, Mother. I was talking about chicken.”

Mrs. Davenport ripped the wing apart with a steel grip that seemed almost bionic in its ferociousness. These couldn’t be the same hands that had delicately manipulated the stubborn ice tray only minutes earlier, Laura thought.

“You’re a beautiful girl. You could get a man.”

“Don’t start. I haven’t even been here ten minutes yet.”

“And what about children? You know how I feel about that, Laura. It’s your responsibility to give me grandchildren.” She punctuated certain words with a mangled chicken wing. Laura ignored her and continued eating her salad. “It’s the only thing I’ve ever asked of you.”

“Another word and I’m leaving,” Laura warned calmly. It was a threat she knew her mother would take seriously.

They finished eating in silence, each with a small pile of clean bones on the side of her plate. They washed dishes and retired to the porch swing to sip lemonade and watch the water sprinkler. They talked and swung until dark when the mosquitoes drove them in. Laura felt good about their afternoon together. She gave her mother a hug and went home to her apartment near downtown San Antonio.
Laura slid a TV dinner out of the microwave and began taking the thin plastic off of the top, careful to avoid the steam. She heard the apartment door open and close and the dog’s high-pitched friendly bark. Mavis breezed into the kitchen in search of a beer in the virtually empty refrigerator. They both grunted a greeting of sorts.

“Are you going out again tonight?” Laura asked.

“I’m thinkin’ about it,” Mavis drawled in her north Texas accent. She unbuttoned her white uniform and sashayed to their bedroom. Her blonde hair bounced on her shoulders as she passed by.

Laura finished eating before switching the television on to watch the remainder of the news. It was already past her usual bedtime. Mavis had strutted naked in and out of the kitchen once for a sandwich earlier, but finally emerged in freshly creased blue jeans and a peasant blouse that left little to the imagination. She could always manage to stuff those thirty-eight D’s on that size ten body into clothes no one else would have nerve enough to try, and she pulled it off exquisitely. Mavis was tall like Laura, and carried herself with the same confidence that most beautiful women do.

“I thought you were trying to save money,” Laura said.

Mavis ran a brush through her clean blow-dried hair and sprayed a dab of Ambush on a few of her favorite areas. “I am. I’ll be out by the end of the month like I promised.” The mirror that hung in the hallway gave her another opportunity to inspect herself. She reapplied a sparse amount of lipstick and primped profusely as she eyed her reflection. “Jolly called me at work to invite us over for dinner this week. You promised to break the news to her, darlin’. I suggest you hop to it before this gets all too embarrassin’.” She found her purse and threw a kiss and a wink over her shoulder. “Don’t wait up for me.”

Laura patted the couch. Ms. Fang, her small gray poodle, jumped up beside her. She hugged the dog and smoothed the curls away from its eyes. Ms. Fang rested her head in Laura’s lap as they both finished watching the weather. Laura switched off the television and went to the bedroom and put the dog’s blanket at the foot of the bed. Neither woke up when Mavis finally came home.
Laura worked diligently at the office the following day and suppressed the vision she had of her mother puttering amid the numerous flower beds in her front yard. It usually took Laura a few days to fully recover from a Sunday visit. Her father had been dead three years now, and her mother was finally beginning to adjust to living alone.

Laura had so many things going on in her own life at the moment, that her first instinct was to withdraw from everything that entailed any emotion at all. She would’ve loved to just close her eyes and let the world carry on without her. She was tired. Her relationship with Mavis was rapidly coming to an end. The decision had already been made, and it was such a relief simply to have it over with. Her lack of emotion worried her though, and there was a numbness that went with it that she didn’t recognize.

Jolly called after lunch, her laughter a welcomed relief from Mavis’s short, moody telephone calls. “How about dinner tomorrow night? Wanda has her chops set for ribs. We’ll barbecue.”

