

# *Loose Ends*

By Kristen Ashley

## *Introduction*

I always thought I couldn't do short.

That is, write short books. Never mind short stories.

Forget about it.

Then along came *1,001 Dark Nights*.

Liz Berry and MJ Rose asked me to be a part of their imprint and write a novella in one of my current series for their awesome project.

A writer needs challenges, so I took it (with, I will admit, some trepidation as I was diving into two characters who were beloved by me who I thought would *never* have their story told, Daisy and Marcus of the *Rock Chicks*—a story that would become *1,001 Dark Nights Rock Chick Reawakening*).

I not only fell in love with the process, an entire new avenue opened not only for me as a writer, but more importantly for my characters.

That's right.

I didn't have to say goodbye.

And that means my readers don't have to either.

I can go back to my babies, just for a spell, spend some time, see how they're doing, how they're raising their families, how their happily ever after stays happy.

But there was a big bonus for me.

Huge.

Colossal.

Most romance novels are anywhere in the range of 60,000 to 110,000 words.

Not mine.

My novels tend to be anywhere upwards of 160,000 words. In my books, I get into the meat of a variety of matters.

And I was struggling with some dangling characters from concluded books and series who *needed* their HEA. However, if I attempted to write a full-blown book, there would be a lot of filler, or forced conflict I wasn't getting from my characters.

I simply can't write like that.

So these beloved characters were left hanging.

My "loose ends."

Not anymore.

With this new concept of a personal anthology, I was able to go back to The 'Burg. I got to visit Glacier Lily Cottages.

And after the personal loss of my dear friend Rick Chew, who Tod of the *Rock Chick* series was based on, I had the bittersweet experience of spending some time with him again as my Tod with his Stevie.

But I also was able to tell Hap and Luci's story (from *Heaven and Hell*) as it was *meant* to be told.

Not to mention I could immediately deal with the demons plaguing Diesel from the ménage I introduced in *The Greatest Risk*, rather than leaving him stuck in an emotional pit of darkness. Which meant I got to give goodness not only to him, but to his Maddox and Molly.

Without delay.

If this concept works...that is, if you—my reader—enjoys it, I'll do these as often as I can because I *adored* being back with Joe, Vi, Deacon and his Cassidy, Tod and Stevie (and the crew), Kia and Sam, Sixx and Stellan, and of course Hap, Luci, Diesel, Maddox and Molly.

The possibilities are endless. The happy endings of my characters never really have to end, and my *Loose Ends* can get tied up all nice and tidy.

In other words, I hope you enjoy.

I really, *really* do.

Because these stories took me other places as well...and new ideas were born. And I want to unleash them (does anyone feel Henry from *The Will* needs to find love? I do!).

So read on.

And as always...

Rock on!

One final note, if you haven't taken the dive into my series, *The Honey*, because erotica just isn't your gig, I'll caution you about reading *More Than Everything* in this anthology. It is a very erotic M/M/F ménage. I think it's beautiful and the message of love and acceptance is crucial.

But the last thing I wish to do is shock any of my readers. I hope you try it, but I understand everything is not for everybody.

And as Diesel, Maddox and Molly would all agree, you do *you*.

All my love,

~Kristen Ashley



***Now I invite you to read a tease from the book, the first chapter of Hap and Luci's story!***

# *The Stars Aligned*

A novella tying up a *Loose End* from the book *Heaven and Hell* featuring Hap and Luci

## *Chapter One*

*Second Best to a Dead Man*

*Luci*

Luciana Gordon sat in a chair on the eighth floor of Saks Fifth Avenue, the one *on* Fifth Avenue, staring unseeing at the boxes of shoes all around her.

She'd taken the express elevator.

She shouldn't have bothered.

After she'd had a salad, alone in the restaurant, she'd wandered the enormous floor filled with shoes, sprinkled with handbags for decoration, and asked Elena, her salesperson, to bring her thirteen pairs of shoes.

She'd tried on one shoe of one pair.

And then she remembered like she often remembered, all the time, suddenly, with no warning.

She remembered Hap's face after she'd pulled away from the kiss she'd given him. She remembered how hard her heart had been beating. She remembered how her skin felt heated and cold at the same time.

Desire.

And terror.

She then remembered how it felt to be swept up in his arms as he carried her from her deck to her couch.

That feel had been just desire.

She blinked her thoughts away and saw she had on a blue Aquazurra pump with a triple layer of fringe as an ankle strap.

