



Damage
CONTROL



JAE

CHAPTER 1

WHEN A RAPID-FIRE STACCATO OF steps echoed through the foyer and Grace's mother swept into the living room without knocking, Grace regretted giving her the security code to her Hollywood Hills home. Her mother's habit of waltzing into Grace's house unannounced really had to stop.

With the dramatic flair of a former actress, her mother flung a magazine onto the coffee table and stabbed the offending print with a manicured finger. "What is this?"

Sighing, Grace put down the script she'd been reading and sat up on the couch.

The magazine on the table was *Tinseltown Talk*, one of the trashiest celebrity gossip rags around. "Let me guess. Either it's another photo of me picking up my dry cleaning without makeup, or I'm secretly pregnant with twins, suffering a mental breakdown after gaining two pounds, or having a torrid affair with Neil Patrick Harris."

"Neil Patrick Harris is gay." Her mother lowered her voice and added, "And so are you, apparently."

"Uh, what?"

Her mother sank into an armchair and shoved the gossip rag across the table.

Grace picked it up and turned it around so she could read it.

The most prominent headline on the cover read in scarlet, two-inch-tall letters: *Exposed! Grace Durand caught cheating on Nick! Secret GAY tryst!* Below it, they had added in smaller letters: *See a shocking photo of Grace and her LESBIAN lover only in this issue of Tinseltown Talk.*

Grace snorted. Whatever photo they had was probably as fake as the breasts of some of her co-stars.

"I told you something like this would happen," her mother said.

"Mom, this is bullshit. I'm not having a secret gay tryst."

"I know. But if they're already writing ridiculous things like this, can you imagine the headlines once they find out what's really going on with you and Nick?"

Grace could, and that was why she hadn't told anyone but her mother and her lawyer yet. She said nothing.

The silence in the living room was deafening.

Her mother leaned forward. Her gaze darted back and forth between Grace and the open French doors leading to the stone patio. “You aren’t...you know?” she asked, her voice lowered to a whisper.

“Gay?” Grace asked.

“Hush! You don’t want the neighbors to hear you.” Her mother’s gaze went to the French doors again, even though Grace’s home was perched on a hillside bluff high above the city, with no neighbors living nearby. “No, I mean, are you drinking again?”

Grace gritted her teeth. She hadn’t touched a drink since she’d been seventeen years old. She’d worked hard to live up to her mother’s expectations and to make up for the sins of her youth, but apparently, it wasn’t enough to make her mother trust her. “Why would you think that?”

Her mother waved at the magazine.

Frowning, Grace flipped through the gossip rag until she found the page with the headline about her “secret gay tryst.” She skimmed the article, noticing with amusement the exclamation points after almost every sentence, probably meant to let readers know they were reading something scandalous and exciting.

According to the article, Grace had been out partying after she’d wrapped up shooting her latest movie and had gotten drunk with her cast mates.

Grace huffed. *Never going to happen.* After spending fourteen hours a day, six days a week with her co-stars, she didn’t want to hang out with her colleagues, no matter how much Roberta, her publicist, urged her to.

Well, this probably wasn’t the kind of headline Roberta had been looking for. Being caught in a compromising situation with a fellow actress was not the way to promote a family-friendly movie about a heterosexual love story.

Grace searched the article to see which actress *Tinseltown Talk* was putting her in bed with.

Oh, shit. Jill.

Her gaze jumped to one of the pictures on the page. It was a little grainy and had apparently been taken with a telephoto lens. In the picture, she and Jill had their arms wrapped around each other while they swayed up the steps to Jill’s trailer. The caption beneath the photo said, *Grace Durand and Jill Corrigan stumbling into bed for a drunken tryst.*

“Would you excuse me for a minute?” Grace threw the magazine back on the table and reached for her cell phone. She walked past her mother as she scrolled through her contact list and dialed Jill’s number. Her mother’s disapproving stare drilled into her back, but she ignored it for once. This was more important than placating her mother. When Jill picked up, Grace stepped out onto the patio and closed the doors behind her.

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“Hi, stranger,” Jill said. “Long time no hear. Are you busy writing your Oscar speech?”

