



Long Hot Nights  
By Candice Poarch

## Chapter 1

In a heavily wooded area of Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains, several members of the all-female Hampton Roads’ High Tides Motorcycle Club were camped out, most with husbands or dates. Alyssa Claxton had invited Reginald Jones, but he’d canceled at the last minute. They were friends, not lovers, and since neither of them dated anyone special, they often substituted as a date when either one needed an escort.

“You should give him a try,” Melinda Easton said, tipping her head toward the man across the campfire. Melinda was five-eight with rich milk chocolate complexion, and wore her hair scraped back in a pony tail.

Under attack by bloodsucking mosquitoes, Alyssa sprayed herself liberally with insect repellent as she shifted her gaze to Jordan Ellis. Six-five

to her six feet even, he sat at the picnic table, his long-long, jean-clad legs stretched out in front of him. His arms were crossed over his well-built chest which was covered in a green designer golf shirt that Alyssa freely admitted enhanced his walnut-brown complexion. Although he carried on conversations with the people around him, his gaze constantly veered back to her. And she couldn't help the flutter in her insides.

"I don't think so," Alyssa said almost reluctantly, coming back to the conversation. "Reg and I are considering kicking our relationship up a notch. Platonic doesn't do it anymore. Girl, I haven't had sex in so long..."

"Considering? Looks to me like you're desperate, but not for Reginald. Any man will do, is that it?" Melinda asked.

"That's not fair," Alyssa snapped. "Why would you say something like that?"

"I think you're doing Reginald wrong. And I can name a place that sells toys to take care of your problem."

"Forget your toys. They can't take the place of a hot-blooded man."

"Hot-blooded can't take his eyes off you. Just look at him. He's one determined man."

Alyssa looked. She'd looked all weekend. Heat rushed through her, spreading out through her like a slow drug. She fanned herself, but it didn't cool her.

"If something was going to happen between you and Reginald, it would have happened by now," Melinda continued.

Alyssa worked to bring her body under control. "We care for each other and we have the same interests like biking and boating—outdoors stuff," she said evenly.

"How do you think he's going to feel when he realizes he can't measure up to your ideal man?" Melinda continued doggedly. "He holds you back and frustrates the heck out of you. It's not fair to him for you to wish

you were with Jordan. He'll let you indulge your wild side. Reg is way too tame and too safe. Jordan is more unrestrained, like you. And you don't threaten him the way you do Reginald."

Alyssa barked out a disbelieving laugh. "I don't threaten Reg. We've been friends since..."

"I know, I know. Since kindergarten." Melinda waved a dismissive hand. "You're friends. He's not the love of your life. He could be with you right now but where is he? He preferred to direct a funeral rather than to come on a trip with you."

"Why don't you just stick a knife in my gut and twist it?" The words hurt like acid. "The woman who died is a pillar of the community," Alyssa defended him even though she'd used the same argument when he'd canceled. "He's trying to grow the business." The excuse sounded lame even to her.

"Stanley is a mortician, too, and he could have gone in Reginald's place. Jordan's a businessman with lots of deals pending but he didn't let that stop him. He's here—because you're here. I'm sure he could have found some work to do if he wanted to."

"Are you implying Reg chose the funeral because he didn't want to spend the weekend with me?"

Melinda slapped at a mosquito on her arm. "What do you want me to say? He's as confused as you are."

Anger bubbled to the surface but Alyssa managed to contain it as she glanced at the object of her frustration. Jordan Ellis' eyes were trained on her, mocking her.

"You're not exactly unbiased. You've always hated Reg."

"I don't dislike him," Melinda said, losing the attitude. "I just think you two are mismatched. Unlike Jordan."

"Because he's wealthy?"

"Don't be a moron. Wealth wouldn't impress you. He's a good match for your fiery nature. You're attracted to Jordan, and I know you wouldn't admit it even if your ass was sitting on a bed of hot coals and your life depended on a confession."

"You think you could be little more dramatic?" Alyssa said, with an uncomfortable chuckle. Everyone except Melinda thought she and Reginald were the perfect couple. "You're on your period or something?"

