

JANE
PORTER

and CAITLIN CREWS

INFAMOUS

Jane Porter

**Infamous: Hollywood
Husband, Contract Wife /
Pure Princess, Bartered Bride**

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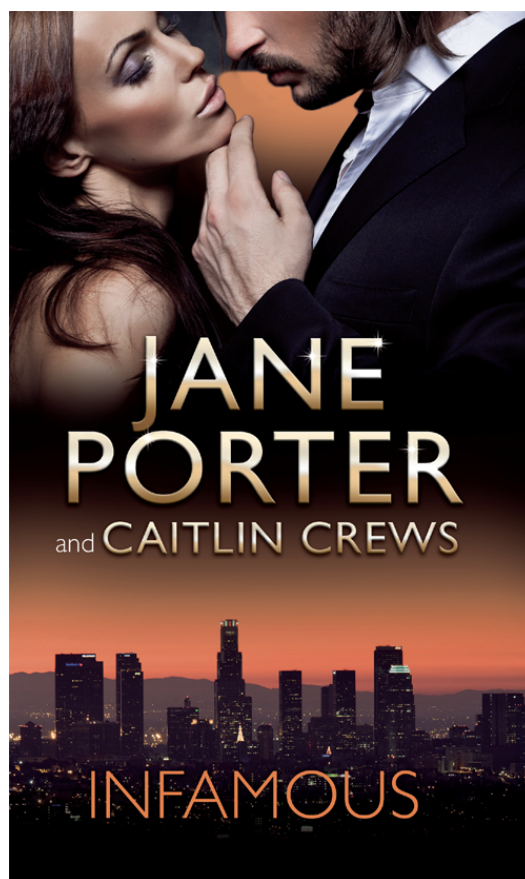
?Jane Porter & Caitlin Crews Fabulous, passionate storytellers From Unknown to Hollywood Bride Sexy Spanish leading man Wolf Kerrick is never out of the headlines. This time he's taken Alexandra, an ordinary girl, and turned her into an overnight celebrity, then into his Hollywood bride! But what's beneath all the glitz and glamour of their lavish wedding? From Princess to Contract Bride Luc Garnier had set out to find the perfect bride and brokered the deal through her father... It was to be a union on paper first and of flesh later... Princess Gabrielle seems to be well-behaved and well-bred. So much so that Luc is determined to find the wanton woman within!

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Two glitzy, glamorous tales from Jane Porter and Caitlin Crews!

INFAMOUS

“In this romantic story, Porter again reveals
herself to be a fantastic storyteller.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Hollywood Husband, Contract Wife*

“Caitlin Crews has penned a winner with

her first novel, *Pure Princess, Bartered Bride!* Sexy, intensely emotional and wholly absorbing

...” —*CataRomance*

**Infamous
Hollywood Husband,
Contract Wife
Jane Porter
Pure Princess,
Bartered Bride
Caitlin Crews**



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Hollywood Husband, Contract Wife

About the Author

JANE PORTER grew up on a diet of Mills & Boon® romances, reading late at night under the covers so her mother wouldn't see! She wrote her first book at age eight and spent many of her school and college years living abroad, immersing herself in other cultures and continuing to read voraciously. Now Jane has settled down in rugged Seattle, Washington, with her gorgeous husband and two sons. Jane loves to hear from her readers. You can write to her at PO Box 524, Bellevue, WA 98009, USA. Or visit her website at www.janeporter.com.

Dear Reader,

I met Caitlin Crews in 2005 at a publishers' splashy launch party in New York City. Caitlin and I shared the same editor and my editor had sent me Caitlin's first novel, thinking I would enjoy it. I had. But I was secretly rather envious of Caitlin's smart voice and distinctive style and meeting her in person only made me more insecure. Caitlin is blonde, beautiful, brainy, and so very funny. There was no way I could compete. Over the next few years Caitlin and I were thrown together time and again. But I still wasn't quite sure what to do with her.

Then came one holiday when we were both in Hawaii with our respective spouses. We met up for dinner in Waikiki and Caitlin told me she'd started reading my Mills & Boon novels and loved them. She said she was a fan. I said she was ridiculous. She made me feel clever and I loved how funny and smart and interesting she was. During the next year I began to turn to Caitlin for writing advice and input on my women's fiction manuscripts. We shared our favourite books with each other. We talked about life. And men. And love.

Over the years I learned to trust and treasure Caitlin for her honesty and strength and insight. I loved her warmth and loyalty to her friends. I loved having her in my life. And then one day she casually mentioned that she'd been working on a manuscript for Mills & Boon® Modern™ and would I be willing to look at the first couple of chapters? I told her to send them ASAP and I read them in one sitting. I was blown away. I loved Caitlin's voice and style and insisted she finish the story. She did.

The rest is history. That first book sold and Caitlin has since written ten amazing stories for Mills & Boon Modern. Caitlin is a true star. But even more importantly, she's one of my dearest friends. I adore her and am so happy and proud to be in this book with her. Welcome Caitlin to the Modern family!

Yours,

Jane

With love for my sister, Kathy Porter.

PROLOGUE

THE WEDDING WAS NOT supposed to happen.

This was a charade, a job she'd been hired to do. But the charade was supposed to have ended long before they ever went to the altar.

Long, Alexandra Shanahan silently repeated, clenching her bouquet of lilies, blue hydrangeas, white orchids and violet freesias tighter between stiff clammy hands.

This was all such a horrible mistake she couldn't even concentrate on the minister's words.

My God, she didn't even *like* Wolf Kerrick. Even four weeks of being squired around Hollywood as his newest love interest hadn't endeared the man to her.

In fact, four weeks of playing his girlfriend had only made her dislike him more. He was horrible in every sense of the word.

He was too rich, too successful, too powerful. He was too much of everything, and that alone made her uncomfortable, but the fact that he didn't respect women infuriated her. He treated women like playthings, taking what he wanted, when he wanted, and discarding without remorse when inexplicably bored.

And now she was his wife.

Alexandra swallowed, stunned, silenced, undone.

She, who could handle anything, she who never wavered in the face of danger, she who took risks and loved challenge, welcoming adversity with open arms, was now married to the world's most famous film star.

Spots danced before Alexandra's eyes and she gulped in air, trying to clear the fog from her head. If she didn't know herself better, she'd think she was going to faint.

She couldn't faint.

It was too much of a photo opportunity.

She must have inhaled too sharply, because suddenly Wolf's hand was at her elbow.

"You better not faint," he growled in his rough accented English, a sexy combination of Irish and Spanish vowels that left women weak at the knees. But that was Wolf's magic.

He was the quintessential bad boy, times a thousand, and everybody's celluloid dream.

Six feet three and impossibly broad through the shoulder while lean in the hip. He looked as good naked in love scenes as he did in a tuxedo shooting the latest James Bond thriller.

Alex's jaw jutted and she tugged her arm from Wolf's touch. "I won't," she whispered defiantly, even though she wasn't sure she wouldn't faint. Truth be known, she was scared, scared in a way she hadn't been since first moving to Los Angeles four years ago.

It'd been a long four years, too.

Four years of struggle, attempting to crawl up the ladder of Hollywood fame. And now she was here. Sort of.

Wolf's grip on her arm tightened. "Then smile. You look as though you're dying."

"If only I were so lucky." Then she forced another tight smile just in case any of the guests could see her face. This was her wedding, after all.

"I'm your dream man. Remember?"

Those had been her words, too, her exact words, but they'd been uttered in a moment of panic, at the height of a crisis. She would have never claimed him otherwise.

Alex's stomach rose, threatening to embarrass her right then and there. Oh, God. What had she done?

Biting her lower lip, Alexandra battled the second wave of nausea even as the Santa Barbara breeze lifted her veil, sending the lace and her long, artfully styled curls blowing around her face. Married to Wolf Kerrick. Mrs. Wolf Kerrick.

Alexandra Kerrick.

Her eyes squeezed closed, her hand shook where it rested on Wolf's arm.

Why had she thought she could play his girlfriend?

How could she have ever thought she'd be able to manage him?

And why had she come to Hollywood in the first place?

CHAPTER ONE

Beverly Hills, California

Five weeks earlier ...

ALEXANDRA SHANAHAN had thought being invited to lunch with Hollywood's most powerful actor was too good to be true.

She was right.

"You want me to *what*?" Alexandra Shanahan asked incredulously, staring at Wolf Kerrick as though he'd lost his mind.

"Play my new love interest," he repeated, his deep voice nearly flat.

Wolf Kerrick's love interest. How ludicrous. Beyond ludicrous.

Wolf Kerrick ... and her? Alexandra would have laughed if her stomach wasn't doing wild cartwheels.

Everything, she thought woozily, about the lunch was wrong. The impossible-to-secure reservations at the famous Beverly Hills Hotel's terrace restaurant. The bright blue sky overhead. The dizzying fragrance of the terrace garden's roses and gardenias.

When she'd first sat down at the table, she'd introduced herself—silly, but since they'd never officially met, it'd seemed like the right thing to do.

Wolf had repeated her name thoughtfully. "Shanahan. Sounds familiar."

"There's a famous football coach by the same name," she'd answered nervously, trying to ignore the excited whispers of the other restaurant patrons. Everyone had been watching them. Or at least watching Wolf. But then, he was a megastar and sinfully good-looking, so she couldn't really blame them.

"Maybe that's it," he'd answered, leaning back in his chair. "Or maybe it's familiar because it's Irish."

She'd managed a tight smile before dropping her gaze, already overwhelmed by his formidable size and presence.

Wolf Kerrick was bigger, broader, stronger, more male than nearly any other actor in the business. There was no mistaking him for any other actor, either, not with his Spanish-Irish black hair, dark eyes and sinful, sensual mouth.

"Daniel said you had a job offer for me," she'd said nervously, jumping straight to the point. There was no reason to stall. She'd never be able to eat in his company, so ordering lunch was out of the question. Best just get the whole interview over and done with.

"I do."

She'd nodded to fill the silence. She'd hoped he'd maybe elaborate, but he hadn't. Her cheeks had scalded. Her face had felt so hot even her ears had burned. "Daniel said he thought I'd be perfect for the job."

Wolf's dark head had tipped, his black lashes dropping as he'd considered her. After an endless silence he'd nodded once. "You are."

She wasn't sure if she should be flattered or terrified. He seemed so much friendlier on the big screen, more approachable in film than he was here in flesh. Right now he was anything but mortal, human. Instead he was like a dark warrior, an avenger with a secret—and dangerous—agenda.

"I'm looking to fill a position," he said flatly.

"Yes," she echoed, hands knotting together in her lap.

"The role of my new love interest."

She nearly tumbled from her chair. "*What*?"

She stared at him so hard his face blurred.

“It’s a publicity stunt,” Wolf said in the same flat, almost bored tone. “The position would last approximately four to six weeks. Of course, you’d be well compensated.”

Shocked, mortified, Alexandra felt as though she’d burst into flames any moment. “But I—I ... couldn’t,” she sputtered, reaching for her water glass even as a rivulet of perspiration slid down inside her gray linen jacket. She was broiling here on the terrace. She’d dressed far too warmly for lunch outside, and with the bright California sun beating down on her head she thought she’d melt any moment. “I don’t date—” she broke off, swallowed convulsively “—actors.”

Wolf’s jaw shifted. A trace of amusement touched his features. “You don’t have to. You just have to pretend to date me.”

Him. Wolf Kerrick. International film star. Spanish-Irish heartthrob. Alexandra gulped more water. She was so hot she could barely think clearly. If only she’d dressed more appropriately. If only she’d thought to bring someone to the meeting with her. Her boss, Daniel deVoors, one of the industry’s top directors, had sent her here today, telling her Wolf Kerrick had a proposition for her. She’d thought maybe Mr. Kerrick needed a personal assistant. It hadn’t crossed her mind he’d be interviewing for a lover.

“Why?” she whispered.

“You’re young, wholesome, ordinary, someone the public could relate to.”

Young, wholesome and ordinary, Alexandra silently repeated, feeling her heart jump to lodge firmly in her throat. He didn’t find her attractive even though she’d made such efforts today. Alexandra rarely wore makeup, but today she’d used a little mascara and a touch of lipstick, and obviously it’d made no difference. She was still wholesome and ordinary. She took a deep breath, suppressed the sting of his words. “But I still don’t understand....”

“It’s a PR move aimed at damage control.” Wolf shifted in his seat so that his powerful body seemed to dwarf the table and the terrace and the day itself.

Alexandra’s brows furrowed. She was finding it increasingly difficult to keep focused on what he was saying, disappointment washing through her in gigantic waves. She’d been so thrilled to meet Wolf Kerrick, to have this chance to interview with him. Last night she’d barely slept. Today she’d woken extra early and showered and dressed with such care....

But now ... now she just felt hurt. Disappointed.

There was no job, just this ridiculous proposal.

Her temper stirred and she sat taller. “Damage control?” she repeated, trying to keep up with him. “Why would you need damage control ...?” Her voice faded as it hit her, in one lucid swoop. *Joy Hughes.*

This was about Wolf’s affair with Joy Hughes.

And looking across the table, it all came together. Mr. Kerrick didn’t want to hire a love interest. He didn’t want to be meeting her or sitting here in public having this conversation. He was doing this—speaking to her, asking her to play a part—to help repair his damaged reputation, and she knew who and what had damaged his reputation. His year-long affair with the very married film actress, Joy Hughes.

“Does this have to do with your ... *affair*?” she asked awkwardly, torn between anger and shame that Daniel deVoors would even suggest her to Mr. Kerrick as a possible love interest.

Wolf Kerrick’s lips suddenly pulled back in an almost wolflike snarl. “There was no affair.”

Alexandra’s heart jumped, but she didn’t cower. “If there was no affair,” she said huskily, fingers balling into fists, “you wouldn’t need me, would you?”

Wolf leaned forward, dark eyes flashing, jaw jutting with anger. “There *was* no affair.”

His dark eyes held hers, fierce, penetrating, and the stillness following his words was as dangerous as his tone of voice.

She felt the blister of his anger, as well as his underlying scorn. Yet she was angry, too. He must think she was stupid or naive to take everything he said at face value. And she might be naive,

but she wasn't stupid. Alexandra met his gaze squarely. "Everyone knows you and Joy have been involved for the last year."

Wolf and Joy Hughes were both megastars. Bigger than film stars, larger than life, they personified Hollywood power and glamour. So much so that when they'd secretly linked up earlier in the year, their affair—Joy was still married to another Hollywood heavyweight—made headline news and had remained there for nearly six months.

Even now she remembered how their photos had been on every cover of every weekly tabloid—for months. "It's not exactly a secret," she added.

The planes of Wolf's face hardened, his high cheekbones growing more prominent. "The media fabricated the relationship. I thought the interest would die. I told Joy as much. It didn't."

He paused, considered his words. "The public's fickle. Today they're enthralled by rumors and gossip, tomorrow they're appalled. But the stories have gotten out of hand. The bad press will soon influence the box-office takings. I can't take that chance, not when it'll hurt every single person who works on my films."

He was right about that much, she agreed, biting her lower lip. She'd been in Hollywood four years, had worked for Paradise Pictures for nearly three and knew that a low-grossing film impacted everyone. A low-grossing film left an ugly black mark on everyone's résumé.

Rubbing at a tiny knot of tension throbbing in her temple, she tried to see her part in this. "But to generate new press by pretending to have a relationship with me? It's such an old Hollywood trick. I didn't think it was done anymore."

His long black lashes lifted and his dark gaze searched hers, his scrutiny so intense it left her feeling strangely exposed. "The studio wants proof that Joy and I aren't an item. Being seen with you would be the proof they need."

"Just by being seen with me?"