“I don’t think so,” Laura said hesitantly. There were times when Mavis’s reluctance to get involved in certain aspects of friendship irritated her. Mavis had gladly given Laura the responsibility of telling the world about their breakup. Laura, however, didn’t like being the bearer of bad news any more than anyone else did. “Mavis and I are going our separate ways,” she said bluntly. “We’re finally making it official.”

Jolly paused for just a moment before going on. “How about six? We’re having beer, beans and potato salad.”

“You’re not listening. Mavis and I are breaking up.” There was total silence. “We’re only living together now because she can’t afford a place of her own yet. She’s paying off her bills.” She had anticipated several reactions, but when Jolly started to cry Laura had no idea what to say next. “Come on,” she whispered. Jolly seemed to be more upset by this than either she or Mavis had been. “It’s not that bad. It’s a friendly divorce.”
“I don’t believe it! Eight years, Laura,” she said in a strained voice. “You two just celebrated eight years!”

“Only three of which were memorable,” Laura reminded her. “Look, Mavis and I are okay with this. It’s something we both want. I don’t know. I’m just tired right now. I need to be by myself for a while. Just me and a new candle making kit.”

“Then it’s not permanent? It’s just a separation?”

“It’s over, Jolly. Very much over.”

“I’m so sorry.” Jolly sniffed. “I feel terrible.”

Ten minutes later Wanda, Jolly’s lover, was on the phone just as upset, but without the tears. “Why didn’t Mavis tell me yesterday?” she barked. “We spent three hours together!”

“She says it’s my job. She’s no good at this sort of thing.” Laura sighed heavily and rubbed the back of her neck. “We’ve more or less already gone our separate ways even though we’re still under the same roof. We’re muddling through right now. You know how it is when you’re deciding who gets the toaster and whose pantyhose are whose.”

“Does Mavis have someone else lined up?” Wanda asked.

“I don’t know and I don’t really care.” She refrained from mentioning how much Mavis had been going out recently. Wanda didn’t need more of an excuse to rant and rave.

“This is just awful. I feel like I’ve lost a member of my family.”

Laura closed her eyes as the words struck a sentimental chord somewhere deep inside of her. Yes, they were a family. The four of them spent holidays together, vacations, weekends. There would be no more scenic drives or trips to the beach. No more Saturday night Scrabble games. No more bargain hunting at the flea market.

“So what’s the odds of you two patching things up?” she heard Wanda asking. “I feel so stupid. Jolly and I didn’t even know anything was wrong!”

Laura glanced at her watch and reached for a tablet on the corner of her desk. “I’ve gotta go. There’s a staff meeting in two minutes. I’ll call you tonight.”

On her way down the hall she made up her mind to stop off at an arts and crafts shop and load up the car with macrame and needlepoint kits. She was ready for some time to herself.
Laura put Ms. Fang on a leash and carried her down the apartment stairs. Both of them were itching for a much needed walk. The cool wind blew Laura’s hair in her face as they rounded the corner to the park, and it felt good getting out in the early evening air.

She was looking forward to being alone. She’d even contemplated taking a vacation to the Bahamas or possibly even someplace more ridiculous. She was convinced that she needed time away from everything—work, Mavis, her mother, rush-hour traffic. She wanted to be alone, to get to know herself again. Having Mavis in her life all those years had caused her to lose touch with the real Laura Davenport. She had no idea who she was or what she wanted but hoped to find out one way or another. When things should have been at their worst, Laura found herself getting more excited about this new phase of her life.

“We can handle it, can’t we?” she whispered as she picked Ms. Fang up again and cradled her in her arms. The dog rubbed her cold nose against Laura’s cheek and gave comforting noises in return.

On Sunday, the only day off they had together, Laura and Mavis avoided each other as best they could. There were full boxes stacked in the corner of the apartment and several empty ones near the stereo. Mavis sat on the couch in her robe and slippers with Ms. Fang, craving attention, in her lap.

“I’m movin’ out next Saturday,” Mavis said.

Laura poured herself another cup of coffee and glanced at the teapot-shaped clock over the stove. She had to get ready, both physically and mentally, for the weekly visit to her mother’s.