Grace laughed. “Hardly.” They both knew the romantic comedies she usually starred in wouldn’t get her one of the coveted Academy Awards, but they had made her a household name, celebrated as a younger, hotter Meg Ryan. “How about you? How are you doing?”

“No Oscar speeches in my near future either, but otherwise, I’m fine,” Jill said.

“Good.” With her back to the house and her mother, Grace sank onto one of the lounge chairs next to the pool. “Listen, I’m not just calling to say hi. Have you, by any chance, seen the newest issue of *Tinseltown Talk*?”

“Can’t say that I have. I try to stay away from trash like that. So, who’s pregnant—you or me?”

“Neither,” Grace said. “At least I don’t think so. It would be pretty hard to become pregnant from a lesbian affair.”

Jill let out a wolf whistle that nearly pierced Grace’s eardrum and made her pull the phone away from her ear for a moment. “They seriously think the two of us are doing the horizontal mambo?”

“Yeah.” Morosely, Grace stared down at the skyline of LA beneath her.

“Well,” Jill said after a moment of silence, laughter in her voice. “I’m honored to be sleeping with the woman who has been voted one of the sexiest women alive, but please tell Nick not to kill me.” When Grace didn’t laugh, Jill sobered too. “What’s going on?”

“They photographed us going to your trailer, with our arms wrapped around each other. You have to be more careful.”

Jill sucked in an audible breath. “Damn. You didn’t tell them anything, did you?”

“No, of course not.” It hurt that Jill even had to ask.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you would...”

Grace sighed. “It’s all right.”

The irritating sound of fingernails tapping on glass interrupted her. When Grace turned, her mother stood on the other side of the doors, staring at her through the glass.

“I have to go,” Grace said into the phone. “Please take good care of yourself.”

“Will do. You too, okay?”

“I will.” Grace said good-bye and ended the call.

Her mother stepped onto the patio. “Who was that?” She gestured toward the phone.

“Jill.”

“Was that really necessary?” Her mother frowned as much as that was possible after her recent Botox injections.

Grace pocketed the phone and squeezed past her mother, back into the house. “You don’t think she deserves to know what the tabloids write about her?”

“Well, yes, but you have to think of yourself and your career first and foremost. You worked too hard to let rumors like that,” her mother waved in the direction of the magazine on the coffee table, “destroy everything.”

Before Grace could think of an answer, the phone in her pocket started to ring. Not sure if she should be relieved or annoyed at the interruption, she pulled it out and glanced at the display. “It’s George.”

“I know,” her mother said. “I called him as soon as I saw that article in *Tinseltown Talk*. We can’t have them write something like that about you.”

Grace suppressed a sigh. She was grateful for everything her mother did for her, but sometimes Katherine took her duties as Grace’s manager a bit too far, acting on her own instead of asking Grace what she wanted first. She swiped her finger across the screen to accept the call and lifted the cell phone to her ear. “Hi, George.”

Not bothering with a greeting, her agent asked, “Did you see the newest issue of *Tinseltown Talk*?”

Grace groaned. “Yes, I did. Mom just brought it to my attention. You know it’s not true, right?”

“Where are you?” he asked instead of answering her question.

That had to be the most-asked question since the invention of cell phones. “At home,” Grace said. “Trying to read scripts.”

“Can you meet me in Westwood in half an hour?” George asked.

“Westwood?” Grace wanted to go back to reading the script, not drive all over Los Angeles. “Why? What’s in Westwood?”

“Your new publicist.”



Lauren cursed herself for agreeing to the nine o’clock slot the reporter had suggested for the interview. It meant that she had to spend an hour crawling through rush-hour traffic on Sunset Boulevard instead of working through the two hundred e-mail messages in her in-box.

The light mist of LA’s infamous June Gloom coated her windshield, and she eyed the low-hanging clouds as she crept east. At least she had booked the photo op for Ben’s new album for this afternoon, when the fog would have burned off.

Just as she lifted the paper cup of black coffee to her mouth, a car crossed into her lane without signaling, forcing her to stomp on the brake to avoid a collision. Coffee dribbled down her chin and soaked her blouse.