"That's how the tabloids work. They snap their photos, run their stories and publicly speculate about celebrities' happiness and future, often without interviewing one reliable source." His tone was rueful, his expression mocking. "After one week of being together in public, we'll be an item."

"That's all it takes?"

"Sometimes only one photo is necessary." His mouth slanted. "But I should warn you, the pressure will be intense. The paparazzi are everywhere, photographers camp outside my door. Once reporters learn your name, they'll hunt down information on you—where you work, what you do, who you've dated—" He broke off, looked at her from beneath arched brows. "Do you have any scandals in your past, anything the press can dredge up?"

Stunned to silence, she shook her head.

"Old boyfriends with an axe to grind?" he persisted.

Again she shook her head. She'd hardly ever dated. Growing up on an isolated ranch, there hadn't been many chances to date, and moving to Los Angeles at nineteen had nipped her desire to date in the bud. The men she'd met in Los Angeles were often shallow, materialistic and crass, nothing like the men she'd been raised with, none revealing any of the male qualities she admired, like strength, courage, confidence, generosity.

Men in Los Angeles loved cars, tans and expensive restaurants. Oh, and women with fake breasts.

"There's nothing in my past worthy of tabloid interest," she said, briefly thinking of her mom who'd died when she was young and her oldest brother's wife who'd been killed in a car accident. But those weren't the kinds of things the gossip magazines would be interested in. Those were the personal heartbreaks that lay buried between the covers of photo albums, baby books and high school graduation diplomas.

But those personal heartbreaks were also one of the reasons she'd left Montana. Having grown up in the shadow of five older brothers, Alexandra needed space. Independence. She needed to be her own person and have control over her life.

Playing Wolf Kerrick's new love interest would strip her identity as well as her control.

She'd be followed, photographed, harassed.

"I'll make it worth your while," Wolf said quietly, as if able to read her mind, or the emotions flickering over her face. "I've met with Daniel and your studio. They're willing to offer you a significant promotion if you take the position. And when the assignment ends, you'll be offered an A.D. position with Daniel."

"Assistant director?" she repeated under her breath, dazed by the idea of really being involved in making pictures and not just taking coffee orders.

"Yes."

For the first time since Wolf had presented her with the proposal, she was tempted to accept, she really was. To escape from photocopy hell and actually do something on a film ... to leave the office behind and go on location ... to be involved with real decision making versus how much liquid sugar was needed to properly sweeten the lighting technician's doubleshot iced coffee ...

But looking at Wolf, she knew her decision wasn't quite so simple. Wolf was a man. An actor. A very popular actor as famous for his skills in the bedroom as his talent on-screen.

And maybe Wolf was notorious for bedding lots of women, but she couldn't do that—wouldn't do that. It's not who she was.

But what if Wolf expected that?

She shot an uncertain glance up into his face. "Mr. Kerrick, I think you should know right now, up front, that I don't do the casting-couch routine." Her heart raced as she considered his hard features, his firm, sensual mouth. "I won't do it. It's not how I was raised."

His lips curled up, a flicker of wry amusement touched his dark eyes before just as swiftly disappearing. "I've never needed to convince or pressure a woman into bed."

"Yes, I know," she said, pulse still pounding like mad. "But I wouldn't want you to think that later I'll do things—"

"Miss Shanahan, rest assured that there's no risk of that. Forgive my bluntness, but you're not my type."

Her face flooded with heat even as her blood turned to ice. Oh, God. How humiliating. But she'd practically asked for that, hadn't she?

Painfully embarrassed, Alexandra felt her insides curdle and cramp. Of course she wasn't his type. Of course he wouldn't want to take someone like her to bed. He could have any woman in the world, why would he want to be with her?

"I'm sorry," she said, voice noticeably husky, "but I don't think this is going to work. I'm not who or what you need." She fumbled for her purse, finally finding it at her feet, next to her chair. "And I'm not about to try to change to please you or anyone else."

She rose to escape, but Wolf reached out, caught her hand, kept her from fleeing.

"That's where you're wrong." His deep voice, pitched low, vibrated inside her as his dark eyes, a glittering onyx, held her transfixed. "You're exactly what I want and need."

His words shook her, but it was his touch, that scalding press of skin on skin, that made her knees buckle. With his hand around her wrist, she felt electric, charged, different. "I know I'm no beauty queen, but there's no reason for you to be cruel—"

His fingers tightened around her wrist. "Cruel? I'm paying you a compliment. I've picked you to play the role of my lover." His voice deepened, betraying his Dublin roots. "I wouldn't ask just anyone—"

"And I'm to be flattered by that?"

"Yes."

She tugged at her hand, hating the ruthless edge in his voice, that raw, hard, male quality that made him want to dominate her and everything else in his world. “That’s where you’re mistaken.” Tears shimmered in her eyes. “Because I’m not flattered and I don’t take it as a compliment that you’ve chosen me to fill a role in your life. I’m not an accessory, Mr. Kerrick. Not for you, not for anyone!”

She stole a quick breath, noticed the diners around them watching in rabid interest. “People are staring,” she said softly, a faint catch in her voice. “Please release me and let me go.”

“I’ll release you, but I want you to sit down and finish this—”

“It *is* finished,” she flashed furiously.

“No, it’s not. Sit down. Now.” He exhaled. “Please.”

Alex slowly sank into her chair again, her purse falling limply to her lap.

Wolf leaned forward, his dark eyes never leaving hers. “Don’t let your pride get in the way, Miss Shanahan. Your boss told me you’re smart, ambitious. This is an opportunity to make a name for yourself.”

Her nausea had returned, stronger than before. “Make a name for myself as what? Your fake girlfriend?” She stared at him incredulously. “You think I should jump at your proposal, be flattered because I’m a plain-Jane girl and don’t get out much, is that it? And yes, I’m ambitious, but unfortunately not ambitious enough to date you. Not ambitious enough to pretend to be your girlfriend to get a promotion. I find it disgusting that I’d gain industry status—respect—simply by being seen around town with you. That’s not the way life should work—”

“Maybe it’s not the way it should, but it’s the way it does.”

“And doesn’t that strike you as immoral? Wrong?”

“No. It’s practical.”

“Of course it would seem so to you. You’re the man that dates married women!” And with a violent jerk, she broke free and rose to rush from the table.

Fighting tears, Alexandra squeezed through the tables lining the terrace, wound her way down a pink painted hallway to the ladies’ room even as his words rang in her head.

Perfect for the job. Damage control. Publicity stunt. Pretend to date me. Practical.

The tears fell even before she’d managed to lock herself inside the bathroom stall.

This was exactly why her father hadn’t wanted her to come to California.

This was exactly what her brothers had predicted would happen.

They’d all said she was too young, too inexperienced to survive in a dog-eat-dog city like Los Angeles, and she’d been so determined to prove them wrong. So determined to make it on her own and do it right.

But playing Wolf Kerrick’s girlfriend would be far from right.

The tears trickled down her face, and she scrubbed them away with a furious fist.

He’d pay her to be seen with him.

He’d make sure she was compensated.

Alexandra’s throat squeezed closed. She felt as though she were gasping for air on the inside, fighting for calm and control.

And then it hit her. She didn’t have to go back to the table. She didn’t have to see Mr. Kerrick again or endure any more of his painful proposal.

She could just go. She could just leave and get her car and return to work.

It was as easy as that.

Calmer now, Alexandra exited the stall, rinsed off her face, patted her damp face and hands dry. The valet attendant had her car key. She had her purse with her. She’d just go now.

Alex left the bathroom but had only taken two steps when she froze, her body stiffening with horror.

Wolf Kerrick was waiting for her. And standing, he was even taller than she remembered.

She felt all her nerves tense, tighten. Even her heartbeat seemed to slow. “The men’s restroom is on the other side,” she said lowly.

“I know.”

“The bar is the other direction—”

“You know I’m waiting for you.”

Alexandra drew a quick, shallow breath. She was exhausted. Emotionally flattened. All her excitement, all her good feelings about meeting Wolf Kerrick were long gone. “There’s no point. There’s nothing more for either of us to say—”

“There’s plenty. You can say yes.”

My God, he was arrogant and insensitive. “I don’t *want* to say yes.”

“Why not?”

She flinched at his curt tone. It was clear he was used to getting his way and didn’t like being thwarted. “I’d never sell myself—”

“This isn’t slavery. I’m offering you a salary.”

“And I want to make it in Hollywood my way.”

“And what is your way?” he taunted. “Making copies? Answering phones? Getting coffee?”

Alexandra’s cheeks flamed. “At least I have my self-respect!”

“You might respect yourself even more if you had a job that actually challenged you.”

“My goodness but you’re insufferable. You should fire your managers, Mr. Kerrick. They’ve got you believing your own PR, and that’s a huge mistake.”

He shocked her by bursting out laughing, eyes creasing with humor. “You really don’t like me, Miss Shanahan, do you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me.”

“Why?” she retorted fiercely, spinning to face him, hands balled at her sides. “Does everyone have to be a fan? Do you want everyone lining up for your autograph?”

Still smiling, his dark eyes raked her. “No.”

“Because I’d be lying if I said I liked you. Maybe once admired you, lined up to see your movies, but that was before I met you. Now I see who you really are and I don’t like you or your chauvinistic, condescending attitude.”

He jammed his hands into his trouser pockets, rocked back on his heels. “Your honesty’s surprisingly refreshing.”

“Were you ever nice?”

His lips pursed, black brows pulling as he mulled over her question. Reluctantly he shook his head. “No.” Then the corner of his mouth tugged into a sardonic smile. “But you don’t have to like me to date me.”

“That’s revolting.”

“Alexandra, if you’re not an actress and you don’t date actors and you can’t get yourself promoted out of the copy room at Paradise Pictures, why stay here in Hollywood? Why not just pack your bags and go home?”

She felt a pang inside her, the muscles around her heart tightening. She’d asked herself the very same question many times. “Because I still want to make pictures,” she said softly. “I hope to one day be more involved, hope I can somehow make a difference.”

He studied her a long moment, his expression closed, eyes hooded. “You can make a difference,” he said finally. “You can help make a picture—and save the jobs of dozens of people. We’re to start filming *The Burning Shore* in a little over a month’s time. Work with me. Let’s get the film into production.”

Alexandra bit down, pinched her lip between her teeth. She'd love to make a difference, do something positive, learn something new. She'd love to be challenged, too, but she didn't trust Wolf. "You think we could generate positive press together?"

He'd never looked so somber. "If I didn't, I wouldn't be here now."

CHAPTER TWO

WOLF ACCOMPANIED Alexandra to the front of the hotel, where she'd left her car with the valet attendant.

Lush purple bougainvillea covered the hotel's pink stucco entrance, and the fragrant blossoms of potted lemon and orange trees perfumed the air, but Wolf gave his surroundings scant attention.

Alexandra could feel the weight of Wolf's inspection as they waited for her car to appear.

The problem wasn't only the offer. And the issue wasn't just her morals or her values. It was her lack of experience.

She didn't know how to manage a man like Wolf Kerrick and couldn't imagine how one would even date a man like him.

But they won't be real dates, she reasoned. They're pretend dates. It's not as if you'll really have to kiss him or touch him or be physically involved.

Heat washed through her at the very idea of getting physically close. She really did need more experience. "If you gave me some time," she said after a moment, "allowed me a chance to think about your offer properly, I might say yes." She looked up, met his gaze before quickly looking away. "But I don't want to be pressured."

She drew another deep breath, flexed her fingers to ease her tension. "And if I did agree, how would this work?"

If he felt any elation or sensed that he'd won, none of it showed on his face. "We'd draw up a contract, include a generous financial compensation, as it's probable you'll miss some workdays due to events and premieres, and then begin going places together to be seen."

He made it sound so simple, she thought, and yet she wasn't a glamour girl, the sort to be invited to fancy parties or industry premieres. No, she was the girl raised by her dad, grandpa and five older brothers. There hadn't been a woman in the house, not since her mom died when Alexandra was five. Growing up, she was the original tomboy.

"And what makes you think people will believe you ... and I ... are together?" she asked, pushing thoughts of Montana and the Lazy L ranch from her mind. "I'm not your ... usual choice in dates."

"Lots of stars date makeup artists, casting directors, the like."

She hesitated. "Some actors do, but not you."

"You can't believe everything you read in the tabloids."

Maybe, she thought, and maybe not, but she'd seen the pictures of the women he dated. He liked starlets and models, topless dancers and magazine centerfolds, his taste typically running toward women with more cleavage than brains. And Alex didn't even have to look down at her not-so-impressive chest to know her strength was not in her cup size.

Years ago, back in junior high school, she'd learned that there were only two avenues open for women: the one for pretty girls and the one for smart girls. Even in high school it had been one or the other—cheerleaders and beauty queens or bookworms and future librarians. Girls certainly couldn't be both. And since Alexandra knew she wasn't pom-pom-girl pretty, she'd decided then and there to be smart. Damn smart. "We both know I'm not pretty enough to be taken seriously as your new love interest."

"You could be if you tried to do something with yourself," Wolf answered with brutal candor. "Alexandra, you don't even try."

She bit down, not knowing where to look. "I don't try because I know already what I am and who I am. And I don't need makeup or fake hair or nails or a tan to make me something I'm not."

"Which is what?" he asked quietly.

“A bimbo. I’m not going to be a bimbo. I want to be respected. Taken seriously. And if I change myself—”

“You’re changing your hairstyle, not your soul.”

Her head jerked up.

“You’re smart,” he added. “Serious. And I’m sorry, but that eliminates the bimbo category for you.”

She should have been flattered. Instead his words merely left her even more flustered.

Every time he looked at her she felt sparks on the inside, little bits of hot fire flaring here and there. It was like being a human sparkler, only worse because the heat didn’t die.

“I just don’t want to be laughed at,” she said after a moment. “People can be unkind. I know the tabloids are famous for publishing unflattering photos and pointing out celebrities’ flaws.”

“Before we go public, you’ll meet with stylists, receive wardrobe consultation. I have a team of professionals who will help ease you into the transition.”

Alexandra was intrigued despite herself. “When would that happen?”

“As soon as you signed the contract.”

Alexandra tried to imagine being groomed by top Hollywood stylists but couldn’t. She might have lost twenty pounds since moving from Montana to California, but she still thought of herself as the sturdy country girl who’d worn cowboy boots before high heels. “A beautiful starlet would be far easier to introduce to the public,” she said in a small voice.

“I’m not interested in squiring around a young actress desperate to make a name for herself—”

“But in real life—”

“This is real life, and I’m quite aware that I’m responsible for dozens of people’s jobs. I just want to get *The Burning Shore* made and I want to do it without emotional complications.”

She fell silent, digesting this. “You don’t want anyone to fall in love with you.”

His dark eyes creased, his mouth compressed. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Thankfully her practical little blue Ford Escort appeared that moment in the famous hotel drive.

The uniformed valet climbed from the driver’s seat and held the door for her.

Wolf walked her to the car. Alexandra slid behind the steering wheel. “I’ll call you,” she said.

“You’ve my number?”

She stared up into his dark eyes, seeing the hard, beautiful lines of his face, and her panic grew. No one had a face like Wolf. No one had his charisma either.

It’d be suicide to do this, she thought, absolute disaster—if not for him, then for her. She wasn’t as sophisticated as he was, nor did she have his experience.

“I still have the card Daniel gave me. He wrote your cell number on the back.”

Smiling faintly, Wolf closed her door and stepped away from the car. “Take your time, think about your options and call me when you’re ready.”

She hesitated and then leaned through the open window. “You think I’m going to say yes, don’t you?”

His faint smile grew. “I know you will.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a smart girl and you’ll soon realize this is the opportunity of a lifetime.”

The opportunity of a lifetime, she repeated over and over driving home, her hands shaking on the steering wheel and her insides doing nonstop flips.