It was fabulous.

It was also ridiculous.

She'd never wear that shoe in North Carolina, even in her shop, where she wore all her fabulous shoes.

She'd found a zone she never thought she'd enter.

Putting on a shoe that was *too fabulous*.

No. It wasn't too fabulous. She could do fabulous anywhere, any way she pleased, even wearing shoe fringe at her boutique in Kingston.

It was that Hap would be in fits of laughter if he saw her in that shoe and there would be no end to the teasing.

This would be...back then. Back before she kissed him. Back before she pulled away from that kiss and saw that look on his face that was gentle and fiery and greedy and hesitant, and something more. Something *so much more*, something that held promise, something that held riches beyond imagining, all of this at the same time.

Back before he carried her to the couch.

Back before he stopped all the wonderful things they were doing on the couch, left her and ended any possibility of *them*.

Back when she actually saw him, which now she did not. Not anymore. Not for months.

Because he was avoiding her to make his point that all of that had been a mistake.

“Luci?”

Her head came up and for a second, she was so deep in her thoughts she did not recognize the petite, slightly stooped woman hovering beside her.

“Hon, are you all right?” the woman asked.

*Oh Dio*, she thought.

Pearl.

Pearl Bazer, wearing a purple velvet jumpsuit, a chunky purple, red, yellow, gold, black and green necklace, a clack of thick gold and black bangles on her wrist that had two indomitable, instantly recognizable interweaving Cs, gold rings on every finger, and the biggest, roundest pair of glasses ever made over her eyes. Glasses molded of Kelly green, embedded with rhinestones.

Oh yes.

And her signature ruby-red lipstick.

Her face was lined to profusion.

Her hair was short, spiky and white with just a hint of lilac.

And she was as she always was, without fail.

Unique.

Individual.

Dancing to the beat of her own drummer.

In other words, she was the most fashionable person on the planet.

“Pearl,” Luci murmured.

Pearl bent closer, peering harder at Luci’s face through lenses that made her eyes look enormous.

“Now that you’ve succeeded in remembering who I am, even though I met you at a Massimo show what feels like a lifetime ago, came to your wedding, had lunch with you not too long ago at your villa in Lake Como and spent time with you on countless occasions in between, would you kindly answer my question?”

Luci was confused. “Your question?”

Pearl fluttered a thin, veined, spotted hand with perfectly rounded nails varnished in cobalt blue between them.

“Are you all right?”

Vaguely, Luci looked to her feet, using that gesture to pull herself together before she looked back to Pearl, pinning a smile on her face.

That smile (among other things) had won her contracts for exorbitant fees in order for her to twist her body into insane positions in such places as under a red-hot sun, looking gorgeous and happy doing so (if the photographer called for that, which in fashion didn’t happen often—girls were expected to look bored, or expressionless, the better to divert attention to the clothes or make said clothes look superior).

“I’m shopping for shoes so obviously I’m fabulous,” she lied.

A bony finger with a blue nail wagged in Luci’s face.

“*Yekirati*, don’t kid a kidder.”

Luci blinked up at her.

“We’re going to Cipriani,” Pearl declared out of the blue, leaning back in a gesture that stated clearly, that was that.

Oh no.

She was not going to Cipriani with Pearl Bazer, one of the most eclectic, singular, extraordinary individuals Luci had met (and Luci had met a lot of people).

She was also one of the most opinionated.

And outspoken.

Maybe *the* most opinionated.

And outspoken.

“I...just had a salad,” Luci tried to demur.

“Not *now*,” Pearl stated, aghast. “You go to Cipriani for dinner. You order something with white truffles in it. I’m assured they’re kosher. But if they’re not, just don’t tell my rabbi. I’ll meet you there. Eight sharp.”

Luci started to stand as it appeared Pearl was going to leave it at that and totter off.

But Pearl stopped all movement and turned sharp eyes in her eighty-something-year-old face to Luci.

“If you’re not there, there’s nothing I can do. Except worry. Worry greatly. And you will be responsible for making an old lady worry. Worry and not enjoy her meal at Cipriani. And if you have that in you, Luciana Gordon, I will be sad that I ever met you.”

And with that, she tottered off, not very fast, and definitely not spry, in her green Doc Martens boots.

Luci settled in her chair, her head bowed, her eyes again not seeing the thirteen boxes of shoes around her.

She was not the kind of woman who would wish to make anyone worry, old lady or not.

