

## A Sample Chapter from *The Stalker* by Marina Martindale

Rachel Bennett turned onto a quiet side street and drove up a steep hill. Desert landscaping lined both sides of the roadway, and a sign with an arrow pointing to the right soon appeared. She pressed down on the brake pedal making a sharp turn onto another road. The hotel, with its three signature arches, stood at the top of the hill. Moments later she pulled underneath one of the archways, and as she rolled down her window, a muscular young man walked up to her car and greeted her with a warm smile.

“Welcome to the La Paloma. Are you here for the Desert Sunrise High School reunion?”

“Yes, I am.”

He opened her door and she stepped out. The warm breeze felt soothing. She reached for her purse and the man handed her a claim ticket.

“Go in through the main door and veer to your right. Head down the hallway, and it’ll be in the third room on your right.”

“Thanks.” She dropped the ticket into her purse and as she slung it over her shoulder, she turned and looked behind her.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

She took a deep breath and stepped inside. Walking down the hallway, she noticed a number of people milling around. Some looked vaguely familiar, and a few smiled and nodded as she walked past. She smiled in return as she tried to ignore the butterflies roiling in her stomach. Two women sat at a table in front an open pair of double doors. One looked up and gave her a friendly greeting.

“Rachel? Rachel Bennett?”

“Yes.” Her voice sounded anxious. She hoped the women hadn’t noticed. “And it’s still Bennett, by the way.”

“I understand.” She nodded toward the other woman sitting next to her. “Shannon and I haven’t gotten married yet either, but it’s only our ten year reunion. Now, if it was our twenty-

fifth or thirtieth..." As they exchanged knowing smiles, Shannon handed her a nametag and the other woman extended her hand.

"I'm Carly Rios. We took a couple of English lit classes together, and we were also in Mrs. Tanner's world history class."

"That's right." Rachel smiled at the memory. "I always liked Mrs. Tanner. She was one of my favorites."

"You and a lot of others," agreed Carly. "And we did invite her, but she couldn't make it. She's retired now, and she and her husband are taking a cruise to Europe."

"Really? Well, good for her." Rachel pinned her nametag on her blouse. "And how wonderful for her that she gets to see all the places she taught us about."

Carly handed her a program, and as she stepped into the large ballroom, her mind flashed back to her first day of high school. It, too, had been nerve wracking, but by the time graduation rolled around she was sad to see that chapter of her life come to an end. She looked around the room, hoping to spot some of her old friends, but so far none had caught her eye. Her circle of friends had been small, and, like her, they had been quiet and reserved. It was entirely possible that none would be attending the reunion. She glanced at her watch. It was still early. Perhaps they might show up later.

She looked around the room a second time and a smile broke out across her face. On the opposite wall stood a table with their yearbooks on display. She quickly crossed the room, and as she flipped through the pages, happy memories filled her mind. Other classmates soon joined her, but none were people she had known. She checked her watch again and a profound sense of disappointment came over her. It was now twenty-five minutes past seven, and dinner would be served at seven-thirty. It appeared that none of her old friends would be attending. She went to look for Carly. Granted, she hadn't known her well, but at least they had remembered one another. Then, once dessert was served, she would find a convenient excuse to leave before the slideshows and games started. A moment later the former class president walked up to the podium to make a welcoming announcement and ask everyone to please be seated.

Rachel looked around the room one last time, but she didn't see Carly. Perhaps she was still out front taking care of last-minute arrivals. She turned her attention back to the tables. Several had empty seats, and as she approached the one closest to her someone called her name. A man seated at another table appeared to be waving at her. He had wavy red hair and well-

chiseled features. He seemed familiar, but she couldn't quite place him. She pointed to her chest and gave him a quizzical look.

"Yes, you," he mouthed back.

As she approached, he stood and pulled out the empty chair next to his and extended his hand.

"It is Rachel, isn't it?"

"Yes." She extended her hand in return and he gave her a mischievous smile.

"But you don't remember me, do you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm afraid not. I'm so sorry."

He reached into his pocket for a sheet of paper, grinning as he slowly unfolded it and handed it to her.

"Maybe this will help."

It was a printout of a page from their senior yearbook. At the top was a photo of three young men seated in front of a whiteboard covered with a long mathematical formula. The one in the middle had red hair, swept back in a ponytail, and he wore a pair of black, horned-rimmed glasses. The caption over the photo read, "The Math Club."

"Okay." Rachel studied it closely as she spoke. "This was one of the photos that I took. I'm just trying to remember the math club."

"It really wasn't much of a club." They took their seats and looked at the photo together. "We didn't have a president or a secretary or anything like that. It was just us three geeks, hanging out at lunchtime and seeing which one of us could stump the other two. And you're Rachel, from the yearbook committee."