The opportunity of a lifetime, she repeated yet again as she parked her car in the tiny garage adjacent to her California bungalow, one of the tiny nondescript row houses built in Culver City during the forties and fifties.

Her house was small, and until recently she’d shared it with another girl. But since the girl had a job transfer to Boston, Alexandra was now covering the rent by herself and it was tight. She’d

considered getting another housemate but was so enjoying having the space all to herself that she hadn't gotten anybody yet.

And if she did sign the contract to play Wolf's new love interest, she wouldn't have to get a roommate, she'd be able to pay the entire rent herself.

Alexandra loved the thought of that.

Since moving to Los Angeles she'd really struggled, both financially and emotionally.

She'd taken a job waitressing and then apart-time job temping for an independent film studio, answering phones, handling mail, playing general office errand girl, which was mainly going to Starbucks and getting everyone's favorite espresso and latte.

Alex discovered that she liked being useful in the office. She was good in the office—quick, smart, agile, she could multitask and never needed to be told anything twice.

After a year working for the independent film company, she answered a Paradise Pictures ad she saw in *Variety* and was hired to assist intense, brainy directors and producers with whatever needed to be done.

She'd worked for Paradise for nearly three years now and she thought she'd proven herself on more than one occasion, but the promotion had never come.

Why?

It wasn't as though she couldn't handle more responsibility. She actually needed the risk, craved change.

In the kitchen, Alexandra took out the business card Daniel had given her several days ago, the one with Wolf's private number. She tapped it on the counter, flipped it over to the personal cell number scribbled on the back and tried to imagine the next four weeks.

New clothes. Input from a stylist. Exciting parties.

Smiling nervously, she bit her lip. It'd be scary but also fun.

Then she thought of Wolf Kerrick and the whole concept of fun went out the window, leaving her unsure of herself all over again.

But it's an opportunity, she reminded herself sternly, *and that's what you want.*

Quickly she picked up the phone, dialed Wolf's number.

"It's Alexandra Shanahan," she said when he answered, dispensing with any preamble. "And I'll do it. But before anything else happens, I want the offer—and the studio's promise about the assistant director position—in writing."

"Of course."

She held the phone tighter. "And working on B-rate flicks doesn't count. I want to work on major studio films. Bigbudget films."

"Certainly."

She folded one arm over her chest and pressed a knuckled fist to her rib cage. "I want to be clear that this is a job, and I'll treat it like a job. I'll do what I have to for the cameras, but I won't do anything inappropriate."

"And what is inappropriate?"

"Kissing, touching, sex."

"There's got to be a certain amount of intimacy for the camera."

"Only for the camera, then, okay?"

"Okay."

"I mean it, Mr. Kerrick."

"I've got it all down, Miss Shanahan. You'll get the contract tonight. It should be there by seven."

The contract did arrive at seven. But a courier service didn't deliver it. Instead Wolf Kerrick brought it himself.

She hadn't expected Wolf and she'd answered the door in her faded blue sweatpants, cropped yellow T-shirt and bare feet in dire need of a pedicure. Without her contacts, and in her glasses, with

her hair in a messy knotted ponytail on top of her head, Alex knew she looked more like a librarian than the sex symbol required.

“Hi,” she said awkwardly, tugging on her ponytail, trying to at least get her hair down even if she couldn’t make the glasses vanish.

“Cleaning house, are you?” he asked.

“I didn’t expect you.”

“Mmm. But maybe I should come in. Two photographers tailed me. Red car on the right and the white car that hopped the curb. They’re taking photos of both of us as we speak.”

Alexandra opened the door so Wolf could enter.

As Wolf glanced around the house, she peeked out the living room curtain, and just as Wolf had said, the red car and the white car were out there, and both drivers held cameras with enormous telephoto lenses. “Those are some huge camera lenses,” she said.

“I learned the hard way that you’ll want to keep your curtains closed. Otherwise they’ll get shots of you walking around.”

She dropped the lace panel and faced him. “How did they know you were coming here?”

“There is always someone tailing me. Has been for years.” He dropped onto her beige couch, extended his denim-clad legs so they rested on her oak coffee table and looked up at her with piercing dark eyes. “How long have you lived here?”

“Almost three years.” The abruptness of his question was less disconcerting than the fact that Wolf Kerrick was stretched out in her living room, looking very relaxed and comfortable—in a loose gray T-shirt, with his thick black hair tumbling across his forehead. “Why do you ask?”

“There’s not much furniture.”

“My former roommate took it all with her to Boston,” she answered, thinking that even dressed down in jeans and a T-shirt, Wolf looked like a film star. It was his bone structure, coloring, the easy way he carried himself. He was more than beautiful, he was elegant and intense and physical. Sexy.

Alexandra exhaled in a painful rush.

That was really the problem. He was far too sexy for her and had been from the time she first laid eyes on him—which was in a movie, of course—eight years ago. In *Age of Valor*, just his second film, he’d played a soldier. And while he wasn’t the lead in the film, his performance was so strong, he stole the show. Alexandra remembered sobbing when his character died in the film, dramatically blown to bits just before the movie’s end. She’d liked him—the man, the actor, the character—so much she couldn’t bear for the story to end without him still in it.

She had been fifteen at the time, just starting her sophomore year of high school, and of course she had known it was just a movie and he was just an actor, but she’d never forgotten his face or his name.

Wolf Kerrick.

Amused by the girl she’d once been, Alexandra took a seat on the edge of the coffee table across from him. “Shall I sign the contract?”

Wolf’s dark head tipped and his long black lashes dropped, brushing his high, strong cheekbones. “Think you can do this?”

Growing up, she’d been the ultimate tomboy. As the baby of the Shanahan clan, she’d stomped and swaggered around in her cowboy boots. But moving to Southern California had killed her confidence, and she was only just starting to realize how much she missed her old swagger.

She’d once been so brave, so full of bravado.

How had moving to California changed her so much? Was it Hollywood? The movie industry? What had made her feel so small, so insignificant, so less than?

“Yes. I know I can,” she said forcibly, and strangely enough, she meant it. She was the girl who’d roped calves and ridden broncs and jumped off the barn roof just because her brothers said

she couldn't. She was the girl who didn't take no for an answer. If she could ride a bull, she could date a wolf.

Alexandra's lips curved at her own feeble joke, but her smile faded as Wolf's black eyes met hers.

"Think you can handle me?" he murmured.

Her heart stuttered. She knew what he was asking. Like everyone else who read the tabloids, she knew he'd been arrested more than once for fighting and heard it didn't take much to bring out the street fighter in him.

She also knew that women found him irresistible, and having once been one of those giddy girls who threw themselves at him, knew she'd never behave so recklessly again.

"Yes," she answered equally firmly, ignoring the cold lash of adrenaline. "You won't be a problem. You might be a famous actor, but you're also just a man. Now give me the contract and let's get this over with."

He handed her the contract and a pen, and Alex spread the document on the table to read while she tapped the pen against her teeth. The form read correctly, all the terms were there, everything she asked for given.

With a confident flourish, Alexandra scrawled her name at the space indicated. "There," she said, lifting her pen and handing the paper back to him. "Signed, sealed, delivered."

"My little lovebird," he mocked, taking the paper and folding it up.

Her cheeks heated. Her blue eyes locked with his. Her heart was pounding wildly, but she held his gaze, kept her chin up, refusing to show further weakness. "I won't be broken, Mr. Kerrick."

"Is that a challenge, Miss Shanahan?"

"No. I'm just stating a fact. I had some time to think about your offer, to look at the pros and cons, and I've agreed to do this not because it helps you but because it helps me. I know now what I want and I know what I need to do to get there. And you won't keep me from succeeding. There's too much at stake." And then she swallowed hard. "For both of us."

He studied her from across the table, his forearms resting against his knees, his eyebrows black slashes above bold dark eyes. "There will be pressure."

She rose to her feet. "I anticipate it."

"The attention will feel intrusive at times."

"I've considered that possibility, as well."

"You're truly prepared to take this all the way? Ready for the makeover, the new hair, the wardrobe and revamped image?"

"Yes."

He stood. "Tomorrow you'll pay a visit to the Juan Carlos Salon in Beverly Hills. The salon is expecting you. It'll be a long day. The car will be here at seven."

"I don't want a limo, Mr. Kerrick."

"It's part of the role, Miss Shanahan. And now that we've agreed to this little play, it's time we dropped the formalities. We're lovers now." He slowly moved toward her. "You're Alexandra and I'm Wolf and we're a very happy new couple."

He was standing so close to her now she could hardly breathe. "Right."

"Just follow my lead," he said.

"Your lead," she whispered, feeling the warmth of his body, his strength tangible and real. She tipped her head back, looked up into his face, with the strong cheekbones and high forehead, the piercing dark eyes.

"I'll make it easy for you."

"You're that good an actor?"

"I'm that good a lover."

She took an involuntary step backward. "You said there'd be no sex—"

“In public, it’s my job to seduce you. To make the photographers sit up, take notice.”

She inhaled hard, thinking he was the devil in the flesh. “In public, yes.”

He leaned down and brushed the briefest kiss across her flushed cheek. “But in private, we’re just friends, remember?”

She felt her stomach fall and her breath catch as his lips touched her cheek. The whisper of his warm breath sent fingers of fire racing through her veins.

Wolf headed for the door. “Don’t forget to set your alarm clock. The limo will be here early.”

Alexandra leaned against the door after Wolf closed it.

Her heart was still pounding and her tummy felt coiled in a new and aching tension.

This was not going to be easy. Pretending to be Wolf’s girlfriend would be the hardest thing she’d ever done.

And then she pulled herself together. *No more negative thoughts*, she told herself. *No more running scared*. She’d signed the contract. She had to go for it now.

And she would go for it.

She’d been in Los Angeles four years and she was hungry. Really hungry. Hungry like one living on the streets, digging out of trash cans, looking for something to fill you up, get you by.

Because, God knew, she wanted to go somewhere. She was determined to go all the way, too, all the way up, to the top. Fame, fortune, power. She wanted the whole bit.

It was time to do what she’d left Bozeman, Montana, to do. Time to make Hollywood hers.

CHAPTER THREE

THEY WERE CUTTING HER hair off.

The next morning, covered in plastic drapes, Alexandra stared aghast as Juan Carlos lifted chunks of her waist-length hair and began to chop it off to shoulder length.

She'd had long hair—really long, down to her butt—since she was a little girl. Being the only daughter, her father had wanted her to be a princess and insisted she leave her hair long. Soon he'd learned her hair was the only thing he could control, as his princess preferred jeans, boots and playing with LEGO, blocks and army trucks.

Alexandra had kept her hair long for her dad and now she found herself fighting tears as it was whacked off.

"It'll be beautiful. You'll be beautiful," Juan Carlos reassured, catching sight of her tear-filmed eyes in his station's mirror. "Be patient. You'll see."

Alexandra wanted to believe him. And it was just hair, nothing more important than that. And if she couldn't handle getting her hair cut, how would she handle the other changes coming in the next few weeks?

With her long hair in pieces all over the floor, Juan Carlos patted her shoulders. "Now we change the color."

Thirty minutes later, Alexandra was still trying to get used to the smell of bleach and chemicals from the cream applied to her hair. They were doing a two-color process—overall color and highlights—and the smelly foils on her head made her want to gag. Did some women willingly do this?

Juan Carlos had told her he was giving her warm amber highlights and promised to make her a Hollywood golden girl.

Alex wasn't so sure about the golden part.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she battled her nerves, drew a deep breath and counted to ten.

At ten, she opened her eyes, caught a glimpse of her silver-wrapped alienlike self in the mirror and closed her eyes again.

This was not going to work.

Back at home five hours later, Alexandra looked in the mirror at the new, improved version of her. Her hair shimmered with a multitude of highlights, precision-cut to fall in thick, sexy waves around her face, playing up her black-lashed blue eyes and the strong cheekbones she didn't know she had.

The makeup artist had shown her how to use color and liner to subtly darken and define her lips, her brows, her eyes.

And studying the new, improved Alexandra, she thought she looked good. *Pretty*. Pretty in a way she'd never been before. Feminine but smart. And confident. Strong. And that's the thing she hadn't known she could be on the outside. On the inside, she liked to roughhouse with the best of them, riding bareback, helping in the roundups, slinging barbwire along with the ranch hands. She'd learned early that she had to keep up with her brothers or she'd be left behind, relegated to the kitchen and the laundry room at home, and if there was anything Alex didn't want, it was woman's work. Housework. Domestic chores that kept her locked inside when the sky was huge and blue beyond the windows of the house, where the land stretched endlessly, waiting for exploration and hours of adventure.

Alex's lips half curved, and she stared, fascinated, at the face of a woman she realized she barely knew.

She really was pretty, almost pretty like the girls in magazines. And maybe it was makeup and expensive hair color and a professional blow-dry, but she wasn't the fat girl she'd been at eleven and

twelve and fifteen. She wasn't even the sturdy, healthy nineteen-year-old who'd arrived in Hollywood eager to make movies.

Reaching up, she touched the mirror, touching her reflection, the shimmering tawny lips, the dusty glow of cheeks and eyes that looked midnight-blue in the bathroom lights.

"Be confident," she whispered. "Be brave."

And with one last small, uncertain smile, she turned away from the mirror and left the bathroom, hitting the light switch on her way out.

In the living room she turned on the front porch light, and before she could decide if she should turn on the stereo or the TV or pick up a magazine to read, the doorbell rang.

Butterflies danced through her middle, spinning up and into her head.

God, she was nervous. Scared.

Why was she so scared? It wasn't as though she'd never been out with Wolf before. It's not as if she hadn't ever been alone with him either.

Hands pressed to her sides, she took a deep breath and reminded herself of all the reasons why she'd come to L.A. and all the things she wanted to learn, to do, to prove. Maybe Wolf Kerrick was way out of her league and maybe this was going to be a rocky couple of weeks, but doing this, playing this part, would help her succeed.

Wiping her damp hands on the side of her black trousers, she moved to the door and opened it.

And then he was there, even bigger than she remembered, taller, more intimidating. And twice as beautiful.

Maybe that's the part she found so disconcerting, too. Because she'd been around big men all her life. Brock was six-four, and Cormac a half an inch below that. But her brothers were more rugged—handsome but lacking the dark Latin sensuality that made Wolf's eyes just a little too dark and his lower lip a little too full and his black lashes a little too long. It'd be one thing if he didn't know his effect on women, but he did, and it only made him more dangerous. Wolf wasn't so much charming as lethal.

"I just need to get my purse," she said, opening the door wider and doing her best to hide her nerves. "Do you want to come in?"

"If you're just getting your handbag, I can wait here."

She silently disappeared, legs distinctly trembly as she went to the couch to scoop up the little evening bag she'd laid out earlier. The bag was so pretty, a small, black, handsome couture bag that looked simple but cost a fortune. Alexandra had seen the price tag when the stylist had presented it and gasped. The stylist had merely winked. "It's covered in your budget," she'd said.

Now Alexandra clutched the bag beneath her elbow, feeling briefly like a glamorous celebrity herself. She knew it was all hair and makeup and wardrobe, but still, it was such a treat, such a delight to feel genuinely pretty for a change.

"So what are we doing tonight?" she asked, returning to join Wolf at the door.

"Thought we'd have some drinks, get a bite to eat."

Alexandra nodded and closed the door behind her. She turned to head down the front steps, but Wolf hesitated and, reaching behind her, checked the door, giving the knob a twist, making sure it was locked.

She shot him a quick glance as they walked toward his Lamborghini. The fact that he'd double-check her door touched her, made her feel surprisingly safe.

She was still looking at him when his head turned and his dark eyes met hers. She shivered inwardly and amended her last thought. Make that as safe as one could feel with a wolf.