She’d done enough of that recently, making people she cared about worry.

Too much.

Though she didn’t mean to.

She sighed as she realized she was meeting Pearl at Cipriani at eight sharp.

“Can I help you try on?”

Luci again looked up, and there she saw Elena, ready to assist.

“I’ll just slip on the Dolce and Gabbana slides,” Luci replied. Slides, even D&G ones, far more appropriate for her home on the beach in North Carolina.

“You’re not taking the Aquazurras?” Elena asked, deflated. “They look beautiful on you.”

Luci looked down.

They did.

They looked beautiful on her.

They were the kind of shoes that would look beautiful on anyone.

But she was a former model. She’d even been called a supermodel in her day (now she was a *former* supermodel). So even if she was vain—and she was, slightly, the appropriate amount, considering she was gorgeous, knew it, and it would be disingenuous to pretend she didn’t—she had to admit to even more vanity about her feet.

She had beautiful feet.

And even better ankles.

Kia would love those shoes. And Kia helped out at the shop on occasion. Kia was her best friend in Kingston. In fact, Kia was becoming her best friend *ever* (and she had a lot of friends, but Kia was special).

She could let her try them on. Even wear them, if Sam took Kia somewhere lovely.  
She lifted her head yet again. “Yes, I’ll take them.”

Elena beamed.

Luci felt a profound sadness inside because it was highly unlikely Hap would ever see her in those shoes.

She was putting the other one on—just in case—when her fingers stilled on the zip in the back.

She hadn’t thought of what Travis would think.

She always thought of what Travis would think, even if her beloved husband was very dead. He’d love them. He’d *make* love to her as she wore them.

Hap would find them amusing, but Luci did not know if he was the kind of man who would tease his woman, doing this partially to hide how he admired her when she took care of herself, looking pretty and dressing up, and then he would show how he appreciated them in another manner.

She’d never know that.

And that was what made her the saddest of all.



*Hap*

“You’re a screamin’ idiot.”

Hap had his crab sandwich up to his face, his eyes on Sam and Kia sitting at the picnic table in front of him, but he slid his gaze to the side and up to see Skip standing there, looking pissed (not an unusual look), glaring at Hap.

It also wasn’t unusual for Skip to be at the crab shack seeing as it was called Skippy’s Crab Shack.

Hap just wasn’t in the mood to put up with Skip’s mood.

He started to lower his sandwich at the same time open his mouth to speak, but Skip (also as usual, especially with his mouth) was faster.

“So Luci’s in New York City, drownin’ her sorrows in stupidly expensive shoes she’s got no business ownin’ when she lives on a beach, and half the time she’s barefoot. So you’re down here,” he swung his arm out in front of him, “havin’ a visit when you’re nowhere *near* here when Luci’s around.”

Hap had once been banned from Skippy’s Crab Shack after an ill-advised discussion (read: fight that he thought was funny, but Skip had not) about the Army v. Navy game (Army had won, Hap was a first sergeant, stationed at Bragg, Skip was retired Navy).

It hadn’t been very long ago he’d been granted permission to return to the Shack.

He liked Skip’s sandwiches. And if pressed, say through water torture, he would admit to liking Skip.

He didn’t want to be banned again.

That wasn’t why he kept his mouth shut.

“Lay off, Skip,” Sam warned.

Good, Sam had his back.

Not a surprise.

Skip turned his attention to Sam. “I can tell you’re gearin’ up to back his play. I can also tell you it’s disappointing, when you’re one of the few males I know who primarily thinks with his *first* brain, those times you think with your *second*.”

Sam’s face got hard.

Kia giggled, and if Hap’s glance at Skip hadn’t happened the precise instant it did, he’d have missed the softness come into its craggy depths when he heard Kia’s laugh.

That was Skip. No woman on earth would think he had a soft spot for them, but as far as Hap could tell, he had a soft spot for *all* of them.

He was the crankiest, most foul-mouthed asshole of a ladies’ man in history.

“I’m sorry?” Sam said low.

Hmm.

Not good.

“Only a man thinkin’ with his johnson would be okay with another man pissin’ his life away and hurtin’ a woman he cares about,” Skip retorted.

Sam’s back got straight. “It’s called brotherhood, Skip.”

Skip jabbed a finger Sam’s way. “That. That right there. Thinkin’ with your johnson.”

Hap entered the fray.

“Maybe you can let us eat our sandwiches?”

Skip squinted at him.

Then he leaned into his fists at the table.