“You need help?” Laura asked. She laughed at the absurdity of the offer. Did other couples actually help each other pack when they broke up, she wondered.
“I’m gettin’ Wanda’s truck,” Mavis said, continuing to rub Ms. Fang’s back. She looked down at the small dog and smiled. “I’m gonna miss you, darlin’. I never had me a doggie before. Do I get this little fur ball on weekends?”

“No,” Laura said, “but you can come over and see her whenever you want. I’m thinking about going on a cruise or something. Maybe around Christmas time. Ms. Fang hates the kennel. I’d feel better about her being with you than at my mother’s.”

“A cruise? Where?”

“I’m not sure yet. I just need to get away for a while.”

Mavis bounced off the couch and snatched up a stack of albums. She stood them up carelessly in a box before storming into the kitchen where she dumped the crumbs out of the toaster oven and wrapped the cord around it.

Laura watched her slam things about and yank open drawers. After a few minutes, Laura got up from the table and went to take a shower. She’s pissed off because I’m taking a cruise, she thought as the water from the shower hit her in the face. Or maybe she’s pissed off because I can afford to take a cruise. Either way, Mavis was pissed off and who the hell cared?

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Bright and early Saturday morning Jolly and Wanda were at the apartment offering their services. Mavis had taken the day off to move, and Laura and the poodle did their best to stay out of the way.

“I hate this,” Jolly said as she picked up another box. Mavis and Wanda were out at the truck rearranging the load. Jolly rested the box against the couch, her tall lanky frame swallowed up in a sweatshirt and blue jeans. “She has a lover already. Did you know that?”

“I’ve suspected it,” Laura said evenly. Her lack of emotion surprised her. Was this what they’d come to? There wasn’t even a twinge of remorse that Mavis was moving out. “We’ve got separate lives to lead, Jolly. You may as well start getting used to it.”
“I can’t believe it’s this easy. Neither one of you seems angry or anything. It’s like you’ve been nothing but roommates for eight years!”

“That’s basically what we’ve been for the last two. I can’t remember the last time we made love. It’s been easier to stay together. We’re comfortable with each other.”

“And that doesn’t count for anything?”

“It’s not enough. There’s gotta be something else out there for both of us.”

Jolly set the box on the couch and put her arms around her. “It just makes me so sad. The four of us were supposed to grow old together. Buy a worm farm when we retired. Remember?”

“I never agreed to the part about the worm farm.”

They heard the apartment door open, and Wanda and Mavis came in. The four of them stared at each other for an uncomfortable moment before they all picked up a box and carried it out to the truck.

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Laura caught herself whistling around the apartment as she cleaned, rearranged furniture, hung new curtains, put her favorite puzzles together for hours on end, reupholstered her couch, and took Ms. Fang for countless walks in the evening. She thought of Mavis often and reached for her in the night, more out of habit than anything else. Laura missed the closeness they had shared in bed, the presence of a warm, female body beside her.

At college they had met during a tutoring session arranged by the math department. Laura had volunteered her services for three hours a week in algebra, trigonometry and calculus, and Mavis had been halfway through her second semester of Algebra I and flunking it badly again. By the end of their first session, they had worked through three chapters, had shared a kiss in the empty basement at the library and made a date for later that same evening. Mavis lived in the dorm and had a roommate who never went anywhere, and Laura lived at home and had parents who never went anywhere. They decided on a drive-in movie, and
parked on the very last row. The front seat of Laura’s car did just fine for what they had in mind. Laura found out quickly how far a little imagination and a creative, willing lover could get you. She experienced her first orgasm before the previews were over and had fallen in love sometime during the second feature.

Their first two years together had been so much fun. Laura had to admit that even though things had been simpler then—paid tuition, a generous allowance from Daddy and finally a cheap apartment shared with another lesbian couple, Mavis had made a major difference in Laura’s life. Laura would miss more than just Mavis’s warm body at night. She would miss having her as a friend.