It was a warm night and the fog hadn't yet moved in. Wolf headed to Santa Monica, where he pulled in front of the luxurious Hotel Casa del Mar, which stood next door to its famous sister property, Shutters on the Beach.

The Casa Del Mar, built in 1926, was once the grandest of the opulent Santa Monica beach clubs and hotels, and a recent fifty-million-dollar renovation had returned the historic property to its former magnificence.

Although she'd never been there until tonight, Alexandra knew that the Veranda, the elegant lobby lounge, was famous for its literary crowd. Screenwriters and novelists hung out in the celebrated bar, with its enormous windows overlooking the sea and the plush velvet chaises and chairs scattered for comfortable seating.

The Veranda was packed when they entered, but miraculously an alcove opened up for Wolf and the cocktail waitress immediately took their drink orders.

Alexandra had thought the lounge was crowded when they walked in, buzzing with laughter and conversation, but the buzz seemed even louder now that Wolf had entered the room.

Everyone was looking their way, men and women alike watching Wolf, openly fascinated.

"I forgot. You're such a star," Alexandra said, sitting on the edge of her red velvet chair, afraid to relax and possibly ruin her artfully styled hair or carefully applied makeup.

"You forgot?"

"Well, I forgot it was like this." She pressed her hands against the chair's edge. "Everyone always looks at you. They watch everything you say and do. It's incredible. I guess that's what *star* means. You're the focus of everyone and everything."

He shrugged, unconcerned. "People are curious. They want to know if I'm as interesting as the characters I play."

"Are you?"

He laughed softly. "No." Reaching out, he took her hand, brought it to his lips. He kissed her fingertips and then curled her fingers over his and kissed the back of her hand, all while his gaze held her transfixed. "I'm sorry to say, I'm really quite boring."

She didn't believe him, not for a second.

Not when his eyes, glowing with an inner fire, belied his words, and Alexandra felt her belly clench as his lips moved across her skin.

He was not boring. Not now. Not ever.

Wolf tugged her hand, pulling her up and out of her chair, drawing her firmly toward him.

"Wolf," she whispered in protest.

He ignored her, pulling her down into his chair so that she sat awkwardly on his lap.

"*Wolf*," she repeated fiercely, blood surging into her face, darkening her cheeks.

"You were too far away," he said.

She felt the hard heat of his lap through her thin black trousers and it threw her, flustered her so that she tensed, going rigid in his arms. "And now I'm a little too close," she choked, her breath catching in her throat as his hand moved to the small of her back, holding her more securely.

"I think you're perfect."

"I feel ridiculous."

"Have I told you how much I like your hair?"

She felt as though everyone in the Veranda lounge must be looking at her. "Please let me off. People will talk."

"But isn't that the point? Don't we want them to?"

He was right, of course, but even knowing why she was on his lap didn't change the way she felt or how her body was responding—because it *was* responding. Her nerves were jumping and strange things were happening inside her, sharp hot streaks of sensation starting with the tight coil in her tummy and then racing to her breasts as well as lower, deeper, making her legs twitch and her mind wander.

“Stay here for our drink and then I’ll let you off,” he said, rubbing the small of her back as though it were perfectly ordinary for her to be on his lap with his strong hands casually caressing her, and maybe he could pretend ease, but Alexandra felt as though she’d pop out of her skin any moment.

His touch wasn’t soothing and she wasn’t relaxing. She couldn’t relax, not when he was stirring dormant feelings and even more dormant nerve endings.

Her lower back was tingling, sizzling with heat and pressure, warming to life beneath the dizzying touch of his hand, and that burn was starting to make her ache in places she didn’t want to ache. Her breasts were already growing fuller, more sensitive, and her belly was coiling hot and tight, making her think of escape. Relief.

She looked up into his face.

Had he had this effect on her four years ago? Somehow she didn’t think so. She couldn’t imagine it. Would she have very different feelings about him today if he had? “I think that’s long enough,” she whispered.

“Not even close.” And then his hands were on her waist, fingers sliding up toward her breasts, and she sucked in air, eyes widening in mute fascination.

He was turning her on. Really turning her on—and in public, too.

“*Wolf*. Let me go. Now.”

“We’re supposed to be lovers.”

Her mouth was parched, her lips painfully dry, and she licked her lips, trying to moisten them. “I know, but does this have to be in public?”

“If it’s not public, no one will know.”

Alexandra thought she’d run to the bar and make her own drink if the cocktail waitress didn’t return soon. “But maybe ... maybe we can be one of those mysterious couples that don’t really *do* PDAs.”

“PDAs?” he asked, his head tipping back against the velvet chair as he watched her with lazy interest.

His hair was thick, glossy black, and he wore it a little long. And in a way it reminded her of a wolf pelt—thick, dense, male.

And Wolf was very male.

Alexandra struggled to swallow. She couldn’t remember ever being this thirsty before. Her body was burning and her throat felt absolutely parched. She pressed her lips together, feeling her teeth beneath.

“PDAs?” he prompted again.

“Public displays of affection.”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “But I’ve no problem with public displays of affection if I like my woman.”

He’d trapped her in his eyes, and she gazed helplessly into the deep brown depths, a color somewhere between cocoa and black coffee, thinking they seemed endless, so dark, so deep, so alive with that unique fire of his.

One of his hands trailed up her spine, tracing her backbone and the little vertebrae between.

She shivered beneath the light caress, aroused despite her fierce desire not to be.

He had exactly the right touch, not too firm, not too delicate. And there was something about him, about his size and strength, about the tilt of his head and the mocking glint in his eyes that made her feel small and pretty and feminine. But not just feminine. Desirable. As though she were the only one in the room. The only woman in Los Angeles. California. Make that the planet.

Her pulse quickened and she found herself staring into his dark eyes, eyes that from far away were black but close like this had the smallest splinters of silver. Those shards of silver made her wonder if it was the lounge’s soft light or the fire that burned within him that made his eyes glow, turning him into some fierce and beautiful work of art.

Fire and ice.

The words whispered through her head and wrapped uncomfortably tight around her heart.

Because that was really who he was, she realized, looking at his face, the hard but expressive sensual features, the glossy black hair, the equally strong black brows.

“Now you’re staring,” he teased, his hand sliding higher up her back to rub between her shoulder blades, finding the little knots and balls of fear and tension. And magically he smoothed the knots away, rubbing firmer and then lighter, heating her, melting that resistance within her.

She wasn’t sure when she began to lean into him, seeking his touch, his warmth, but somehow his chest was where she wanted to be.

The cocktail waitress materialized with their drinks, and Wolf gestured for her to set them on the low table at his elbow. Smiling, she left the drinks and moved on, but not before giving Alexandra a brief inspection from beneath her lowered lashes.

Alexandra saw the look the waitress had given her and she wondered if everyone would look at her that way.

Wolf handed her martini glass to her before lifting his. They clinked glasses and Alexandra tilted her chocolate martini to her mouth, curious about a drink she’d heard of but never tried.

It was smooth, hot, strong, sweet, and she wrinkled her nose as she swallowed.

“Don’t like it?” Wolf asked, watching her.

“It’s different.”

“I take it different is bad.”

She smiled ruefully. “Different can be good. But in this case, different is just different.”

“Mmm.” His dark eyes glowed, and she felt, if not saw, the laughter within.

“You’re not laughing at me, are you?”

“Actually I am.”

And as she opened her mouth to protest, he caught the back of her head in his hand and pulled her close to cover her lips with his.

She inhaled at the sudden touch of his mouth on hers. It was a shock to her senses, his mouth so cool and firm, tasting of sweet chocolate and icy vodka. She shivered, her breasts peaking. At her shiver, his mouth hardened, the kiss deepening, the pressure parting her lips.

Her head spun, her senses swam, her body danced with pleasure that was as hot and sweet as it was electric.

The electric part dazzled her all over again, and blindly she leaned into him, searching for him, searching for more of the sensation and pleasure he offered.

Finally he lifted his head. She blinked, tried to focus, but she could only feel her mouth, soft, swollen, sensitive and it amazed her, this way he had of winning her over, taking her objections and melting them as surely as he’d just melted her.

Lifting her fingers to her mouth, Alex pressed down on her lips, feeling how the lower lip quivered and how her blood raced in her veins liquid-hot.

One kiss and she wanted more.

One kiss and she wanted to slide her hands into his thick ebony hair, twine her fingers through the glossy strands and hold tight, hold his face to hers so she could feel him, his beard and mouth, jaw and chin.

“You’re looking a little more relaxed,” he said, catching her hand in his and bringing it to his mouth, where he kissed the pulse beating frantically in her wrist.

“I think it’s the chocolate martini,” she said unsteadily.

His eyes creased. “I thought it was my kiss.”

She lifted her glass to her mouth and took a greedy gulp to hide the fact that he was making her nervous all over again. Those butterflies in her stomach had returned, only this time they felt more like forks of jagged lightning.

The chocolate-flavored martini slid down her throat, cool and tantalizing but also empowering. The cocktail made her feel stronger, calmer than she would have otherwise.

By the time they headed for home, close to midnight, Alexandra was laughing and surprisingly at ease.

She didn't know if it was that first chocolate martini or Wolf making an effort to be charming, but she'd ended up having fun.

After drinks at the Casa Del Mar they'd driven to Houston's for steaks and salads and glasses of wine. Again everyone had stared when they'd entered the darkened brick building, and again the hostess had magically found them a table.

Wolf hadn't been the only celebrity dining at Houston's that night, though. There'd been several other well-known entertainers, and two of them, both men, had stopped by their table to say hello.

Now Wolf was walking her to her door. After she unlocked the door, she stepped inside, and he followed her in, closing the door behind him. For a moment she felt a spike in nerves again, nerves and anticipation. Would he kiss her again?

But instead of a kiss, he checked each room, made sure everything was as it should be before saying good-night, giving her a platonic peck on the forehead and returning to his car.

His brotherly kiss jolted her back to reality. The kiss on the forehead was a kiss in private, a kiss behind closed doors and an indication of how things really were.

She wasn't his love, wasn't his girlfriend. She wasn't even really his date. She was just a girl hired to play a part. Any kisses, any whispers, any sexy innuendos were for the public and the press, wherever the hidden photographers might be.

Alex leaned against the door and remembered the kisses earlier. There'd been so much heat between them. When he'd kissed her, she'd felt unbelievable. Glamorous. Funny. Delicious.

"Delicious," Alex repeated, turning out the small hall light and heading for her bathroom, where she pulled her hair into a ponytail and washed her face, getting rid of the makeup.

In bed, Alex curled onto her side, covers pulled up high, so high that they covered her chin and the middle of her ear.

So you learned something important tonight, she told herself. You learned that there's a difference between real and pretend, truth and fiction. Tonight was make-believe. And it's okay to enjoy the make-believe, but don't get it confused with reality.

You're doing a job. That's it.

No emotions, no hopes, no feelings.

This, she reminded herself sternly, is business.

The next morning Alex was at work when the flowers arrived. Three dozen very long-stemmed pink roses in a stunning hand-blown glass vase. Oohing and aahing, the entire Paradise Pictures office staff broke away from their tasks to look over Alexandra's shoulder as she read the card.

Thank you for an unforgettable night. Looking forward to another. Wolf

Kristie, one of the other production assistants, snatched the card from Alexandra's hands. "Wolf?" she said, flashing the card at everyone. "There's only one Wolf I know of."

"Hmm," was all Alexandra said as she sat down in her chair and pushed the extravagant roses toward a corner of her desk to make some room to collate the scripts she'd just photocopied. It was one of the first jobs she did every morning. There were always script changes during the night, and the new, updated scenes had to be distributed to the cast and crew immediately.

But Kristie wasn't to be put off. She leaned across Alexandra's desk and held the small white florist card in front of Alexandra's eyes. "Wolf."

Alexandra looked up, her gaze meeting Kristie's. "I think that's what it does say."

"Wolf Kerrick?"

Alexandra suppressed a sigh. "What do you want me to say, Kristie?"

The young, bubbly production assistant from Duluth, Minnesota, arched her eyebrows. “You’re seeing Wolf Kerrick?”

Alexandra shrugged as she reached for the next set of pages and stapled the corner. “I don’t know if I’m seeing him. We went out last night. Had dinner and drinks—”

“Is that the first time?”

“Um, well, not exactly. We’ve had lunch. And then he’s stopped by my house a couple times—”

“For real?”

Alexandra suppressed a smile. Kristie’s expression was priceless. “We’ve only just met in the past week. Who knows where it’ll go?”

But Kristie wasn’t looking at the card anymore, she was studying Alexandra. “It’s more than that. Something’s going on. You’re different, you know. You’re ... pretty.”

Alexandra’s eyebrows lifted. “I wasn’t pretty before?”

“Not like this.”

Rolling her eyes, Alexandra grabbed the florist card from Kristie and shoved it in her desk drawer. She tried to focus on the job in front of her, but Kristie hadn’t budged and the other girls were still watching and waiting.

She knew she had to say something. They were desperate for a morsel of news, some juicy little tidbit, and isn’t this what Alexandra had agreed to do? Play the part? Become Wolf’s new love interest?

Shaking her head, Alexandra finally looked up. “If he proposes, I’ll let you all know.”

Three o’clock that afternoon, the studio’s main number rang and the receptionist took the call and then buzzed Alexandra to let her know she had an incoming call from Wolf Kerrick. Unfortunately the receptionist chose to use the intercom to tell Alexandra of her call, instead of a private line.

With Kristie and the other girls staring in rabid fascination, Alexandra picked up her phone and took the call off hold. “Alexandra Shanahan,” she said as crisply as possible.

“Wolf Kerrick,” the voice answered at the other end of the line. His voice was deep and husky and tinged with amusement.

Alexandra didn’t know if it was the timbre of his voice, or the amusement in it, but it immediately set her teeth on edge. “Hello.”

“Can I bring the coffee girl a coffee?”

Aware that Kristie was inching forward, Alexandra ducked her head, trying to avoid being overheard. “No, thank you.”

“How about I take you for a coffee?”

“Wolf, I’m *working*.”

“Not very hard.”

“What does that mean?”

“It seems to me you’re just sitting there, staring at your desk.”

“How do you know?” Alexandra demanded before noticing the office had gone strangely silent. Lifting her head, she saw that Wolf, dressed in loose dark denims and a black linen shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest, had entered the front doors and stood next to the receptionist’s desk talking on his cell phone.

My God, he looked gorgeous. And sinful. “What are you doing?” she whispered urgently into the phone, trying to duck her head so he couldn’t see her face or the telltale blush turning her cheeks a crimson pink.

“Watching you.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Why?”

“Because I want to.”

“Wolf.”

“Can you just do that with a little more passion in your voice?”

“No!” Alexandra started to slam the phone down and then, remembering she had an audience, hung the receiver up more gently. Phone down, she watched Wolf slowly saunter toward her through the rows of desks.

She heard the girls whispering excitedly as he passed. Wolf had to have heard the whispers, too.

Reaching her desk, he stood over her, his linen shirt half open, giving her and everyone else a glimpse of burnished bronze skin and hard, toned muscles. His dark eyes half smiled down at her, and yet there was nothing sleepy about him. He had the silent, watchful air of a wolf before it attacked.

“I’m stealing you away,” he said.

Alexandra hadn’t expected to see Wolf for days. She’d thought maybe by the weekend he’d call her, contact her, set something up for the future, and yet here he was, at her desk, causing trouble.

And she wasn’t ready for trouble. Didn’t think she’d be ready for his kind of trouble for a long time. Last night had taken something out of her. Last night had been a tease, a torment. She’d had so much fun with him that she’d imagined he’d been enjoying her company just as much. Instead he’d been acting.

Acting.