"Go ahead. Be a smart ass, detective. You always have to be right."

"Right. I am the detective," Alyssa snapped. "None of your business anyway."

Melinda sighed just as Racine Hammerfield cut across Jordan's path moving her well-trimmed body in slow motion.

She wore a knit top with half her paid-for boobs hanging out. Gone were the cheerleading days when she stuffed socks into her bra. Obviously she used a shoehorn to squeeze into those tight jeans. Bending over right in front of Jordan, she gave him an up-close-and-personal view of her backside. Some women had no class.

"She's trying to push her fake boobs and big butt in his face, but he's still ignoring her."

"None of my business," Alyssa informed her. Racine was a thorn in Alyssa's backside from elementary school and things had only gone downhill in junior high and beyond. Early on Alyssa sprouted taller than the average boy in her class and Racine had picked at her emotional wounds until Alyssa knocked her on her ass. Of course Alyssa always got in trouble, but she never let the fact that it bothered her show. She had her mother to thank for that. There wasn't a day that went by that her mother hadn't told her how beautiful she was. And made sure her father got on the bandwagon.

Jordan cut Racine an irritated glance, and annoyed at being ignored, she finally moved on. Racine was recently divorced and her search for

husband number two had turned into a full-time job.

Alyssa sipped her Riesling. Jordan made her heart race. But the truth was she was sick to death of putting her heart and soul into relationships only to come up on the short end of the stick. She'd heard I don't make promises so many times she could make a CD. Or worse, the new catchphrase was No strings attached.

A relationship was an investment. An investment of time, energy, catering to another's needs to fit into your schedule, and vice versa. It was filled with heartbreak and disappointment. Women always invested more than men. With Reginald, she knew her investment would net a sizable payout. They'd had a history. Not as lovers, but she trusted him.

The stakes were higher too, because if things went sour, she could lose a valued friend.

Alyssa didn't let fear rule her life. She was willing to dive into almost anything head first. But she wasn't stupid. Who didn't know that Jordan lived by the No Strings Attached motto? Just ask the string of heartbroken women he'd left in the wake.

Besides, Alyssa had grown up with three brothers and no one had to tell her a woman couldn't change a man.

But was she substituting Reginald for her ideal man? And would she eventually hurt him? Melinda was just ranting. She didn't know what she was talking about. Alyssa couldn't stand the idea of forcing Reginald into a disastrous situation—one that would cause him unhappiness—just because she was ready for another chapter in her life and he was willing to oblige. A woman should love the man she marries, not dream of what could have been.

But she loved Reginald, didn't she?

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When Vanetta Claxton Frasier's plane touched down from New York,

she'd planned to spend the night with her college friend in Williamsburg. They had planned to spend Monday at Busch Gardens, but Vanetta had bought some sexy lingerie at a Fifth Avenue boutique and she wanted to try it out on her husband.

Sex had been nonexistent lately and Vanetta wanted to get that part of their lives back on track. She was in her mid-thirties while Matthew was in his fifties, but men of that age still boasted a healthy sex life. Vanetta missed the closeness and intimacy most of all.

She took the ferry back home to Paradise Island. Only two other cars rode over with her. She stood at the railing alone watching the star-filled night, thinking of the times she and Matthew stood with his arms wrapped around her on balmy nights like this.

As a warm breeze blew over her she thought long and hard. For the few years she and Matthew had lived in Norfolk, she'd longed to return to her island. When he had landed his first big deal, they'd built an enormous house.

The ferry docked, and giddy with anticipation, Vanetta drove home, barely ten minutes away.

Her bubble deflated a little when Matthew's car wasn't in the garage. Maybe he was visiting someone. But it was late. Who would he visit this time of night? Maybe he'd take the next ferry back.

Her home was one of the largest on the island, but that was changing. Jordan was building one so immense the islanders dubbed it "the castle."