"That would be me." She studied his face for a moment and then looked at the photo a little closer. "And you certainly look different now."

"I know. It's amazing what a haircut, a new suit, and a pair of contact lenses will do. You, however, look much the same, although your hair looks a little lighter."

"Yes. I added the highlights about a year ago."

"And they certainly look lovely on you." He gave her another smile. "And the name is Shane. Shane MacLeod."

She smiled in return. "Nice to meet you again, Shane."

As the wait staff brought out their salads, Shane and Rachel introduced themselves to the others at their table. One man had been in Rachel's biology class, but aside from him, neither knew any of their tablemates. Desert Sunrise was a big school, with many different groups and cliques. By the time the main course was served, Rachel and Shane were busy getting reacquainted with one another. Both had attended the University of Arizona, but had never run into one another during the time they were there. It, too, was a big school, and their paths simply never crossed. Rachel studied art and marketing, while Shane got his degree in engineering. He then went to graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin. Before long the servers returned to pick up their empty plates and deliver their chocolate mousse desserts. Rachel eagerly dipped in her spoon, but was soon disappointed.

"I love chocolate, but this is way too rich."

Shane tasted a sample as well, his nose wrinkling as he set his spoon down. "It is a bit overpowering. Tell you what, they'll probably take a short break before they start up the slide shows, so why don't we step outside for a few minutes and I'll buy you a drink?"

"Thanks. I'd like that."

They excused themselves from their table, and Shane led the way to a lounge on a lower mezzanine level. A man playing a guitar sat off to the side while a few hotel guests were seated around the tables. Shane led her to a long sofa and a waitress soon arrived.

"Would you like a glass of chardonnay?" he asked.

"Yes. It's my favorite. Thanks."

He turned to the waitress. "Make it two."

She stepped away and he turned his attention back to Rachel. "So, now that we know all about what we did in college, what happened after that?"

"I ended up in Reno, Nevada," she replied. "I accepted a position with a regional magazine called *Sierra Life*. It was a lifestyle publication with features on local history, architecture, home decorating ideas, places to visit, that sort of thing."

"I see. So, what did you do there?"

"I worked in the art department. I did most of the ad layouts, and I helped the art director put each issue together. It was challenging but fun at the same time; sort of like putting a puzzle together." She paused for a moment and a frown came over her face.

"What's wrong? All of a sudden, you don't look too happy."

She sighed. "Let's just say that while I was there, I had some unexpected challenges."

"Really? Like what?"

"Well, I'll spare you all the boring details. Let's just say I had a co-worker who turned out to be...well, rather difficult."

"You mean you had a co-worker from hell."

She finally smiled. "That, my friend, would be an understatement. Hell wouldn't have wanted him, because he would have taken the place over."

"Wow. So who was he?"

"One of the staff writers. We never dated, or anything like that, but he got into the habit of joining me in the break room for coffee, and we'd talk. Nothing serious, just, you know, everyday chitchat. I guess you could say he was an office buddy, although I did look up to him. Then, later on, the art director left, so I applied for her position. By then I'd been with the magazine for about eighteen months and I knew the formula, inside and out. I figured it would be a good career move, but what I didn't know at the time was that, Craig, my break-room friend, didn't exactly agree."

"How so?"

She took a deep breath. "I didn't want word getting out that I'd applied for the job, so I didn't mention anything about it to anyone, not even Craig. Therefore, I had no way of knowing that his girlfriend's niece had also applied for the job. Fast-forward a few weeks. They offered me the job, and the next thing I know, Craig is unleashing his wrath on me and accusing me of sleeping with the boss."

Shane's expression turned serious. "Good grief. What is wrong with people these days? So what did you do then?"

"The usual. I told my supervisor about it, and Craig was reprimanded, but not fired. I was told it was because he was the best staff writer they had. She also showed me a copy of an email his girlfriend's niece had sent the magazine. In it she'd thanked them for the interview, but she was happy with her current job and didn't want to leave. Unfortunately for me, the damage had been done, and it soon became a hostile work environment, so I'd started sending out resumes. About six months later we were told the magazine would be folding. Everything's going online these days, and they just couldn't complete, so I stayed until the final issue went to print. After that I went to work for an advertising agency in Phoenix."

The waitress arrived with their wine. As she stepped away they raised their glasses and toasted to new beginnings.

“So tell the rest of your story,” said Shane as he set his glass down. “You were saying the magazine folded and you moved to Phoenix.”

“Yes, I did.” Rachel swirled her wineglass as she spoke. “I went to work for an advertising agency. I loved my job, and I would have stayed until I retired, but then they decided to downsize and outsource. So I came back to Tucson about six months ago, and, since everyone seems to be outsourcing these days, I’m now a freelance graphic designer.” She took a sip of her wine. “So, how ‘bout you, Shane?”