Alexandra smiled her brightest, most confident smile to cover her trepidation. “I wish I could go. But I’ve so much work. I’ve a million things to do and Daniel—”

“Has already given you permission to take off early.” Wolf smiled down at her, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “So get your purse and let’s go.”

CHAPTER FOUR

IT WAS A GORGEOUS afternoon, hot, sunny, the sky a dazzling california blue. Wolf was driving a different car than he had last night, a gleaming red Ferrari that looked brand-new.

A studio head, just leaving his office and heading for his car, noticed the Ferrari, too, and wandered over to shake Wolf's hand and compliment him on the car.

"That's a Superamerica, isn't it?" he said to Wolf as he shook his hand. "Hardtop convertible."

Wolf opened the passenger-side door for Alexandra. "It is."

"I was reading about the car's revolving roof recently. Doesn't it open up in ten seconds?"

Wolf was heading to the driver's side now. "It does."

"What are they? Half mil?" he asked as Wolf settled behind the wheel.

Wolf put the key in the ignition, started the engine. "A little less than that," he said before putting the car into reverse.

The other man whistled. "Beautiful car."

Wolf nodded agreement and drove away. But Alexandra sat next to him, dumbfounded.

"This car is worth half a million dollars?"

Wolf shot her an amused glance. "It's not that much. It's closer to a third of a million. But I can see you don't approve."

She studied the car's interior. The steering wheel wasn't exactly normal. It had paddle shifters on the wheel, but other than that it looked like an ordinary—albeit very clean—sports car. "I don't understand why anyone would spend so much money on a car."

"I have the money."

"Yes, but—"

He was leaving Culver City behind and heading for Santa Monica. "But what?"

"But you could do a lot of good with that money. You could feed starving children and build houses for the homeless and things like that." She stopped talking, bit her lip, stared at her hands, inspecting the spa manicure she'd gotten at the salon yesterday. "I know it's none of my business. I just wish I had the means to help more people. I think we should all help more people."

Wolf looked at her for a long, silent moment. "I agree," he said quietly before returning his attention to the road.

They traveled in silence down Santa Monica Boulevard and then north on Highway 1 wrapping the coast toward Pacific Palisades and scenic, craggy Malibu.

Wolf drove well, fast but confidently, and with the cliffs to the right and the sea to the left, Alexandra felt as though she were part of a movie or some reality television show.

He had been unusually quiet since she made her comment about helping others, but she wasn't sorry for thinking people should help others and she wasn't sorry for thinking an expensive car like this was a waste of money. He could buy whatever he wanted and she could think whatever she wanted. They weren't really a couple. They didn't have to agree.

Finally Alexandra couldn't take the silence any longer. She made a pitiful stab at conversation by asking him, "Are you excited about the new film?"

"Excited?" Wolf repeated, his upper lip curling. "I wouldn't say I'm excited, but I will be glad to work again. Working distracts me. Keeps my mind off other things."

It wasn't the answer she'd expected. She'd imagined he enjoyed acting, thought he would have found a certain fizz factor from being one of the most highly acclaimed actors in the business. "What things?"

His eyebrow arched as he glanced at her. "We all have ghosts and demons."

"And you won't tell me yours."

"No."

Alexandra didn't know if it was his expression or the caustic curve of his sensual mouth, but she felt the strangest flutter inside her middle as though she were nothing but naked nerve endings.

"Do you ever go home?" she asked suddenly, not sure where the question came from but curious about him, curious about his past as well as those ghosts and demons he'd just mentioned.

He shot her a long, assessing glance from beneath his lashes. He knew what she was doing, too. "Ireland or Spain?"

"Which is home?"

"Both, I suppose. I'm bilingual and was raised in both countries."

"Your mother was Spanish."

"From Cadiz," he answered, slowing for the traffic light looming ahead. "I was born in Cadiz, but when I was twelve my parents divorced and I moved with my father to Dublin. Spain is home in ways Ireland could never be, but I'm comfortable in Ireland, I like the people."

"And yet now you're here, in America."

"It's what the career dictated."

Alexandra stole a glance at him from beneath her lashes. "Do you ever regret becoming an actor?"

He hesitated before answering, shifting gears down and then, after the light changed, accelerating until he pulled into the parking lot for the Malibu Coffeehouse.

Turning off the engine, he turned to look at her. "Every day," he said grimly.

After getting their coffee, Wolf drove to one of the scenic turnouts on Highway 1 and parked. Climbing from the car, they moved to the cliff's edge to savor the view.

Wolf drew a deep breath, breathing in the stinging salty air off the Pacific Ocean. He loved the ocean, loved the cliffs of Malibu and Pacific Palisades. This area reminded him of Ireland's southern and western coasts, especially when the soupy fog rolled in, covering everything in a misty, mournful gray.

If it weren't for the ocean, Wolf didn't think he would have survived so many years in Southern California. He hated L.A. He hated the falseness, the superficiality, the attitude and airs. People in his business—like so many people in Los Angeles—were afraid to be real, human.

They were afraid of their bodies, their age, their flaws, their frailties. Women here went to ridiculous lengths to be beautiful: nipping, tucking, tightening, enlarging, enhancing, sucking, smoothing. They worked on themselves endlessly, refusing to age naturally, fixated on how they looked, how others perceived them, how attractive they were in comparison to other women.

God, he missed real women. He missed wit and banter, laughter and smiles that made the eyes crinkle and foreheads wrinkle instead of ghastly BOTOX-frozen faces. He'd love to share a drink with a girl who could tell a proper story, eat a bag of chips and not immediately worry about her thighs. Sometimes Dublin seemed too far away, and in those moments he missed his old life—the ordinary life before he'd become a celebrity—more than he could say.

Alexandra watched Wolf sip his coffee as they leaned against his half-a-million-dollar car. She felt wrong leaning against a car that cost so much, but he did it so she supposed it was okay for her to do it.

Ever since they'd left the Malibu Coffeehouse Wolf had been quiet, and his expression was unusually pensive now. Always enigmatic, he seemed even more distant than usual. Again she wondered why he didn't enjoy being an actor and why his success—and the accompanying fame—didn't mean more to him.

Was he really so spoiled? Was it arrogance that made him fail to appreciate his achievements? Or was it something else?

"There's nothing planned after this, is there?" she asked, wind blowing, tousling her hair. She tried tucking strands behind her ears, but they wouldn't stay there.

"We've a dinner tonight at Spago."

Any other time Alexandra would have been excited about the idea of eating at Spago. Wolfgang Puck's name and reputation spoke for itself. But she was tired—she hadn't been sleeping well lately—and after the tense afternoon she craved a quiet night at home. Alone. Preferably curled up on her couch with a good book.

"Do I have to go?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes."

"Why?" she asked in an even smaller voice.

He glanced at her, expression blank. "It's Rye Priven's birthday."

Rye Priven was the newest heartthrob in Hollywood, a gorgeous Australian that had just co-starred in a film with Wolf. The film was in the editing stage now and was supposed to be released at Christmas, when all the big Academy Award contenders were released.

"But Rye Priven doesn't know me—"

"Everyone's coming as a couple," Wolf answered roughly. "You're supposed to be the other half of my couple."

She ducked her head, stared sightlessly at her cup. She was hating being part of the couple right now. Wolf was so intense. And unpredictable.

"Rye's hosting the party himself. He's keeping it low-key," Wolf added. "I think he's only invited six friends, so my absence would be conspicuous, particularly as I already told him I'd be there."

"I'm not saying you shouldn't go," she doggedly replied. "It's just that I don't feel like it."

He looked at her over the rim of his coffee as he took another sip. "You don't like me much, do you?"

"No," she blurted and then winced at her bluntness.

"Why not?" Wolf paused, waited for an answer. "It's a shame you can't be more articulate in naming my faults."

Alexandra shot him a swift assessing glance, but he didn't look the least bit injured. "Your morals and values are deplorable. You could be someone truly great, someone ... heroic. But instead you just use people. Take advantage of them. I hate it."

"And you hate me, too."

"I—" she started to protest but then fell silent. She didn't want to start lying to him, because then the lies would never end. It was bad enough she'd agreed to do this, but to become as fake as her role? No. She wouldn't sell out. She couldn't. "*Hate* is a strong word," she conceded. "But I don't like you and I don't respect you. You just seem so bored and spoiled and arrogant. Selfish, too."

"You're a hard woman, Alexandra Shanahan."

She suddenly felt her anger start to melt. She didn't want to be angry, didn't like feeling angry. "You're just used to women falling all over you, desperate to impress you, please you. It's too bad, too, because you'll never know if people like you for you or because you're a famous movie star."

"Or if they like me for my body or my face."

Alexandra nearly choked on her sip of her now lukewarm coffee. "And that's exactly why I don't like you. You're so incredibly ..." she drew a rough breath "... so ..."

"Yes?"

"Conceited."

"Conceited," he repeated.

"You have so much—you've virtually everything—and you don't even appreciate it."

"And just what is everything?"

She gestured, her hand sweeping up and down. "This. You. Looks, wealth, fame, intelligence, success. You have it all, you have more than anyone else I know. But do you even feel grateful? Do you even have any idea how blessed you are? I don't think so."

"I hired you to play my girlfriend. I'm not paying you to be my conscience."

"I don't think you've even got a conscience!" Alexandra shrugged. "And you're right, none of this is my business. Just like who you pick up and take home isn't my business. Or the number of women you have in a week, that's not my concern either. You're free to take women and use them and abuse them, because as long as they give themselves over to you, you're not doing anything wrong."

"Right."

"Wrong!" Alexandra furiously tossed her cup into the trash bin and spun to face him. "Just because women will let you have them doesn't mean you should take them. Just because women get blinded by your good looks and fame, just because they hope a night of sex will turn into true love, doesn't mean it's okay for you to take advantage of them."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Maybe I'm not taking advantage of these women. Maybe they're taking advantage of me. Maybe they know one night of sex is just that, one night of sex, and when they leave me in the morning they leave happy to have had one night with me. They've got bragging rights, a chance to talk big—"

"That's horrible."

"To you."

Her hands balled, nails pressing hard against tender skin. "Not just to me but to all women. It's a lack of respect, a lack of awareness of how women think and feel, of how making love makes them think they've fallen in love ..."

"You're sounding as though this is pretty personal."

Her chest felt hot and tight, too hot and tight. She felt absolutely undone, beyond her own level of self-control. "Women aren't tissues, to be used and discarded."

"Have I somehow hurt you, Miss Shanahan?"

She turned away, stared out across the busy lights of the boulevard.

Yes.

Yes. Four years ago, you parked your fancy car and we kissed and made out. And then when I fumbled with your damn trousers and belt buckle, you realized I was inexperienced. You realized I didn't know how to touch you or give you pleasure and you got rid of me so fast afterward. If I couldn't give you what you wanted ...

Tears filled her eyes and she squeezed her fists against her ribs, pressing hard against her sides, pressing skin to bone. "No," she whispered. "You've done nothing to me."

"Are you sure? Because it's almost as though you've some personal experience—"

"No."

"Good. Then you'll have no objections going to Rye's party tonight?"

Alexandra reached up and swiped away a tear before it could fall. "You still want me to go?"

"Want?" His shoulders lifted. "I don't know if it's want, but you did sign a contract, and regardless of your personal feelings—or even my own—you'll fulfill the contract."

"Even if I hate you," she whispered.

His mouth quirked, eyes dark and granite-hard. "Especially if you hate me. Fewer complications, remember?"

The party that night at Spago was less stressful than she'd feared.

The stylist had dropped off clothes for her to wear—a smart black cocktail dress that was both simple and sexy, very high stiletto heels and a pretty gold charm bracelet that was girlish and fun.

The stylist had shown Alexandra how to pile her hair on top of her head in a messy twist with loose tendrils falling here and there. With small gold studs in her ears and neutral makeup, she looked nothing like the office assistant she was.

Good, she thought, joining Wolf in the car. Because she wasn't going to be an office assistant or production assistant for long. She was going to learn how to direct. She was going to make movies.

Wolf was driving a different car again tonight. This one was a sleek pewter Ferrari from the '60s. Even she could see it was a classic that had been lovingly restored.

"I've seen three cars so far," she said, sliding into the passenger seat. "Are there more?"
Wolf waited for her to buckle her seat belt before driving off. "An entire warehouse full."
"A warehouse?"

"I collect cars." White teeth flashed, and Alexandra couldn't be sure if it was a smile or a snarl.
"Something else for you to disapprove of."

Dinner was less tense than the drive to the restaurant. Nearly everyone attending the dinner was a celebrity. She counted four actors, two actresses, a comedian and an R & B singer, along with their respective dates. During dinner Wolf discussed politics with Rye and the R & B singer, and Alexandra was rather surprised by his depth of knowledge regarding world economics and the U.S. trade policy.

"Do I know you?" the man to her left asked when Alexandra turned from Wolf's conversation to her dinner salad.

She recognized the man—an actor named Will Cowell—but they'd never met before. "No," she answered, cutting the apple in her salad.

"Are you sure?"

She stabbed her fork into lettuce, apple, and blue cheese. "Quite sure."

"Hmm." Will studied her, elbow on the table, expression teasing. "Then I *should* know you."

She chewed her salad diligently, hoping he didn't see her blush. Swallowing, Alexandra wiped her mouth with her linen table napkin. "Why is that?"

"Because you don't look like a bimbo—and God knows I need a break from bimbos."

Alexandra laughed. She couldn't help it. "What makes you think I'm not a bimbo?"

"No fake boobs or collagen-plumped lips." He smiled charmingly. "I'm an expert in those things, you see."

Her eyebrows arched, but she took another bite of salad instead of replying. It seemed safer to eat the sweet-tart vinaigrette salad than discuss his expertise in fake breasts and lips.

"Can I have a word with you alone? In private?" Wolf suddenly growled into her ear.

She turned toward him, apple and cheese skewered on her fork. "Why?"

His dark eyes snapped with fire. "Alone," he repeated. "In private."

Wolf stood up, pushed his chair back and took her by the elbow.

With his hand on her lower back, he pressed her through the restaurant and down the hallway until he found a small alcove by the pay phones.

"What are you doing?" Wolf demanded, turning on her. "What game are you playing?"

Alexandra shook her head, nonplussed. "Game? There's no game. I was having dinner, talking to Will—"

"Will's pathological. He has to get in every woman's pants."

She jerked her head back as if slapped. "Well, he's not getting in mine, and we were just exchanging a few words. Pleasantries, that's all."

Wolf's features tightened. "He was looking at you as though he'd devour you any moment."

"If you didn't notice, *I* was devouring my salad."

"You're supposed to be devouring me."

Alexandra gasped with outrage and shock. Her jaw dropped, her eyes grew wide. And then she snapped her jaw closed and came out swinging. "Sorry, Wolf, but I'm afraid I don't have the experience!"

She gave him a shove, her hand connecting with his chest, and she'd pushed at him so hard her wrist did a painful little snap, but he didn't budge.

Wolf felt her hand hit his chest, but he didn't move a muscle. He couldn't. He was wound too tight.

No one and nothing got under his skin, not anymore. He wanted to believe that, but since meeting Alexandra Shanahan, she'd lived under his skin.

His gaze swept her face. "What do you mean that you haven't the experience?"

Her dark blue eyes snapped at him. “I mean that I’m not an actress and I haven’t devoured lots of men and I can’t do whatever it is you want me to do.”

“Are we talking oral sex or intercourse?”

He watched, fascinated, as a wave of color stormed her cheeks.

“And that,” she choked out, tendrils of hair falling around her face, “is none of your business.”

“Just like my sex life is none of your business.”

“That’s because you have one and I don’t!”

He leaned toward her, trapping her between the pay phone and the wall. “You could.”

Another wave of color surged through her cheeks, darker, hotter than before. Her blue eyes shimmered. “It’s not in our contract,” she said through gritted teeth, nose in the air, cocky as a little girl in a denim skirt and cowboy boots.