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Later that week she tried to make travel arrangements for a cruise to the Bahamas but was informed that all cruises were booked for the week between Christmas and New Year’s. She was disappointed and had been counting on getting away, especially during the holidays, going somewhere she’d never been and doing something she’d never done before. When the travel agent suggested a similar package for Hawaii at close to the same price, Laura jumped at it. She bought vacation clothes, worked like a demon to get caught up at the office and broke the news of her trip to her mother.

“Is that woman going with you?” Mrs. Davenport asked.

For eight years Mavis had been referred to as “that woman.” Laura ignored the question, having no desire to give her mother the satisfaction of knowing that she and Mavis no longer lived together. Hawaii was looking better and better with each word that fell from those pursed lips.

She called Mavis at work a few days before she was scheduled to leave and was surprised at how good it was to hear her voice. Mavis seemed curious about the trip and indirectly tried to drag information out of her, but Laura remained vague about her plans.

“I hear you aren’t living alone,” Laura said, changing the subject.

“I’m sharin’ an apartment with Susan Webb from X-ray.”
“Sharing an apartment.” Laura chuckled. “Does she mind you watching the dog for me? Does she like dogs? My mother could keep her if it’s a problem.”

“No problem at all, darlin’,” Mavis assured her. “You just have a good time. When can I pick the Fangster up? I bought her a Benji colorin’ book yesterday. You think she’ll like it?”

“I’ll check with my mother and see if she can keep her.”

“You’ll do no such thing! We’ll be fine, darlin’. I’m lookin’ forward to spendin’ time with the fur ball.”

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Hawaii was a dream. Laura slept the entire way over and was in bed by eight the first night she arrived. Once she realized how much money she was wasting by sleeping her vacation away, she was ready to have some fun. The package included a few days at Waikiki Beach, Maui, and a visit to Kona and the Big Island. She rented a car and did the usual tourist things right away. She took five rolls of film her first time out, but hated dragging the camera around. Later she decided that anything else she wanted a picture of, she would just buy the appropriate postcard instead.

She spent mornings at the beach, and munched on fruits and vegetables during the afternoons as she toasted on the edge of the beautiful pool. There was a bar with palm leaves and bamboo decor across from a lush garden behind the hotel. The bartender was a tall brunette dressed in a white tank top neatly tucked into white shorts. Her skin was bronze and seemed even that much darker against her clothes. Laura remembered how good Mavis always looked in white.

Her name was Tonita, according to her name tag, and she obviously didn’t wear a bra or care who noticed. Tonita had the attention of every male on the beach. Laura zoomed in on her right away as well.

Wanting a closer look at her, she had passed by the little thatched cabana earlier on her way to the beach. Tonita usually drew a crowd in the afternoon. Laura finished swimming and soaking up rays and had changed into shorts, a festive sleeveless
blouse and sandals. Someone vacated a bar stool just as she arrived. Tonita looked at her for a moment and then continued making the usual slew of drinks.

She flipped bottles, added a dash of this and a pinch of that, all to the grinding of a tired blender behind her. Four different drinks were made at the same time and dealt out to customers either seated or standing around the bar. Just as Laura was about to order, Tonita set a piña colada down in front of her and with a swirl and flourish added the tiny umbrella to it.

“A piña colada with a double shot of rum,” she said.

Laura managed to close her slightly gaping mouth. “Thank you,” she said. It was the only drink she had ordered in the cabana bar since her arrival—and she hadn’t really ordered it. She had had three the night before in the hotel lounge. Laura slid a crisp ten-dollar bill across the bar.

“It’s on the house,” Tonita said.

More bottles were flipped, limes juggled, and dashes of this and pinches of that tossed around only to land miraculously where they were all supposed to. The moment Laura’s drink was even close to being empty, a fresh one was put in its place. The tiny umbrella was always twirled and then added to the drink with a flourish and the words, “On the house,” following soon after.

An hour and a half later, with Laura well on her way to a healthy buzz, she caught Tonita’s hand as she twirled the tiny umbrella again before placing it in Laura’s drink.

