



When Lightning Strikes (Whiskey Creek)

By Brenda Novak

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Welcome to Whiskey Creek— Heart of the Gold Country!

Simon O'Neal's causing trouble again.

And it's up to Gail DeMarco to stop him.

Gail DeMarco left Whiskey Creek, California, to make a name for herself in Los Angeles. Her PR firm has accumulated a roster of A-list clients, including the biggest box office hit of all— sexy and unpredictable Simon O'Neal. But Simon, who's just been through a turbulent divorce, is so busy self-destructing he won't listen to anything she says. She drops him from her list—and he retaliates by taking the rest of her clients with him.

Desperate to save her company, Gail has to humble herself by making a deal with Simon. The one thing he wants is custody of his son, but that's going to require a whole new image. He needs to marry some squeaky-clean girl who'll drag him off to some small, obscure place like Whiskey Creek....

Gail's the only one he can trust. She agrees to become his wife—reluctantly. But she isn't reluctant because he's too hard to like. It's because he's too hard *not* to love!

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Editorial Review

Review

"Whenever I see a new Brenda Novak book, I buy it and read it, pronto. I can always count on her for a solid, exciting story, full of adventure and romance." -Linda Lael Miller, #1 New York Times bestselling author

"Any book by Brenda Novak is a must-buy for me." -Reader to Reader Reviews

"Brenda Novak's seamless plotting, emotional intensity and true-to-life characters who jump off the page make her books completely satisfying. Novak is simply a great storyteller." -Allison Brennan, New York Times bestselling author

Novak's smooth plotting makes for a great read." -Publishers Weekly on Dead Right

"Strongly defined characters, sizzling sexual tension and a tautly constructed plot... blend brilliantly together in Novak's exceptionally intense, powerfully emotional novel." -Booklist on Every Waking Moment

"Novak is an expert at creating emotionally driven romances full of heat, sensual tension and conflict that not only satisfy her characters but her readers as well." -Writers Unlimited

Well-written, nicely paced, filled with appealing characters and laced with a few surprises." -Library Journal on Dead Right

"Believable characters and gripping action." -Carla Neggers, New York Times bestselling author

"I suggest Brenda Novak be added to your 'to buy' list today. You won't be disappointed." -Romance Readers Connection

"Imagery so vivid it leaves you breathless." -Christine Feehan, New York Times bestselling author

About the Author

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author Brenda Novak has penned over 45 novels. A two-time Rita nominee, she's won The National Reader's Choice, The Bookseller's Best, The Bookbuyer's Best and many other awards. She runs an annual online auction for diabetes research every May at www.brendanovak.com. To date, she's raised over \$2 million. Brenda considers herself lucky to be a mother of five and married to the love of her life.

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She was ruined. She'd become anathema—the Jerry Maguire of the Los Angeles public-relations biz. And it'd happened almost overnight. "You don't look so good."

Gail DeMarco turned away from the phone she'd just hung up to focus on Joshua Blaylock. Dressed in a pair

of skinny black jeans with long-toed shoes, a designer jacket and rectangular-shaped glasses, her personal assistant hovered at the corner of her desk, a hopeful yet worried expression on his face. Like her, he'd been hoping they could pull out of the nosedive she'd caused by making one impetuous call, and then a number of thoughtless statements, three weeks earlier. But she could tell Joshua had overheard enough to understand what her other employees didn't grasp quite yet. They hadn't just lost a few important clients, like Maddox Gill and Emery Villere; they'd lost them all. Big Hit Public Relations had fallen from its lofty perch at the top of the PR food chain to crash and burn at the bottom. And it was all thanks to one man. Simon O'Neal, the hottest male lead in the movie business, had flexed his superstar muscles and brought down her company so quickly and easily Gail could hardly believe it. She kept thinking she'd wake up to find that their feud was all a bad dream—or that others would see Simon as the train wreck she knew him to be and side with her instead. But America loved him. He was their new James Dean. He was screwing up right and left, but he had the most loyal fans in the world, fans who were as fascinated by his self-destruction as his talent.

She should never have told him she'd no longer work for him. One client after another had deserted her ever since.

But any self-respecting public-relations professional would've grown tired of Simon's antics. He'd done everything she'd specifically asked him *not* to, created so many media nightmares, and that made her, as his personal publicist, look as bad as he did. How was she supposed to represent someone like that?

"Hello?" His smile gone, Joshua snapped his fingers in front of her eyes.

Gail forced back her tears. For more than a decade, ever since she'd graduated with a degree in advertising and public relations, then interned for Rodger Brown and Associates, she'd devoted herself to building her company. She had no husband, no kids and very few friends, at least in the L.A. area. Her ambition hadn't allowed time for that. There was only the group of childhood friends in Whiskey Creek six hours north. She saw them every couple of months. But by and large she'd left both family and friends to make her mark in the big city. Here, her employees were closer to her than anyone else. And now she'd have to let them all go. Even Joshua.

"That was Clint Pierleoni." She groomed her voice into a careful monotone to keep it from cracking.

He blinked rapidly, as if he was tempted to cry himself. It wouldn't be the first time he'd broken down in her office. He was always getting upset over one man or another. She usually consoled him, actually enjoyed living vicariously through him since it'd been so long since *she'd* had a love life. But today she had no words of comfort because his pain was her pain, too.

"Don't tell me—" he started.

She broke in before he could get the words out. "He said it's time for him to find another PR company."