She loved her six-bedroom home. They'd hired an architect to design it and Matthew had given her free rein in decorating, so she'd chosen French Country. He was pleased with the effect. And although she wanted separate bathrooms in the master suite, he insisted on only one. He wanted the pleasure of watching her dress. But lately, he rarely watched her.

She rushed to the bathroom, turned on the water in the shower, and

stepped out of her slacks. She reached into the drawer for her shower cap and spotted pills on the countertop. Curious she picked up the bottle.

Viagra. Her heart gladdened. Of course he missed their intimacy as much as she did. Thirty pills were on the label. No time like the present to start trying them out. Vanetta opened the bottle. One, two, three, four tiny blue pills. Twenty-six of the little suckers were missing. He sure as heck hadn't used them on her—not even one. Come to think of it, why were the pills out when he wasn't expecting her back until tomorrow?

It didn't take a genius to answer that question. Damn his soul. Vanetta went weak with anger. She slid onto the little vanity stool to gather her wits. Anger started as a slow simmer and increased to a roaring rage. Damn him. Vanetta wasn't putting up with this crap.

Quickly she reached down and pulled her slacks back on, remembered the running water and turned it off.

She picked up the phone and dialed Matthew's cell number. He didn't answer.

She wasn't waiting for him to show up at some ungodly hour. Chances were he wouldn't return until morning. Probably come rushing in an hour before she was due home. He was spending the night at the upscale business club in Virginia Beach he owned with his two partners.

She grabbed her purse and headed to the ferry. On this ride back to Virginia Beach, she stayed in her car instead of getting out to catch the ocean breeze. As soon as the ferry docked, she headed to the club. She was going to catch that two-timer in the act.

She slammed to a stop and sailed inside the club ignoring the elegant decor and old world charm.

"May I have a key to Mr. Frasier's room please?" she asked the front desk clerk.

"I don't believe he's here tonight, ma'am. He rarely stays here,

especially now that Mr. Ellis is back," the middle-aged coffee complexioned man said.

"He told me he was staying here," Vanetta assured him. "Please give me the key."

"Let me check the guest list. Excuse me, please." He disappeared through a door. A minute later, the GM Wade Ripley approached her. He reminded her of a sleazy used car salesman. All false charm.

"It's good to see you, Vanetta. I'm sorry you made a fruitless trip, but Matthew isn't staying here tonight."

"He told me he was. I need to speak to him. It's urgent."

Wade gently took her arm and steered her to a private seating area but they remained standing. "I'm sorry, Vanetta. He really isn't here. I don't know where he is. Did you try his cell phone?"

"Of course." Did she look like a moron? Vanetta sighed and left for her car. Liar. If Matthew wasn't there, he'd arrive eventually. She'd come over on the last ferry. Where else would he stay when he owned an exclusive business club with seventy rooms? Make that seventy-one. Jordan had insisted on having a suite available for the owners.

She drove her car across the street, turned off the engine, then the lights...and waited.

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Alyssa drank the last of her wine and got up to refill her glass. Seconds later, Jordan was beside her.

"I've been trying to arrange a date with you since Valentine's Day. Why are you playing so hard to get? Why don't you give a guy some slack?"

"Why are you invading my space?" Alyssa asked. "The average guy would have gotten the message by now. Your persistence borders on stalking."

He'd been away most of the year opening new facilities in California

and New Orleans and had only returned a couple of weeks ago.

"I'm trying to court you. There's a difference." He deftly uncorked the wine bottle and filled Alyssa's glass.

"Let's just put an end to this right now. I don't like you. I won't date you. So don't waste your time."

Jordan shook his head. "I don't understand. What do you have against me? I know you're attracted. I could feel the sizzle between us from way over there. So what's the problem?"

"It's lightning bugs." Alyssa held up her filled glass. "Thanks for the wine," she said before she started to return to her seat. But Jordan grasped her arm.

"No, no, no. Don't walk out on me like that. What have I done?"

"You have a lot of nerve. Do you really think I'll just close my eyes to the fact that you make it easy for Matthew to cheat on his wife?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" He looked genuinely shocked, but Alyssa wasn't buying it.