“How did you know what I like to drink?” Laura asked. She had wanted to ask the question sooner but hadn’t had the opportunity. Laura let go of the bartender’s hand. She had gotten her attention, which was more than any other customer had accomplished so far.

“You ordered three last night,” Tonita said. “There in the lounge.”

“You remember that? Where were you?”

She smiled. “I was there.” She resumed making drinks with the same energetic finesse as before. Occasionally she glanced over in Laura’s direction and smiled. The muscles in those tanned arms, and the slight jiggle of her firm breasts as she raised the bottles, one in each hand, had everyone’s attention. A while
later she brought another drink over for Laura and said, “I get off at eleven.”

Laura laughed and felt absolutely wonderful. “I’m not sure I can even stand up.”

“For what I’ve got in mind you won’t need to stand up.”

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“We leave the lights out,” Tonita said, “and I keep my clothes on. I like it that way.”

Laura was still in a piña colada stupor, in no condition to question what anyone else found pleasurable. After three unsuccessful attempts at getting it in the lock, Laura finally surrendered her room key. Between being a whole lot drunk and a tad bit nervous, she considered herself fortunate just finding the right room. Tonita smiled and unlocked the door, slowly dropping the key in the palm of Laura’s hand.

Once inside, Laura switched a light on and turned around and stepped into her arms. Tonita’s lips grazed her throat and earlobe, and a few seconds later Laura heard the click of the lamp as Tonita turned the light off. They danced through the darkness to the edge of the bed where Laura’s giddy excitement began to take over. Her blouse was hastily unbuttoned and then tossed somewhere on the other side of the room. A slender, curious hand inched into her shorts, unzipping and tugging at them easily.

“And me without my pocket rocket,” Tonita whispered.

Deep, relentless kisses made Laura forget where she was and even how she had gotten there. Her body responded to everything touching her—lips, fingers, tongue, the bedspread against her naked back and legs. They rolled to the center of the bed as their mouths desperately sought more of each other. Laura’s hands moved under Tonita’s shirt and briefly met cool soft skin. She reached for the top of Tonita’s shorts only to get her hands gently pushed away again.

“You’re so wet,” Tonita said. Her tongue flicked over Laura’s hard nipples; fingers slipped inside of her making her shudder unexpectedly.
“Take your clothes off,” Laura said, her voice ragged and breathless.

“Just enjoy me,” Tonita cooed. “You like this, don’t you?”

Like it? Laura thought. Who wouldn’t like it? She came quickly, and before she was fully aware of anything else, Laura found herself on the edge of the bed with her legs dangling over Tonita’s shoulders. Laura was sure that the room was spinning, but it was too dark to verify such a thing.

Orgasms became elementary, while her limbs remained heavy and cumbersome. Each time Laura moved, she felt as though she were under water. She pulled at Tonita’s shirt again and heard a low chuckle.

“We keep the lights out and my clothes on,” Tonita whispered in her ear. “Remember? It can be good this way. You’ll see.”

“I need to touch you,” Laura said. She wanted the predictable, the usual—the bare skin and the cool sweat. So far, none of this seemed real. In Laura’s mind, it took some sort of effort on everyone’s part in order for two people to make love, and what was happening to her now didn’t resemble anything like that.

“Please take your clothes off.”

Again the low chuckle, and again another position was introduced and implemented. Laura was absolutely exhausted after round four, and barely had the strength to collapse on a pillow. Instead of trying to tug on various articles of Tonita’s clothing, she feebly pawed at the bedspread in an attempt to cover herself up. Through the fog of sleep, alcohol, and a sex-induced daze, Laura was vaguely aware of fingers smoothing her hair away from her face and the cover from the scrambled bed being draped over her limp, nude body.

“Thank you,” Tonita said, and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

For what? Laura wondered as she struggled through the fog. All she had been allowed to do was lie there. She reached for Tonita’s hand and tried to squeeze it, but she had no strength left.

“I’m leaving now,” Tonita said.