“If I thought it was worth my time, instead of a waste of it, to tell you a story that would get your head out of your ass, I’d do it. Since it’ll be a waste of it, I won’t. But you’re a damn fool, George Cunningham. Never thought I’d say that, even you...a grunt. But you’re a *damn fool*.”

Hap felt his jaw get hard, but Skip just pushed up and stomped away.

“Let it go,” Sam advised quietly.

Hap stopped watching Skip storm away and turned his head to study his sandwich.

“Eat your sandwich. We’ll take off, get some beers, hang out on the deck, and you can relax and let that shit go,” Sam suggested.

“Skip’s right,” Kia chimed in, also quietly.

“Baby,” Sam murmured.

Hap looked at Kia. “I don’t need this.”

Kia looked right back at Hap. “Yes, you do.”

At that, Hap felt his lips thin.

“Let it go, honey,” Sam urged his wife.

Kia gave her husband a stubborn look then she picked up her basket of food, twisted on her seat and swung her legs around, muttering, “I’m eating in the kitchen with Skip, the only man of my acquaintance here who’s using his *first* brain.”

Sam made a noise in his throat that was part humor, part annoyance, and Kia took off.

Hap watched her go and wondered when she’d start showing. She was only four months pregnant, so he figured it’d happen soon.

Hap bent his neck, lifted his sandwich and took a huge bite.

“Skip’s not gonna let this go,” Sam noted.

Hap kept his eyes on his sandwich as he chewed, swallowed, then grunted, “He’ll let it go.”

“Man, you gotta swing things back around with Luci.”

Hap lifted his gaze to his friend. His brother in arms. Just his brother, not by blood, but that was where they were at.

Like Gordo was there with them.  
Always and forever, even after Gordo and Sam left the Army.  
Travis “Gordo” Gordon.  
Their brother.  
Luciana’s dead husband.  
“She finds someone else, I’ll get there.”  
Fuck, it was a miracle he could get that out.  
He pushed the miracle.  
“And she’ll find someone else, Sam. She’s ready. She’s got herself past the hard part. It won’t take her long.”  
Yeah, that was harder.  
A fuckuva lot harder.  
The thought of Luci with another man made him want to hurl.  
He took another bite of his sandwich to get the sick taste out of his mouth.  
It didn’t help. Not surprisingly, it made it worse.  
“You shouldn’t have gone there with her.” There was an edge of pissed in Sam’s voice that made Hap look at him again while he swallowed.  
“We were drunk,” he replied.  
“That’s no fuckin’ excuse and you know it.”  
He did.  
“Shit just got outta hand,” Hap muttered.  
“With Gordo’s wife?” Sam asked irately.  
“No, with *Luci*,” Hap bit back, shocking the shit out of himself not only at the bite, but at his words.  
She wasn’t Luci.  
She was Gordo’s. Gordo’s wife. Gordo’s everything.  
He was a brother.  
Which meant she should only ever be a sister.  
But he couldn’t for the life of him put her there.  
She’d kissed him, tasted so damn good, *looked* so damn good, and when she’d pulled away, the anxiousness and heat and want and beauty in her face, her eyes...  
She was just Luci.  
“It was turned around, you’d rise from the dead for the sole purpose of breakin’ his neck,” Sam retorted.  
“If it was turned around, I’d rise from the dead for the sole purpose of having one more minute with my wife.”  
Sam shut his trap.  
Yeah, he felt that.  
He felt that with watching Luci lose what she lost. Watching his younger brother, his *blood* brother’s girlfriend lose what she lost when his brother died in the line of duty. And now having a wife who he loved more than his own life.  
So yeah.  
He felt that.  
Hap stared at him and let that sink in.  
Only when he thought he’d given it enough time did he speak.

“It got outta hand, Sam,” Hap clipped. “She’ll find some dude and we’ll make our way back to each other. Just peace out on this shit. I don’t need to lose Luci, have Kia and Skip ticked at me, and take your shit too.”

“Just tell her it was a mistake and you’re not going to go there and do it now so we can have the family back together again,” Sam encouraged.

Oh, he’d told her it was a mistake. He’d told her that afternoon, at the barbeque Sam and Kia had for Sam’s high school football team.

She’d looked at him like he’d sunk a knife in her gut.

Then she’d taken off.

He’d gone after her for the purpose of having it out and putting it behind them, once and for all.

Then, chickenshit and fucked in the head, he’d gotten in his truck and driven home.