"But... Clint's been with us from the beginning. I've *slept* with Clint—after signing that form agreeing not to reveal he's gay, of course."

Gail ignored the last part of what Joshua had said. She didn't condone her employees having sex with the firm's clients. But she'd already written Josh up for his inappropriate relationship with Clint. It seemed pointless to go over her objections again, especially at this late date. What Joshua said about Clint was true. He'd been the first up-and-coming actor to take a risk on her. And she'd done a hell of a job for him at a steal of a price.

She'd expected more loyalty. They'd come so far together. He was bigger now than he'd ever been, and she'd helped make that happen. "He tried to explain—"

Joshua broke in. "Explain what? That he was caving in to the pressure of the Hollywood heavyweights who've joined Simon O'Neal and turned against us?"

"He's afraid staying with us will adversely affect his career. Simon promised him a part in his next movie, and he's positive it will disappear if he doesn't kowtow."

"Simon's a bastard! An *alcoholic* bastard!"

She narrowed her eyes. "You haven't slept with *him*, have you?" For just a moment, she allowed herself to imagine what it would do to the almighty Simon's career to leak *that* information. He'd never be able to play a romantic male lead again. But she knew what Joshua was going to say before he said it.

"He's yummy enough that I'd sleep with him if I had the chance. I don't know many people who wouldn't, except you," he added as an afterthought. "But...he's not gay."

"Right." She attempted a shrug, even though she'd had her fantasies about Simon, too. Who hadn't? "Too bad."

He leaned on his knuckles as if he was planning to reveal a big secret. "He *is* a womanizer, though. I bet we could come up with all kinds of dirt—"

She waved him to silence. "Not the kind that'll surprise anyone. His wife left him because he couldn't keep his pants zipped. His exploits in *that* area are second only to Tiger Woods's." Even if she had the goods, she doubted she could bring herself to destroy him. She was hurt and angry, but she didn't believe in creating bad karma.

"So what do we do?" Josh asked.

"What *can* we do?" Drawing a deep breath, she tried to sit tall in her chair, like she was used to doing when barking out orders and handling calls in rapid succession. She thrived on the adrenaline that sustained her on any given day. But her groove was gone, along with her clients.

Sagging against her expensive leather chair, she thought about calling the actors who'd fired her. If only she could talk them into coming back...

But it was no use. She'd already tried that. No one would cross Simon, except a few inconsequential clients who didn't care enough about him to follow his lead, and three of them were charities she repped *pro bono*.

"He's going with Chelsea Seagate at Pierce Mattie," she added dully.

"No!" Joshua punched the air. "That bitch has everyone!"

Also thanks to Simon. He'd been with Big Hit for three years, knew they were rivals, so he'd gone to Chelsea and taken almost fifty of Gail's sixty-four other clients there, too. "Pierce will regret letting Chelsea sign him. Simon will ruin them. There isn't a PR firm in America, or anywhere else, that can protect the image of a client so bent on self-destruction. Since his wife left, he's worse than Charlie Sheen ever was."

"At least PM will die a slow death," Joshua said, dropping into the chair across from her. "How long before we have to close our doors?"

She pursed her lips as she glanced around her swanky office. There'd been days when she'd been unable to believe her own success. Now it all seemed to have been an illusion. "Two months?" Could she even hold out that long?

He rocked forward. "That's it?"

"Our overhead is huge, Josh. Rent alone is fifteen thousand. Together with salaries for twenty people...the money will dry up fast."

His next words were muffled; he'd buried his face in the stylish scarf he wore under the collar of his too-cool jacket. "When do we tell the others?"

She couldn't bear to see him slumped over like that. He'd told her not to cast Simon aside but she'd done it, anyway. Simon had deserved to be cut from her client roster—he'd been asking for it—but he wasn't anyone to mess with, and he'd proven that.

Struggling under the weight of her responsibility, she got up and walked to the interior window overlooking the expansive lobby designed to impress visitors. The staff cubicles and three other offices branched off to the right. They couldn't be seen from where she stood, but she could make out the back of Savannah Barton's dark head as she lounged in the doorway of Serge Trusso's office. Savannah was a single mom with two kids. Where would she go? Serge would land on his feet. He saved money, never took anything for granted. But what about Vince Shroeder, one cubicle over? He had a disabled wife. Then there was Constance Moreno, barely twenty years old. She'd come from New York two months ago and signed a year's lease on her apartment. How would she pay the rent?

These people depended on her. Why had she been so determined to punish Simon, to see that he received some type of backlash?

Gail tapped her forehead on the cool glass. "You'd better call a meeting. I'm sure they already know trouble's brewing. It's been dead around here. They're out there throwing spitballs at one another."

"You want me to get them now?"

She thought of Simon's movie premiere tonight and the fact that he'd be at the after-party, probably roaring drunk but enjoying the fame and fortune that followed him everywhere. He shouldn't get away with what he'd done. She'd been in the right, damn it. But...if she wanted to save her employees, she was going to have to humble herself and apologize, maybe even *beg*.

She'd rather throw herself in front of a bus, but there was more at stake here than pride. She had a good team; they didn't deserve to lose their jobs. "No, wait."

"You think something's going to change?" he said with a telltale sniff.

She didn't dare hope. But she had to make one last-ditch effort to save the firm, just in case it was still possible. "Give me until tomorrow."

He toyed with the expensive pen set he and the rest of her staff had bought her for Christmas. "For what?"

She turned to face him. "A Hail Mary."

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