"Oh, come on. He brings his women to the club. Parades them right under your nose."

"Not when I'm there."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Matthew doesn't even stay at the club. At least he hasn't since I returned. Listen, he's a grown man and a partner in the club. But there's no way in hell I'd let a partner carry on like that in our business environment. I don't control what he does on his own time. Like I said, he's a grown man."

Alyssa searched his eyes for the truth. Jordan was known for his integrity. Besides, he was right, darn him. Only Matthew could control his actions. She couldn't blame the world because he was an asshole. Racine had deliberately let the news slip with an "Oops. Didn't know you were

there." Alyssa wanted to smack her.

"If I've misjudged you, then I apologize."

"Apology accepted." He kept a light grip on Alyssa's arm. "Does Vanetta know?"

Alyssa cast her gaze down. "I don't think so."

Jordan scrubbed a hand behind his neck. "I'm sorry, Alyssa. Vanetta deserves better."

"You bet she does. And she needs to know. She has to protect herself from diseases. If it were me, I'd leave the son of a bitch," Alyssa said between her teeth. "How the hell do I tell my cousin her husband's a lying, cheating piece of scum?"

"I don't know," he said, releasing her to cross his arms, tucking his hands beneath his armpits as if to keep himself from touching her. "So that's what you've been holding against me all this time."

"For the last couple of weeks, anyway."

His gaze roved lazily over her. "I haven't had sex since February, when I fell for you. And right now I'm so needy I could pretty much drag you off into the bushes and..."

Alyssa held up a shaky hand. "Just stop right there." She did not need sexual images of Jordan crowding her mind. "Thanks for the wine," she said abruptly and made her way to the table, easing herself into the seat next to Melinda.

Jordan took a seat across the fire from her again. And he was still staring at her. Her defenses were down.

Melinda sighed.

"Tired?" Alyssa asked still perturbed at her friend, but glad to focus on another topic.

"Not really."

"Other than my love life, what's wrong?"

Melinda frowned. "I touched a raw nerve, didn't I?"

Alyssa wouldn't dignify that with a response.

"I'm worried about Vicky." Vicky was Melinda's younger sister.

Alyssa sat her glass on the seat between them. "Is she taking the divorce hard?"

"I'm worried about the group she's hanging out with."

"What don't you like about them?"

"It's her. She's so secretive. That's what worries me."

"She has enough sense to stay out of trouble."

"With the law. But she's always skirting the edge. Always thinking up some scheme."

"What is she doing this time?" Alyssa asked.

"That's just it. I don't know. Like I said, she's secretive. Ever since Vicky was a child, when things got this quiet, something happened. She's going over to Norfolk every weekend."

"So what? A lot of islanders go there. There's not much entertainment on the island."

"She never says where she's going and she makes a mess of everything. Despite the rumors about him, her husband is a good man, and look what happened. Maybe I should have stayed home and had a talk with her."

"It's not like you can dictate to her. She's grown."

"Only in age. There's something to be said for maturity," Melinda said.

"If there's anything I can do just say the word."

Melinda nodded. "I'm turning in," she said and rose from the bench.

Alyssa watched her friend make her way to her tent. What the heck was Vicky up to now? A few years ago a rumor spread that her husband dabbled in necrophilia. Since he was a mortician, that did not go over well with the locals. Who wanted to think about a necrophiliac handling a dearly

departed loved one? He nearly lost his business and was finally forced to sell out to Reginald and Stanley.

It was only a rumor, but a powerful one. A rumor that made a difference. He now worked in some factory in Norfolk.

Alyssa made a mental note to ask around about Vicky when she returned to Paradise Island.

Including Alyssa, four people were left around the fire. Two women and Jordan. Racine had disappeared.

Sighing, Alyssa sipped her Riesling. She'd turned thirty a couple of weeks ago. Thirty and single, her mother reminded her on a weekly basis. It was even more glaring here because nearly everyone was paired off, and one-by-one they were leaving the campfire for their tents. Alyssa might shrug off her single state, but deep down she, too, wanted to be part of a couple.

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