“No,” he muttered, “but this is.” He closed the distance between them with one aggressive step.

Alexandra’s heart thumped wildly and she pressed backward, her hands behind her, knuckles tight against the wall. He loomed over her, so tall, so big, so much more powerful, and it wasn’t even his height that made him strong or his frame but the force inside him, that fire. He was alive and intense, engaged and aware.

She didn’t want him to kiss her, didn’t want him anywhere near her. But once his head dipped, it was like last night at Casa Del Mar’s Veranda lounge.

Bolts of electricity shot through her, and that was even before his mouth completely covered hers.

And then when his lips did take hers, she felt the electricity again, hotter, brighter, sharper.

He felt good. He felt amazing. Unreal.

Her mouth softened. The pressure of his lips increased and her heart raced, fast, faster, as fire and hunger whipped through her.

She groaned as he parted her mouth with his tongue, groaned again as his tongue flicked the inside of her inner bottom lip, tasting her, teasing her, making her want more of him.

This wasn’t a kiss, she realized, dazed. This was his first step in seducing her, taking her, and he intended to do it. Despite the contract.

But would that change when he realized she really was as inexperienced as she said?

Back at the table, Wolf sat with his arm draped over the back of Alexandra’s chair. And her chair was close to his—so close that no one could mistake his actions for anything but a sign of possession.

He was claiming her, marking his territory, letting the other men know to stay away and letting other women know he was taken.

Alexandra, he noticed, didn’t like it.

“You might as well put a Sold sign on me,” she said through gritted teeth.

“That’s not a bad idea,” he answered, smiling faintly at her pink-cheeked indignation. He’d never met a woman who blushed so much—or made a simple blush so alluring.

Studying her profile, he found it hard to believe she was as inexperienced with men as she claimed. How could she be when she was so ridiculously pretty?

He looked at her thoughtfully, almost clinically, trying to understand what it was about her that made him want to put that Sold sign on her.

Maybe it was that leggy tomboy stride of hers, or her mouth that was endlessly expressive, sometimes set, sometimes pursed, sometimes smiling most beguilingly.

Wolf didn’t know which he liked better—that full mouth with the tiny indentation in the bottom lip or the midnight-blue eyes set so wide beneath winged eyebrows.

Or her sharp mind and sassy tongue.

His sardonic smile stretched.

She was a breathtaking combination of girl and woman, funny, sensitive, proud, uncertain. Unlike the women in Los Angeles who pursued him, women who blatantly advertised their interest and availability, Alexandra didn't project her sexuality. It was hidden, secret, and yet when he kissed her, she became a different woman.

She became his woman.

It was as simple as that.

Later, as they drove from Spago back to Alexandra's house, she sat as far as she could from Wolf in the snug sports car and kept her eyes firmly fixed out the passenger window.

Wolf had reached a whole new level of despicability. He'd shown his true colors, behaved like a member of the animal kingdom more than once.

"You're still upset about the kiss," Wolf said.

His nonchalance only antagonized her further. "Everyone noticed your behavior at dinner." She threw him a disgusted look. "You kept your arm on my shoulder throughout the meal as though you were afraid I'd bolt away any minute."

"I wasn't afraid you'd run away. Your heels are far too high—"

"Wolf, don't play the charming-Irishman card right now, okay?"

"And I like touching you," he continued smoothly as though she'd never interrupted. "You're my girlfriend. It's my prerogative."

"And that's how it felt, too. It was your prerogative to touch me. Your prerogative to kiss me. Your prerogative to do whatever you damn well pleased." She finally turned to face him. "Next time why don't you just pee all over me like an alpha wolf should."

He'd pulled up in front of her house, and turning off the engine, he flashed her a lazy white-toothed grin. "Hmm, kind of kinky for a girl without much experience, but if that's what you want—"

Alexandra threw the door open and jumped out of the car before she had to listen to another word.

And as she undressed for bed, peeling the smart, sexy black dress off, Alexandra wanted to scream with frustration. Spending time with Wolf was hard, far harder than she'd even imagined. It wasn't just one thing, it was everything. He wasn't just physically gorgeous, his personality was huge, his charisma larger than life.

He was far more than she could handle, and she'd known it, she'd known it from the beginning, but she wanted that promotion. She wanted it badly.

And unless you'd been a little girl who'd grown up outside a small town, you didn't appreciate that for girls in small towns opportunity meant a job at Wal-Mart and success meant one day owning your own car free and clear. Unless you'd been the only girl in a family of overbearing brothers, you didn't understand the value of dreaming, and dreaming big.

Unless you'd listened to the sound of television late into the night, the canned laughter on TV shows and overly loud commercials the only sound in your house after everyone else had gone to bed, you didn't know the definition of *escape*.

You didn't know how important it was to get away and become someone else, something better, something more.

But Alexandra knew all these things, had lived all these things, and she decided years ago she'd have a different life than her mother, her father, her brothers. She'd do it differently than the people who seemed to just get swept along by life.

She wouldn't be swept along. She'd do the sweeping.

She wouldn't ever make anyone take care of her.

But Wolf Kerrick seemed determined to change all that. In fact, if she let herself really think about it, it felt as though Wolf Kerrick was sweeping her.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALEXANDRA'S FIRST thought on waking was that she needed to call Wolf immediately, before she lost her nerve.

"We need to talk," she said crisply, her tone no-nonsense when he answered the phone. "You hired me to make things better, not worse, and it's important we find a way to keep our public appearance positive."

If she'd caught him off guard, he gave no indication. "I agree," he said.

Alexandra couldn't read his inflection. "I can't help your image if we can't even communicate," she continued stiffly. "So I propose we work harder at creating clearer communication channels."

"Communication channels, yes."

She understood then that he was, without a doubt, mocking her. And Alexandra knew that she had a choice—she could call him on his attitude, thus detouring from the purpose of her call, or she could let his sarcasm slide. She chose to let his sarcasm slide. "Before we go out again," she persisted, "and before we make another appearance, we need to choreograph the evening."

Wolf cleared his throat. "Are we entering a dance competition, by chance?"

Alexandra chose to ignore this bit of sarcasm, too. "I need to know before we go places what you expect and how we're *both* to behave. I can't wing it anymore. I'm not an actress and I can't improvise the way you can."

There was silence on his end of the phone and the silence seemed to stretch endlessly.

Exasperated, she closed her eyes, counted to five. "Did you hear me?"

"What?" he asked innocently.

"This doesn't have to be difficult," she said through gritted teeth.

"You're right." And then his tone changed, his rough voice deepened. "So let me make this easier. We've a premiere Saturday afternoon. It's a matinee since it's a children's film. I did the voice for one of the characters and I've promised to be there. You'll attend and—" he broke off, hesitated as if searching for the right word—"pretend to enjoy me."

Alexandra flushed hotly. "That's not exactly the choreographed routine I was imagining. It sounds more like a set of military orders."

"But at least you know my expectations."

"And what about mine?" she flashed, furious that she was losing her temper yet again but unable to stop it. He had the most negative effect on her. From the beginning he'd annihilated her self-control.

"Well, you can expect to have your photograph taken, and expect to stand by my side and expect to be paid." He paused. "Is there anything else?"

"No," she choked out, hanging up.

The rest of the week passed too quickly for Alexandra's taste, knowing that on Saturday she'd be with Wolf again, attending the premiere.

She'd only been seeing him a few days, but already she was exhausted, worn out trying to juggle work responsibilities during the day and appearances with him.

Fortunately she was looking forward to the film. Even though it was only a matinee for *The Little Toy Solider*, the newest Pixar animation, Alexandra was looking forward to seeing exactly what happened at premieres.

She'd read about them for years in *People* magazine, seen the photos of celebrities attending, and now she was finally going to one.

Even better, it was the premiere of an animated film—Alexandra's secret favorite. Back before her brother Brock had been widowed, she used to go into Bozeman, Montana, with his late wife Amy

and their kids to see all the Disney films. In her mind, Saturday afternoons were made for movies, and she was glad to be going, eager to see just what kind of cartoon toy soldier Wolf'd be.

A stylist arrived at Alexandra's house early Saturday morning, bringing with her several wardrobe options. Jointly Alexandra and the stylist settled on the low-hipped sexy charcoal trousers cinched by a wide gray croc belt with an enormous round pewter studded buckle. On top she was wearing a burnout velvet tank in a color somewhere between lemon and mustard, topped by a fitted cropped coat of the same rich, saturated color.

She'd accessorized with sleek pewter heels and a chunky two-strand gray-and-white alabaster necklace. Her hair had been flatironed and it hung smooth and sleek past her shoulders. Makeup was even more subtle: pale foundation, lightly lined eyes in gray pencil, lots of mascara and a soft, neutral lip color called Naked for her mouth.

When Wolf arrived at one to pick her up, he was dressed casually elegant in jeans, a white dress shirt and a dark gray Armani jacket. He wasn't behind the wheel today. Instead he had a driver and a limo, important for the red-carpet arrivals.

He was cool and distant during the ride, and Alexandra sat opposite him, savoring the last bit of privacy before they stepped onto the red carpet and into the flash of a hundred camera strobes.

"I almost forgot," Wolf said, reaching into the limousine's side console. He handed her a clear glass tube the size of a rolling pin filled with gold confetti and a single sheet of rolled parchment paper.

She tipped the cylinder to watch gold glitter emerge from the sheer strips of shimmering confetti. "Not another invitation."

"With me, of all people."

She gave him a dark look and tipped the cylinder yet again but at a shallower angle, fascinated by the glitter clinging to the insides of the tube. "So what's this an invitation to?"

"It's for Matt Silverman's fiftieth birthday party."

"Ah." Matt Silverman was the most innovative director and producer in the business today, and everything he did—whether it was a futuristic sci-fi or a historical drama—became a blockbuster, guaranteed to garner a half dozen Academy Award nominations, including the coveted Best Picture. "When is it?"

"Thursday." Wolf glanced out the window. Traffic was slow through the 405 and 10 intersection. "It'll be a big party. Black-tie, live band, sit-down dinner in his Bel Air estate's garden. Nearly everyone in the business will be there." He leaned back against the seat, smiled crookedly if not a bit wearily. "But we've got to get through today's premiere and parties first."

She nodded, noticing the shadows under his eyes. "Do you ever get tired of the parties and events?"

The creases deepened at his eyes. His expression turned wry. "All the time."

"But ...?"

"Every movie needs publicity, and publicity requires me being out there, doing the interviews, the talk shows, the premieres, the award shows, the parties and fund-raisers."

"And that doesn't even include making the films or the weeks on location," she added.

"You're right, it doesn't."

She'd never really thought about the life of a star like Wolf, imagining that fame, fortune and success made life easier, but she wasn't so sure anymore. "No wonder you're not in love with your career."

He shrugged. "It's a job, and I understand it's a job."

"You don't make it look like a job. You're incredibly talented."

His expression almost gentled. "You don't have to make points with me, Alexandra. I know how you really feel."

She waved her hand, batting away his comment. "If you made one less film a year, that would be less PR, fewer interviews and press junkets and parties, right?"

“One would hope.”

“So do that. Make one less film. Or two. Find a way to have more time for yourself. I’m sure there are things you’d like to do.”

The corner of his mouth lifted, but his dark eyes were deep, intense. “You’re sounding an awful lot like you want to save me. But, love, I can’t be saved.”

“Yes, you can.”

“This isn’t a challenge, Alexandra.”

She pressed her lips together, held tight to her opinion—and her temper—realizing now wasn’t the time to debate him.

Instead she changed topics. “So what would you do if you had more free time? Would you pick up a hobby? Want to travel? Are there places you’re anxious to go? What’s top of your to-do list.”

His eyes narrowed. “Ending world hunger.”

Alexandra did a double take. Was he serious? She couldn’t be sure, but he wasn’t smiling, wasn’t making light of his lofty ambition.

“Erasing Third World debt,” he continued.

She simply stared at him.

“Stopping the spread of AIDS in Africa.” His hard features softened, his expression turning rueful. “Sorry you asked?”

There was something in his face she’d never seen before, something behind the slightly bored, rather cynical mask he usually wore. Something fierce and raw and real. *Real*. For the first time she saw a man, not an actor or star.

Alexandra felt a tug inside her chest, a twinge of muscle that was almost pain. “No.”

And then whatever fierce, raw emotion—passion—she’d seen disappeared, replaced by that public mask he wore to keep the world at bay.

With mask firmly in place, Wolf turned, glanced out the window and spotted the crowds lining the sidewalks. “We’re here.”

The morning after the premiere, Wolf flew to New York for a Monday-morning appearance on *Good Morning America* to promote *The Little Toy Soldier* and then an afternoon taping for the David Letterman show at the Ed Sullivan Theater on Broadway between Fifty-third and Fifty-fourth Streets. If things went well, he hoped to have dinner with friends Tuesday and then return to Los Angeles Wednesday morning.

He’d said maybe they’d have dinner Wednesday night—he’d let her know once he was back in town.

It was odd with Wolf out of town. Alexandra went to work Monday morning thinking she’d feel liberated, but instead she felt rather lost.

Wolf had been taking up so much time—physically and mentally—she didn’t quite know what to do with herself now that he was gone for the next three days.

Alexandra tuned in to *Good Morning America* at the studio, caught the tail end of Wolf’s interview—he looked so amazing on TV, it wasn’t fair at all—and then turned the TV off once the interview ended to get back to work.

Tuesday she wondered if he’d call.

Wednesday she wondered if he’d caught his morning flight and was heading back to L.A.

Instead flowers arrived for her Wednesday noon, four dozen white roses with a stiff white embossed card that read, *Have been held up in NY, will pick you up tomorrow for party. Apologies. Wolf*

Alexandra hid the card before anyone else could see.

He wasn’t coming back until tomorrow, until just before the party. And she didn’t mind, not really, not until Kristie in the office casually dropped a newspaper on her desk, opened to the Entertainment section with the celebrity gossip column.

The VIP Room

Wolf Kerrick was seen having a cozy dinner Tuesday night with former flame, actress Joy Hughes, at Manhattan's celebrity favorite, Nobu. Are Wolf and Joy back together again?

Alexandra read the gossip item over and over again until her eyes began to burn and a lump formed in her throat. She felt almost ... betrayed. Which was stupid since she and Wolf weren't a real couple, but still, they'd been spending so much time together lately that in some ways she did feel as if she was part of Wolf's life. Felt almost like Wolf's woman.

Quickly, before anyone could see, Alexandra wiped away tears, stood up, trashed the paper and went to make her third coffee run of the day.

Wolf picked her up in the limo fifteen minutes after the party officially started, but even then they were among the first arriving at Matt Silverman's fabulous Bel Air estate.

Although it was a private party and media hadn't been invited, dozens of photographers had still set up their cameras on tripods across the street from the Silverman mansion.

Walking through the gardens next to Wolf, Alexandra recognized nearly half the people there. And the other half were probably the really important people—the producers, directors, power agents like Benjamin Foster.

"Did you get my flowers?" Wolf asked as they stopped near the pool to take in the hundreds of floating water lilies illuminated by just as many floating candles.

Alexandra's stomach immediately knotted. "I did."

He turned his head, looked at her. "I'm sorry I was held up—"

"No apologies or explanations required."

She was trying to be poised, but the tartness of her answer gave her pain away.

"You saw the photograph of Joy and me at Nobu," Wolf said.

Had there been a photograph in another paper? Her heart felt strange. Tender. Almost fearful. "No. I just read a little blurb about your dinner in the local paper."

He was still looking at her. "There's nothing between us, Alexandra."