That was where they were at. He hadn’t seen her since. Nearly three months.

He missed her.

Like *fuck*.

Shit.

“Hap, are you hearin’ me?” Sam pushed.

“I told her that. It hurt her, bro.” He shut his eyes quick and hard at the memory then opened them with a shake of his head. “It hurt her. Just leave it lie.”

Sam was now staring at him and Hap knew him well, could read him, so it was not hard to see he didn’t like the idea of Luci hurting.

“She’ll move on,” Hap assured. “She was just...feelin’ shit out. Doin’ it with someone she thought was safe. She had a bumpy road when we lost Gordo. She was just pullin’ out onto the straightaway, checkin’ her groove. When she realizes that, and that I don’t give a shit she used me to do it, it’ll be all good. But she’s stubborn, so she probably won’t realize that shit until she has another guy.”

Sam looked sick at that, neither of them wanting Luci to move on, which would mean she left Gordo behind (though, Hap had shit messing with his head that made him dislike that idea a fuckuva lot more).

It was healthy.

It was right.

They should want that for her.

They both *did* want that for her.

It still sucked.

For Hap, it sucked *hard*.

And that had nothing to do with Travis “Gordo” Gordon.

Which made it suck harder.

“Got a kid comin’, want all my family around me, around my baby, all good, copacetic, nothing messin’ with it,” Sam replied.

“We’ll get there, man.”

“Maybe she gets back from New York, you try to find some time to get her there faster.”

Hap wanted to get up, lean across the table, and shout, “*Lay the fuck off!*”

He did not do that.

A younger George Cunningham would.

No hesitation.

He’d learned control since he was a perpetual, immature jackass.

Or control when a beautiful woman he'd loved from afar from the minute he'd clapped eyes on her did not lay a sweet, wet kiss on him.

Fuck.

"We'll see."

Sam hesitated before he sighed.

Hap took another bite of sandwich, trying not to think of Luci in New York.

He was not a city guy.

But she probably knew that place like the back of her hand. She'd know the good restaurants and bars and places to take a walk in Central Park. She'd stroll in somewhere and folks would probably know her, call to her, greet her, kiss her fuckin' cheek like those lame-assed city folk did. Maybe even kiss *both* her cheeks, like those lame-assed European folk did.

He'd grown up on a farm in Iowa. What the city folk called a "flyover" state. What they did on the rare occasion they had to get to LA or San Francisco so they could do what they had to do in LA or San Francisco, but do it looking down on LA or San Fran, dying to get back to the "city."

So he had no problem looking down his nose right back at those city folk and he had no problem sharing it.

He'd teased Luci about that shit for years, Gordo backing him up, both of them busting her chops.

But he knew one thing and he knew it for certain.

He would take pride in his place if he walked into some ritzy, up-its-own-ass restaurant in New York City and someone called out to her and came to kiss her cheek and she was on his arm.

She was on his arm.

Damn.

It was not about having seen the look on Gordo's face the million times he watched his brother proudly introduce his stunning wife to someone who hadn't met her. And it was not about knowing what he knew with no doubt, the fact that shit had nothing to do with how drop-dead gorgeous she was. That she was an ex-supermodel.

But instead it was about the fact she was Luci, who drank beer and ate three hotdogs in one sitting because she liked them so much she could tell you her favorite (Hebrew National, bun length).

For Hap, it would be about having her long, elegant fingers curled around his elbow, having her close, smelling her hair, her exotic perfume, the turn of her head to get those exquisitely formed eyes looking right into his, and having her.

*Having her.*

Knowing later he'd tease her about her ridiculous shoes that cost more than most made in a month and put her just as tall as him (right, maybe an inch taller). And she'd pretend to be pissed, but she'd love it, like she always pretended to be pissed when he gave her shit, but he could tell by the way her lips curved up she loved it. And he'd know what kind of beer she drank and how her hair looked windswept after a walk on the beach and how she took her coffee and how she looked naked and spread out...

Hap bit off another huge hunk of his sandwich, stopping his train of thought, reminding himself he'd never have Luciana Gordon on his arm.

Not only because he should not ever go there because she was his brother's woman.

Though that was part of it.

But because he knew where she was at.  
She was feeling things out.  
She was trying to find her new groove.  
But once she found it, with someone else, that man—no matter how decent he was, how rich,  
how good-looking, how smart or funny...no matter what he was.  
He would always come second best to a dead man.



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Available for pre-order now!