“Well, nothing quite so dramatic for me. After I got my master’s degree, I worked for a high-tech firm in Houston. Then, about a year and a half ago, I came back to Tucson as well. I got a job at Raytheon, but I can’t tell you what it was. It’s classified.”

Rachel chuckled. “Which means if you told me, you’d have to kill me.”

“Something like that.” He gave her a wink. “But then I left that too. I got tired of working for big corporations. Sure, the pay is great, and they have all kinds of wonderful perks and benefits, but after awhile all the office politics starts getting old.”

“Tell me about it.”

He nodded. “So I now work for a small Internet security company. It’s just me, my boss, and the office manager. It’s not quite as much money as I was making before, but they still pay me a fair salary, and it’s a lot less stressful without all the brown nosing and game playing. And, I get to be a real person instead of a number.” He raised his glass. “So, here’s to us, and our future endeavors.”

They sipped their wine and spent the next few minutes listening to the music.

“He’s quite good,” Shane finally said. “Sort of a jazzy, Spanish style. Has a nice, romantic feel to it.” He looked her in the eye. “So, I was wondering...are you by chance seeing anyone these days?”

“No, not at the moment.”

He gave her a grin. “I see. Well, in that case, would you mind giving your phone number? I’d really like for us to stay in touch.”

“Me too.” She reached into her purse and handed him a business card. “I work out of my home, so my business number is also my cellphone, but don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

Their waitress returned a short time later and Shane took care of their tab. As Rachel made her way toward the stairs, a sheriff’s deputy came into the mezzanine and blocked her path. He noticed her nametag.

“Ms. Bennett, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave, and I’m here to escort you off the premises.”

Rachel was stunned. “What?”

Shane came up to join them. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Do you know this woman?”

Shane bristled. “Yes. She’s with me.”

The deputy nodded toward the bar. “Unfortunately, we’ve had a complaint about your friend. She’s been harassing one of the hotel guests, so I have to ask her leave.”

Rachel still looked stunned. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m here for my high school reunion. As soon as I arrived I headed straight down that hallway to the room where it’s being held, and it’s a private party. None of the other hotel guests would have been allowed in, and I haven’t bothered anyone. I also have a room full of witnesses to back me up. This gentleman, who’s also here for the reunion, invited me out here for a drink, and I’ve been with him the entire time. I haven’t been anywhere else in the hotel.”

“And I can assure you that other than a waitress, no one else has approached us since we came out here,” added Shane.

“I understand, sir.” He turned his attention back to Rachel. “However, I just finished speaking to the man who made the complaint. He tells me, Ms. Bennett, that you approached while he was seated at the bar, and that you yelled at him and caused a scene.”

“That’s impossible,” said Rachel. “I haven’t been anywhere near the bar.”

“And again, we have a room full of witnesses who can tell you it never happened.” Shane motioned toward the sofa. “We were sitting right over there, the whole time, and we were just getting ready to go back and rejoin our group when you came in.” He pointed out their waitress, delivering drinks to a table near the bar. “She was our server. Why don’t you go talk to her? She’ll tell you we’ve been here the entire time, and that Rachel was never anywhere near the bar. I think you’ve mistaken Ms. Bennett for someone else.”

The deputy shook his head. “The person who made the complaint mentioned Ms. Bennett by name, and he was able to point her out to me, but if you two will wait here, I’ll go have a talk with the waitress.”

Rachel felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as the deputy approached their waitress. He pointed to them as they talked, and she shook her head. He returned a minute later.

“Well, Ms. Bennett, your story checks out. She said she’s been here since the middle of the afternoon, and she says nothing unusual has happened. She also said you two have only been out here for about twenty minutes or so, and neither of you came into the bar area.”

As the deputy talked, Rachel looked back toward the bar and spotted a man seated on one of the barstools. The sight of him chilled her to the bone.

“What the hell? What’s he doing here? And how did he find me?”

“What’s going on?” asked the deputy.

Rachel nodded toward the bar. “The man seated at the bar. With the brown hair and mustache, wearing the light-blue shirt. He’s been stalking me for years.” She turned to the deputy. “I need to talk to you someplace private.”

“Who is this person?” asked Shane.

“I’ll fill you in later, Shane. Right now I have to talk to the deputy.”

He glanced toward the hallway. “Will you be coming back in when you’re done?”

She shook her head. “No. As soon as I’m done, I want to go home.”

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

She gave him a reassuring smile. “I’ll be fine. I’ll ask the deputy to walk me out, and I’ll see if he can wait with me while the valet brings me my car. I’ll be okay. I promise.”

Shane hesitated before he extended his hand. “It was good seeing you again, Rachel, and I’ll call you soon. Goodnight.”

“You too, Shane. And I look forward to hearing from you.”

They shook hands, and Shane stepped away.