She nearly hung her head and then thought better of it. She was wearing vintage Armani tonight, an exquisite ivory pleated gown that the stylist had brought over yesterday. With the gold-heeled sandals on her feet and the gold band wrapped around her arm she felt beautiful, like an Egyptian priestess or maybe a princess, and she didn't want anything to ruin that.

"It's none of my business," she answered calmly.

"But it is, at least until our contract ends."

She managed a droll smile. "You're too good an actor."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we both know the truth. I'm not the kind of woman you usually date. I'm serious, industrious. I like the quiet evenings in and you—" she broke off and smiled brighter "—are the bad-boy playboy, notorious for all-night parties."

He swore under his breath, a short, sharp, profane curse that caught her by surprise.

Alexandra blinked at him. "I've never heard you curse before."

He took her chin in his hand, lifted it up. "I wish everything was as simple as you make it out to be. I'd love for life to be so black-and-white, but it's not. And you, sweetheart, don't know me." His dark eyes burned into her, promising, punishing. "You know nothing about who I really am, and maybe that's a good thing. Maybe it's better to let you remain sweet, inexperienced, naive."

Alexandra didn't have time to answer or defend herself. People were heading their way, flocking toward Wolf as though he were a beacon of light.

Concealing her chaotic emotions, Alexandra quietly stood next to him. Wolf appeared to have many industry friends. He'd been a Hollywood force for nearly ten years, but it was only in the last two years, since winning the Oscar for *Boys in Belfast*, that he'd become viewed as a serious talent.

Waiters passed glasses of specialty cocktails on gilded wood trays—cocktails like pomegranate martinis and Lemon Drop shooters—and the crowd around Wolf grew louder and more jovial as the drinks were consumed.

Alexandra tried not to wiggle while she stood for the first hour at Wolf's side, but it was difficult not to feel self-conscious given the amount of skin her cream Armani gown exposed.

Fortunately Wolf didn't forget her. Several times in that long hour he broke off his conversation to introduce her, point someone out or try to explain a reference, making sure he included her as much as he could. He even once reached out and touched her upper arm as he talked to yet another woman who'd come to congratulate him on his exceptional performance in his last film.

Two more young women were approaching Wolf now, both stunning, one very fair with straight waist-length blond hair and a figure that looked as though she could model for Victoria's Secret, and the other a sexy, sultry brunette that reminded Alexandra of Wolf's former flame, Joy Hughes.

As it turned out, the blonde *was* a model for Victoria's Secret and she introduced her friend, a former Miss Venezuela who'd come to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career.

Despite Alexandra's presence, the women flirted outrageously with Wolf, touching him, laughing, leaning seductively toward him, showing cleavage Alexandra would never have. But once again Wolf put his hand on her arm, rubbed it as if to reassure her, and some of Alexandra's tension eased. That was until Paige, the Victoria's Secret model, tripped and sent her red pomegranate martini flying—all across Alexandra's exquisite ivory Armani dress.

For a moment Alexandra just stood there, her bare shoulder wet and sticky, her breast and fitted bodice a splash of pale red, with little droplets of red staining the long straight skirt.

A seven-thousand-dollar vintage gown ruined.

She stared at Paige in shock, her gaze riveted to the model's empty glass. Empty because the cocktail was now all over her gown.

For a moment she could think of absolutely nothing to say—at least nothing polite, because on the inside she was livid, fuming. How could a model that pranced down a runway in four-inch heels and enormous white angel wings trip over nothing? And not just spill her drink but dump the entire contents over Alexandra and only Alexandra?

"Are you okay?" Wolf asked, his arm encircling her, bringing her closer to his side.

"I'm fine," she choked out. But she wasn't fine. She was shaking, trembling in her heels. Her lovely dress was ruined and there would be no easy exit from the party, not with a stain like this.

Wolf flagged down a waiter and requested some soda water and a towel. "Soda water might help," he said.

She nodded, forcing a tight smile. "I'm fine, it's fine," she repeated, but her voice had grown husky. It was humiliating being Wolf's pretend girlfriend, humiliating playing a role and being ignored by everyone and pretending she didn't notice their condescension when Wolf introduced her.

But she understood their snubs, understood why they didn't care to meet her or remember her. Wolf had a reputation for dating and discarding young Hollywood starlets. And being young and reasonably pretty, people probably assumed that Alexandra—Wolf's newest plaything—would soon be gone. These people weren't going to try to impress someone or even be kind to someone who wasn't important.

And she wasn't important. Not to anyone here.

Shame filled her, shame at so many different levels. She shouldn't have signed the contract. Shouldn't have let her own ambition get before her morals. Shouldn't have allowed herself to be used.

Just because she wasn't an actress or a model or someone powerful in Hollywood didn't mean she wasn't valuable.

"I'm sorry." She struggled to maintain her composure. "This is so embarrassing."

"It's not at all." Wolf suddenly looked at Paige and Lulu and gave them such a dark, ferocious look that both women scuttled away. With Paige and Lulu gone, he drew her closer. "And you couldn't embarrass me, so don't say things like that."

Blinking back tears, she glanced up, and the depth of his concern made her see yet again that he did wear a public mask, a coolly amused mask, as though he were always laughing at life. Laughing at himself. But she was just beginning to realize that underneath the mask he wasn't laughing at all. "I should go before the entertainment reporters and photographers spot me looking like this."

She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders. "Now let me just slip out now so no one can get pictures of us together. You stay here and do what you have to do."

"I'm not going to let you leave alone. If you want to go, we'll go together." Wolf reached inside his tuxedo for his mobile phone. "I'll call for the car."

She covered his hand with hers so he couldn't make the call. "You have to stay. Aren't you making one of the birthday toasts?"

He shrugged. "It's more of a roast than a toast."

"But still, you're wanted here, needed here."

He shook her hand off and punched in the number before putting the phone to his ear. "The speech is already typed up. I could have someone else do it."

The waiter returned at that moment with a small bottle of soda water and two clean white kitchen towels. Wolf hung up, reached into his pocket for a twenty-dollar bill to tip the waiter.

"Thank you, Mr. Kerrick," the waiter said, nodding appreciatively.

Alexandra took the soda water and towels from the waiter. "All right. I'll make you a deal. You stay here, and I'll go find a bathroom and see what I can do to salvage this dress. Okay?"

"Okay."

She nodded and forced a light note into her voice. "I'll be back soon."

Alexandra was heading to the house to look for a bathroom when she crossed paths with Jason Kirkpatrick, a young director she'd met earlier in the year when he'd dropped by Paradise Pictures to discuss directing a film for the studio. In the end, he wasn't hired, but Alexandra had enjoyed her brief conversation with him that morning and she smiled in recognition as he flagged her down.

"Alex! It's Alex, isn't it?" he said, hailing her.

"Yes, although I prefer Alexandra," she corrected. "And it's Jason, right?"

"Good memory." He rocked back on his heels. "So what happened to you?" he asked, lifting her hand that clutched the bottle of soda water to better see the vivid stain ruining her gown.

She'd nearly forgotten the catastrophe and grimaced now. "A famous lingerie model accidentally poured her drink on me."

"That's a lot of accident," he retorted, taking a step into the shrubbery and pulling her with him to let people pass behind them on the curving stone path.

She glanced down at the stain. "I'm thinking the pomegranate martinis are better in the glass."

He laughed. "You're funny."

"Thanks."

His laugh turned to a sympathetic smile. "Why don't you run home and change? The party hasn't even started. It's still only the cocktail hour."

"I'd go home if I could, but I don't want to make Wolf leave—"

"Why should Wolf have to leave? Zip home, change and come right back."

Alexandra's nose wrinkled. "I'd love to, but it's not that easy. I don't have a car and I didn't bring money for a cab. And Wolf—"

"Let me take you." Jason stretched his hands out. "My Porsche is right out front. Wolf's a friend of mine. I'd love to help him out."

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” She glanced over her shoulder, struggling to see if she could find Wolf in the crowd, but the extensive garden was packed. “Wolf might not like it.”

“It’ll only take a moment and then—snap!—you’ll be right back, pretty as a picture.” Jason winked. “And trust me, you’ll take a better picture in a new gown, if you get what I mean.”

CHAPTER SIX

AT MATT SILVERMAN'S Bel Air estate, Wolf walked through the fancifully decorated gardens with the massive jacaranda trees festooned with twinkly lights, searching the clusters of party-goers and guests for Alexandra.

There were so many people—hundreds—that he was forced to look for splashes of cream and white fabric in the crowds to focus his search, and while he spotted several women in light-colored evening gowns, none were Alexandra.

As he headed back through the gardens to the estate's 1930s mansion, Wolf wondered if she had perhaps gone home. Maybe she couldn't get the red stain out of the dress and she hadn't wanted to make a scene.

He frowned as he neared the ornate fountain. Even if she was embarrassed by the stain, he couldn't imagine her just leaving without speaking to him.

And if she had left, how had she gotten home? Had she called a cab? Had a friend picked her up?

Not far from the fountain Wolf spotted his agent grabbing a couple of sushi appetizers from a tray one of the waiters held.

"How's it going?" Benjamin asked Wolf as he popped a bite of sashimi and wasabi into his mouth.

"Good." Wolf's brow furrowed, knowing it wasn't good. Nothing about tonight was good. In fact, nothing about this week was good. Dinner with Joy in Manhattan had been troubling and he'd been on edge since, waiting for another call, wondering if he'd need to hop on a plane. "You haven't seen Alexandra, by chance?"

"Lost your girlfriend?" Benjamin asked, dunking a slice of California roll into soy sauce.

"Paige poured her cocktail all over Alexandra's dress."

"Paige?" Benjamin repeated, chewing the seaweed-wrapped roll.

"Your client Paige. The model."

"Ah, Paige." Benjamin smiled. "She's hot, isn't she?" Then he remembered himself and glanced around. "Where is Alexandra?"

Wolf nearly reached out to grab Benjamin by the throat. "That's what I'm asking you."

The lighting director from Wolf's last film joined them and reached for a piece of yellowfin sushi. "You're looking for your girl?" he said to Wolf.

Wolf nodded. "She'd gone to clean up her gown."

"I saw her," the lighting director said. "She's wearing an off-white gown, right?"

"Yes."

"She left," the lighting director said, reaching for another piece of sushi. "With Jason. I figured you two had a fight."

Wolf's features hardened. His dark eyes glittered. "There was no fight." He inhaled sharply as he saw red. "But there will be now."

And as Wolf headed to the front circular driveway, he prayed he'd find Alexandra at home. Alone. Because if Jason was there ...

Wolf shook his head, not even wanting to finish the thought. Because he knew exactly what he'd do and it wouldn't be pretty.

Across town, Alexandra stood swaying in her living room, having finished changing into the little black cocktail dress she'd worn to Rye's birthday party at Spago. Jason had offered to make drinks for them while she changed, and she'd agreed.

He'd been so nice about driving her all the way to Culver City and patiently waiting while she rummaged through her closet trying to find something elegant to wear. But the cocktail was doing funny things to her, and she grabbed the living room wall for support.

“My head,” she whispered, her body going cold all over and alarmingly tingly.

“Have a headache, doll?”

She didn’t like his tone or the way he was looking at her. But Alexandra didn’t close her eyes until the room started to spin. “What’s going on?” she demanded huskily as soon as she could open her eyes again.

Jason was standing in front of her. “Hi, big eyes.” He reached up, pushed a long lock of hair from Alex’s eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“Dizzy.”

“Are you? Maybe we need to get you to your bedroom so you can lie down.”

“No.” She put out a hand and immediately thought she’d fall. She needed Wolf here. She shouldn’t have left Wolf. “Call ... call ... Wo-Wolf.” She forced the words out, squinting her eyes to try to slow the spinning, but it didn’t help. Nothing was working right. She wasn’t working right.

“You don’t need Wolf,” Jason answered, taking her hand, fingers wrapping around hers. “I can help you. I’ll get you into bed, don’t worry.”

“I need a doc-doctor. Call doctor.”

“No, no, you’ll be fine. I’ll just take you to bed, darling.”

“Call Wolf,” she repeated, struggling to resist him as he dragged her toward the bedroom.

“You’ll feel better in bed. Trust me.”

She felt stiff, sick, puppetlike, her legs and arms disjointed. “No.”

In her room, Jason closed her bedroom door and Alexandra’s legs gave out. Jason pulled her up, pressed her against the wall. “One kiss, baby,” he crooned.

It was then she realized how drunk he was—or drugged he was—because this wasn’t the Jason she’d met at the studio office a month ago and this wasn’t the Jason who offered to drive her home from the party.

But now this Jason was trying to kiss her, and the more she struggled to escape, the more excited he became.

“Stop it. Let me go,” she choked out, turning her head away from his wet mouth.

“Why? You like me. I know you like me.”

“No, I don’t like you.” Alexandra sucked in a breath, fighting to stop her head from spinning, fighting to regain strength in her limbs.

“Don’t be that way,” he answered, leaning against her, holding her immobile. “I want you. I’m crazy about you.”

“Get off—”

But he’d cut her words off with another hard kiss that repulsed her so much her stomach turned inside out. He’d pinned her to the wall, his body leveraged against her, his knee slammed between her legs, his hands groping over her.

“Jason.” She choked, violently twisting. “Stop.”

But her struggles only enticed him, her shuddering body inflaming his. “Come on, Alex, kiss me,” he whispered, grabbing at her face. “Kiss me properly. You know how.”

But she wouldn’t, she couldn’t, just as she couldn’t find the strength she needed to break away.

Wolf was nearing the front porch of Alex’s small house when he heard the scream.

Alexandra.

Heart pumping, he took the three steps at one time. He was prepared to break the door down but was relieved to discover it’d been left unlocked. With a shove of his shoulder he had the door open.

In the bedroom, Alexandra screamed as Jason’s hands slid across her.

“Come on, baby,” Jason crooned, shifting his weight, and suddenly she felt his bare legs against her own as he battled to part her thighs.

He’d dropped his trousers.

She tried to scream again, but before she could make a sound, his head dipped and his mouth covered hers once more, smashing her nose, her mouth, cutting off air. Frantic, she bit savagely into Jason's lip, felt him stiffen even as she tasted a spurt of blood.

Stunned, Jason lifted his head and then his fist, and Alex squeezed her eyes shut, preparing to be hit, when suddenly Jason was off her, being hauled away by a massive, shadowed shape.

Even though the room was dark and spinning, even though she could barely see, much less stand, she knew it was Wolf.

Somehow she had known he would come.

"Alexandra." He ground out her name in the dark, and in his voice she heard fury that turned her blood cold.

An icy shiver raced up and down her spine. Wolf sounded angry enough to commit murder. "I'm okay," she choked out, pressing her black dress down, trying to cover the length of her bare legs. It was so odd, so strange. Her body could have been anybody's body. Her body didn't even seem to recognize her. She couldn't move from the wall, couldn't walk, couldn't function.

What in God's name was wrong with her?

And as she heard Wolf speak, his voice low and harsh, his accent stronger than she'd ever heard it, Alexandra fell back, hit the wall and slid all the way down, passing out before she touched the ground.

Alexandra was having a nightmare and she couldn't wake up. Someone, something, was hurting her, jabbing something down her throat, shoving something down into her middle. She tried to pull away but couldn't. Hands held her still. There was no relief.

And then she was gagging, vomiting, and she wasn't sure if it was real or a dream. The pain felt real enough, but nothing seemed clear, nothing made sense. But finally the gagging stopped and she was left alone and she slept.

While Alexandra slept, sedated, Wolf paced next to her bed. The doctor had said the drugs were finally out of her system thanks to gastric lavage with activated charcoal.

As Wolf paced, he watched her sleep but was far from calm. She hadn't liked having her stomach pumped, and when she woke, she'd be confused. She wouldn't remember much of last night.

Wolf clenched his teeth in mute outrage.

What was she thinking, going home with Jason?

His gut churned. Burned. His temper felt lethal.