“Mmm.” Laura was still holding her hand. “I need to ask you something,” she said weakly, and used the last of her energy to try and pull her closer. “Tell me,” Laura whispered. “Tell me...” She could hear herself mumbling and knew she wasn’t making any
sense. The last fleeting thought she had before passing out was, *What the hell is a pocket rocket?*

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By the next morning, she felt as though she had personally been put in a blender. She nursed her hangover most of the following day and slept at the edge of the pool the rest of it. At ten-thirty the next evening she was once again at the cabana watching Tonita set them up and deal them out. When the first piña colada with a double shot of rum was placed in front of her, Laura gently pushed it back and shook her head.

“Coffee?” Tonita suggested.
Laura smiled and nodded.  
“I get off at eleven.”

“Could we maybe try it with the light on and your clothes off just once?” Laura whispered over the steaming coffee being poured.

“I don’t like it that way.”

“You’ve never tried it with me that way.”

Tonita’s expression suddenly hardened and the playfulness in those exotic eyes disappeared. “I just remembered a previous engagement I have.”

Laura spent her last day at Waikiki on the beach. She avoided all cute little cabanas and drank her last piña colada alone in the hotel lounge the evening before her flight back to San Antonio.

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Laura finished dressing only minutes before hearing the knock on her apartment door. Ms. Fang announced the arrival of their visitor with her yapping. Laura felt more rested than she had in years. The vacation had done her a world of good.

“How much did that tan cost you?” Mavis asked.

“You don’t want to know,” Laura assured her. “What’s up? You sounded depressed on the phone. Have you changed your mind about letting me keep the bed?”
Mavis laughed and rubbed Ms. Fang gently between the ears. “No darlin’,” she drawled, “it’s nothin’ like that. Let’s go out for a drink. I just need to do some jawin’ for a while and unwind some.”

It was too early for the bar to have more than a handful of customers, so they got their drinks and retired in complete privacy to a small table in the corner under a huge picture of Mae West.

“What’s the problem?” Laura asked. “You miss me and want me back already?”

Their laughter and obvious ease with each other was a relief in itself. It felt good to be together again without the pressure of having to be.

“I missed you some,” Mavis admitted. “Susan don’t like to clean house, and you know what a slob I am.”

“You jumped into this kind of quickly, don’t you think?”

“Not really,” Mavis said after savoring a mouthful of her margarita. “We’ve been sort of seein’ each other for about a year now.”

“You slinking bitch.” Laura set her drink down a little harder than she’d intended. A part of her was severely agitated at being made a fool of, while the rest of her couldn’t have cared less what Mavis did with her life. Was Susan the reason things had gone sour between them, or was Susan the result of things having been bad between them for so long?

“Now that we’ve got these pleasantries out the way, darlin’, how was your vacation?”

“Wonderful. I had a marvelous time.”

“You’ve had some of us worried. Wanda’s bettin’ money that you’ll try and go straight now, but I came to your defense,” Mavis said with a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “I told ‘em you like pussy too much.”

“Feel free not to defend me in the future.”

“So what’s it like? This Hawaya place. Would I like it?”

“Women, water, beach. Your kinda place. Check out these postcards. Would you like to see my postcards?”

“Get tired of carryin’ the camera again?”

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Later that evening, as Laura prepared for bed, she smiled to herself. She was finally beginning to pull herself together. In affairs of the heart she usually felt destined to become a failure, but she really liked being single again. Even though she and Mavis had lost interest in each other, they had parted in time to preserve mutual tolerance. There was still something definitely missing in Laura’s life, something she still couldn’t quite comprehend, but she wasn’t in any real hurry to find it, whatever it was. And the thought of dating didn’t appeal to her at all. The fling with the bartender in Hawaii had been enough to convince her of that. Laura had never felt so thoroughly ravished and physically exhausted in her entire life, but not even for a moment did she ever think of it as making love. Laura had heard of women like that before, but had never been with one. It had proved to be a very strange experience. It had been the most impersonal, if not strangely satisfying, night of her life.