He continued to pace, battling to contain his anger when all he wanted to do was find Jason and annihilate him. He could, too. He could make Jason suffer—and more.

Many successful screen and television actors were short, even slight, and they'd learned to use the camera close-up to their advantage, the zoom lens capturing carved jaws and handsome clefted chins.

But Wolf wasn't small or slight. He had the size and height of the professional boxer he'd once been. He'd made a name for himself in Ireland as the Dublin Devil—a furious, fire-fisted street fighter who leveled all his opponents within just one round. He hit that hard. His blows were that accurate.

And now he wanted to do what he did best—fight.

On the inside, he wasn't an actor, he was still an athlete, a boxer. Hollywood had never been in Wolf's sights. Being half Irish, he was as steeped in the great Irish literary tradition as the next snot-nosed kid, knew the Irish playwrights and poets and had seen his share of theater by the time he turned sixteen. But be in a play? Put on makeup, learn lines, be fitted by a costume designer? Never.

It wasn't until an independent film company from America came calling, looking to cast an Irish boxer in a small role in an even smaller film, that Wolf got noticed.

The casting director loved him, but the film couldn't find proper funding and never opened in theaters, going straight instead to America's booming cable business. But it turned out Wolf didn't need a box-office hit to turn his fifteen minutes of fame into a huge career.

Anyone who had seen the film had come away with two impressions—the script was a convoluted mess and the tall, dark, brooding boxer, Wolf Kerrick, was unforgettable.

A year and one finished major motion picture later, critics were falling over themselves, gushing praise.

Fast forward ten-plus years and he was even more of a Hollywood heavyweight than anyone imagined he'd ever be.

He'd certainly surpassed anything he'd ever dreamed he'd be. But then, he'd never dreamed. He'd wanted little. Preferred even less.

Growing up, his parents had fought bitterly, and their divorce when he was twelve had been something of a relief. At least the long, drawn out screaming matches had ended. There'd been no more broken dishes or doors. At first Wolf's dad had disappeared. But then, when Wolf's mom hadn't been able to take care of Wolf or even keep a job, his dad had abruptly returned and moved Wolf back to Ireland with him.

Wolf knew his dad wasn't a bad man, but his dad wasn't a talker, and the changes, coupled with silence, made a confused kid angry. But Wolf soon discovered he liked being angry. Anger gave him power, anger made him strong, anger gave him a reason to go to bed at night and then wake up the next morning.

Being angry had filled his days, fueled his runs, helped him train.

Being angry had allowed him to take hits and, even more importantly, dish it out. Angry, he could pound his opponents, mash them. Punish them.

Which is what he'd do to Jason as soon as he knew Alexandra would be fine.

Hours later, Alexandra slowly opened her eyes, stared up at the lavender-tinted ceiling above her. It was lavender, wasn't it? But why lavender?

She narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out where she was and why the ceiling would be this color. She didn't know anyplace with a ceiling like this or walls papered in soft swirlies of lavender, cream, gold and gray.

What ugly paper.

Looking the other way, she saw the table next to her bed with the plastic water pitcher and plastic cup and straw jostling for prominence among vases of flowers and sprays of white orchids.

Hospital.

She was in the hospital.

Alex tried to swallow but stopped when it hurt like hell.

Her throat was unbelievably sore and her stomach felt just as bad. There was an IV taped to the back of her left hand, and a black paper had been taped over the window in her door.

Why was she here? What was going on?

Alex stirred, turning onto her side to find the call button, but before she could push it the door to her room opened. Wolf entered, carrying a cup of coffee.

He looked at her, one eyebrow lifting ever so slightly. "You live."

"Barely," she croaked, watching him close the door and then approach her side.

He said nothing, and for a long moment neither did she, lying there against the stiff hospital pillow feeling fragile and strangely broken. She hurt, her insides hurt, and not knowing what had happened and not having anyone here but Wolf made her feel even more defenseless.

"Look at me. I don't know what happened," Alex whispered, vocal cords bruised. "Jason gave me a ride home to change so I could return to the party. While I was changing, he made us a drink and then—" She broke off, bit her cracked lower lip. "He ... he ... got weird."

"You were screaming when I arrived," Wolf finished roughly.

"I was scared." She closed her eyes, drew a deep breath. "Thank you for coming to look for me." Opening her eyes, she reached out, caught Wolf's pinkie finger between two of hers. "You saved me."

He said nothing, his head averted, his narrowed gaze fixed on the wall.

She tugged on his hand, trying to persuade him to look at her. “Thank you, Wolf.”

Slowly his head turned and he gazed down at her, a deep furrow between his thick brows, his dark eyes more black than brown. “What if I hadn’t come? What if I hadn’t left the party when I did?”

She stared up into his eyes. The black depths burned. But it wasn’t just anger blazing in his eyes. It was fear.

“But you did,” she whispered.

“If I’d been five minutes later—”

“But you weren’t.” She squeezed his hand. “Please, let’s forget about it.”

Wolf abruptly pulled away. He walked from the bed, went to the window, where he looked out. “Forget?”

“Yes, forget. Move on. There’s so much more that’s important—”

“Not to me.” He glanced at her over his shoulder. “God, you’re so innocent! So naive. You were drugged. Attacked. You had an allergic reaction to the pharmaceutical cocktail he put in your drink. *Alexandra*.” His voice deepened, fell, vibrating with fury and outrage. “You could have *died* from the drugs alone.”

Her heart thumped. She felt dizzy all over again. “I only had a drink with him, Wolf. I wouldn’t take anything. I know it’s dangerous.”

“As we discovered.”

“Please believe me.”

He took a breath, his broad shoulders tensing, and then he exhaled in a slow, hard stream. “I believe you.”

“You do?”

He nodded slowly, rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Jason likes to mix pills with his liquor—cocaine and temazepam are favorites of his.” He fell silent a moment as he considered her. “Do you have family we should call? Someone I should contact?”

Her eyes widened. She shook her head. “There’s no one,” she whispered.

“You’ve no family?”

She stared up at him, terrified he’d discover the truth. No family? Alexandra had the most protective, overbearing family in the universe. “No.”

“Do you want me to get you legal counsel then?”

“Legal counsel for what?”

“Because you’ll want to press charges.”

She was beginning to wish she hadn’t woken up. This was too much, too overwhelming. “Do you want me to press charges?”

He exhaled in a harsh whoosh. “I don’t know. I just want to beat the hell out of him. Want to make him—” He broke off, his beard-darkened jaw jutting tautly.

“Wolf, you could destroy him,” breathed Alex. “And whatever he did, I don’t want that.”

He towered above her, his dark eyes frosted with ice, his features glacier-cold. “I would not be a man if I stood by and allowed him to go unpunished for hurting you.”

“I won’t let you! Someone has to think about your reputation. The press.”

Wolf made a harsh sound in the back of his throat. “Press? You want to talk about press?” He laughed, but the sound was like fingernails down a chalkboard. “Alexandra, it’s a little late to worry about bad press.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re the topic of this morning’s talk radio, and there was a blurb in the gossip section of the morning paper, too.” He leaned over, kissed her forehead, his lips warm against the iciness of her skin. “And I can guarantee we’ll be all over the news segments on the entertainment shows tonight,” he murmured.

His words made her go numb all over. “What are they saying?”

“They’re reporting that you were hospitalized for a drug overdose.”

Her gaze lifted, found his. “*What?*”

“A photographer caught the ambulance wheeling you out of your house.” He sighed. “The photo has me right there at your side.”

“What is the paper saying?”

“You don’t want to know.”

She’d begun to tremble. “Tell me.”

He hesitated so long she wasn’t sure he would. And then he took her hand, lifted it to his mouth and kissed the backs of her fingers. “That you tried to kill yourself.”

“Oh, my God.”

His silence was deafening, and Alexandra closed her eyes, shrinking inwardly. All their joint efforts, everything they’d tried to do ... gone.

Over.

“And this was in the paper?” she asked, imagining the reaction her family would have if they got word of this.

“Today’s *Los Angeles Times*.”

She exhaled gradually, trying to calm herself. If it was just the *Los Angeles Times*, maybe none of her family would hear. None of her brothers lived in L.A. anymore.

“And *USA Today*,” Wolf added quietly.

Her stomach heaved. Her throat sealed closed. *USA Today* was a huge national paper. “*No.*”

“No is right. Our publicity-stunt relationship has made headline news.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEY KEPT ALEXANDRA for most of the day to give her sufficient opportunity to rest and recover. They would have kept her overnight again but Wolf feared that the media frenzy outside would only grow if she wasn't discharged.

The hospital administration, as fed up with the paparazzi as Wolf, allowed Alexandra to exit the hospital late that evening from a side door into the waiting limousine, avoiding the main entrance where photographers and reporters still lurked.

"You're not taking me home?" Alexandra said as the limousine left UCLA's medical center, traveled down Wilshire Boulevard to the 405 Freeway on-ramp.

"Not with those vultures watching your house."

"But I need clothes, pajamas, a toothbrush at least."

"You can manage one night without all that."

She pressed her lips together to hold back the protest. She didn't have a leg to stand on anyway. She'd gotten them into this mess, and Wolf, considering the circumstances, was braving the spate of bad press very well.

Wolf's home in Malibu was tucked among other celebrity homes, each hidden behind massive walls, shrubbery and gates. It wasn't until the limo passed through the gates and around one of the tall white stucco walls that the house, lit by a spotlight, came into view.

The house, a sprawling modern cube with enormous windows that faced the sea, was as serene as the beach and blue watery horizon beyond.

Wolf unlocked the front door and swung it open before stepping back to let her enter.

The surfaces were sleek, glass, chrome. The couches were low and white, oversize and covered in white chenille. The cocktail table and end tables were equally huge, low thick slabs of exotic wood hand carved and crafted. Even the walls—where there were walls—were plastered white, and the artwork was selective, modern oil paintings by some of the contemporary masters of the day. One painting, more violet than purple, hung above the smooth stucco fireplace. Another vast gray-and-pewter canvas hung on the opposite wall, above a Brazilian-wood console.

"Your room," he said, opening the door to a guest room down the hall from his. "And you can sleep in this," he added, tossing a large gray T-shirt in her direction.

"You've done this before," she answered, clumsily catching the T-shirt.

He acted as though he hadn't heard. "A new toothbrush is on the counter in your bath. Toothpaste is in the drawer. Fresh towels are on the towel rack."

Alexandra headed into the bathroom and, stripping off her clothes, took a long hot shower and worked at peeling off the adhesive strips from the IV that still remained on her arm.

Once finished, she dried off, tugged Wolf's T-shirt over her head and brushed her teeth.

When she left the bathroom, she saw that his bedroom door was now closed and she could hear him talking in a low voice on the phone. She overheard bits of the conversation, phrases like *Soon I'll be there* and *There'll be lots of time in Africa*.

Joy.

He was talking to Joy about shooting the movie in Africa because soon he'd be there. Another couple of weeks and he'd be on location.

With Joy.

Alexandra swallowed the stab of jealousy. Wolf had said there'd been no affair, he'd said they were only friends, but somehow Joy and Wolf's relationship made her feel insecure. Like an outsider. Wolf and Joy were both actors and celebrated and beautiful, while she was ...

Ordinary.

Sighing, Alexandra returned to her room, shut the door and climbed into the guest bed. It was a huge bed for a guest room and she felt very small in it.

The small feeling only grew worse as she struggled to relax. Sleep was a long time coming. She'd spent too much time in bed the past twenty-four hours as it was.

And as she lay there, thoughts churning, stomach in knots, she realized she wasn't just upset about Joy. She was also really upset with herself for thinking she could compete with Joy, live in Wolf's world without getting hurt.

Alexandra felt a bittersweet ache inside her chest, a tug on her heartstrings. Sometimes Wolf reminded her of the cowboy of her girlish dreams. He was every bit as big, and handsome and strong. Capable of looking out for her without smothering her. Sure enough to let her be without trying to change who she was or what she dreamed.

If only he were that hero ...

If only those happy Hollywood endings really came true. But she knew better. Once you visited Los Angeles you realized that Hollywood wasn't a place but an intersection of streets. You realized that the golden sun in California postcards was rarely seen due to a disgusting layer of smog. *It's not that happy endings aren't possible in Hollywood*, Alexandra told herself, pulling her pillow close to her cheek, *it's just that they're highly unlikely*.

Alexandra thrashed in bed much of the night but woke up to the smell of freshly ground coffee and felt almost like a new woman.

Unable to face putting her party dress back on, Alexandra dragged her hands through her hair and headed to the kitchen in the gray T-shirt. Fortunately it was long on her, hitting her mid thigh, and it covered her better than any silky baby-doll pajamas would.

It was Wolf in the kitchen making coffee, and when Alexandra appeared in the doorway he offered her a cup.

"Please," she answered, watching him take another big white glazed mug down from the glass-fronted cabinet.

He filled her cup, and she added a spoon of sugar before clasping the mug between both hands and taking a sip. It was strong and very good. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

She took another sip and covertly watched him as he sliced several oranges and squeezed fresh juice into two tumblers. Once he finished with the juice he turned his attention to making toast.

"Butter, marmalade, strawberry jam?" he asked, rummaging through his huge stainless-steel refrigerator.

"Just butter," she answered, wondering exactly what his timeline was for getting her home. She'd missed work yesterday and now today was Saturday, and although she hadn't anything planned, she felt a need to establish some control again. Get back to her usual routine.

He grabbed the newspaper from the kitchen counter. "I always have my coffee outside on the deck. Care to join me?"

Her eyes narrowed a fraction. He was being polite. Too polite. Something was up. "Only if you'll share some of the newspaper," she answered, suddenly on guard.

His mouth curved. It wasn't a friendly smile. "Depends on the section."

She was beginning to think that she'd woken to a potentially explosive situation. "I like Arts & Leisure," she said.

"Yours." He held the glass door for her, and as Alexandra stepped outside she blinked at the bright morning sunshine. Here in Malibu the sky was blue and the sun was shining and long, smooth bottle-green waves crashed on the white beach.

She took the seat he offered and he divided the newspaper, but unlike Wolf, she didn't start reading. She watched him for several minutes, curious that he could be so absorbed in the paper when life seemed so confusing. "Wolf."

“Hmm?”

“Are we going to talk about what happened?”

“No,” he answered without looking up.

Seagulls swooped low overhead and her stomach thumped with nerves. “Why not?”

“Because there’s nothing to discuss.”

She pulled her section of the paper closer to her but still couldn’t read. Sitting outside on the deck, drinking coffee, sharing the paper, watching the seagulls and listening to the waves break, they looked like a typical Malibu couple, and theirs was such a normal domestic scene, that Alexandra found herself hoping that maybe, just maybe, yesterday’s headlines had already been forgotten.

That no one remembered her suicide attempt from a drug overdose.

She exhaled, the stream of air blowing a wisp of hair up and out of her eyes.

She hoped ... until she glanced up from the paper and spotted a photographer on the beach with a camera focused in their direction. Her heart fell with a sickening thud. “There’s a photographer on the beach.”

“Really?” Wolf asked, turning the page in the paper. He didn’t sound surprised or worried.

“You knew?” she demanded.

He folded the paper in half, glanced up at her, his expression shuttered. “There is always someone somewhere, lurking with a camera. You learn to get used to it, ignore the cameras as best as you can and get on with life.”

She stared at him suspiciously. “You’re sure we’re not here for a photo op? A get-well shot for the paparazzi?”

He smiled grimly. “It’s a nice idea. I wish I’d thought of it.” He folded the paper yet again so it was a quarter of its original size. “As it happens, this is my house and this is the deck where I have breakfast every morning. And you, Alexandra, just happen to be here.” He returned to his paper and resumed reading, but Alex couldn’t read—or focus.

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