Great. This day was getting better by the minute. Lauren hurled a curse at the reckless driver in front of her while putting the coffee into the cup holder and dabbing at her blouse.

Her cell phone rang through the car's speakers.

She didn't even have to look at the number on her dashboard display. She had gotten two calls in the last five minutes, both of them from Ben Harrison. She pressed a button on the steering wheel and accepted the call. "Hi, Ben," she said in a pleasant, upbeat tone, forcing herself to be a professional and forget her shitty day. "Don't worry. I'm almost there. We're now going almost thirty miles an hour, which is practically a high-speed race here in LA."

Ben didn't laugh as he usually did when she made a quip like that. Only silence filtered through the line.

"Ben?"

"No, it's Marlene."

Of course. She should have expected it on a day like this. A call from Marlene Chandler, founder and president of Chandler & Troy Publicity Inc., usually meant one of their clients had gotten into trouble and Lauren was expected to handle the resulting PR nightmare.

"Sorry, boss," Lauren said. "I thought it was Ben Harrison. He needs a lot of hand-holding."

"I'll let Judy know," Marlene said.

"Judy?" Lauren frowned. Why did one of her colleagues need to know about Ben's jitters?

"There's been a change of plans. Judy will take over as Ben's publicist."

What the hell...? Was this supposed to be another punishment for the Tabby Jones disaster? "But Ben has an interview in half an hour, and he'll be a nervous wreck if I'm not there to field questions."

"Judy is already on her way."

"And he's got a photo op scheduled this afternoon."

"Judy will handle that too," Marlene said. "I need you in the office right away."

It irked Lauren to hand over a client just like that, but she knew protests were futile. She made a quick right turn into Vine Street and headed toward Santa Monica Boulevard, which would take her to the CTP offices in Westwood.

"What happened?" Mentally, she went through her client roster, searching for the most likely up-to-their-necks-in-trouble candidates. Her money was on either Brittany posting R-rated photos of herself on Twitter again or Leroy being caught cheating on his wife with the au pair.

"We've got a new VIP client," Marlene said.

Lauren braked at a red light and eyed the cement truck in front of her. With the kind of luck she was having today, being behind that thing made her a little nervous. "I thought Ben was VIP."

“Well, if Ben is VIP, this new client is VVIP.”

Despite her curiosity, Lauren knew better than to ask who it was. They never discussed the names of their VIP clients on insecure cell phones. She'd have to wait until she got to the office to find out more.

“We need absolute discretion,” Marlene said, emphasizing every word.

In the PR business, the need for discretion went without saying. Having her boss remind her of it was unusual. When the light turned green, Lauren sped across the intersection and switched lanes, leaving the cement truck behind. She couldn't wait to get to the office and find out what was going on.



Lauren pulled into her spot in the office's underground parking garage and got out of her car. She waved at the security guard in his booth and marched past him to the employee elevator. A quick swipe of her ID card and the elevator doors slid apart.

When they opened again on the twelfth floor, the controlled chaos of a typical Monday morning in the PR business engulfed her. The phones were ringing; people were tapping away at their keyboards, and someone was humming a song that sounded like “Rehab” by Amy Winehouse. She weaved around the desks of hard-at-work publicists, careful not to collide with the interns running around, asking questions, and putting together press kits.

As she passed one of the desks, someone grabbed her arm.

Lauren turned.

Tina, one of the account executives on Lauren's team, looked up at her with a desperate expression. She was on the phone and now pressed one hand against the receiver, covering it. “It's Mark. He called me twice already because he wants to go on *Ellen*. Should we try to get him a spot?”

“God, no.” Lauren firmly shook her head. “*Ellen* is perfect for a witty client with a good sense of humor, but Mark is about as funny as going through a bout of norovirus with no toilet in sight.”

Still covering the phone, Tina chuckled before her expression switched back to panic. “You're right, but I can't tell him that. How do I talk him out of it? He thinks it's a genius idea.”

Knowing Marlene was waiting for her, Lauren didn't have time for long explanations. She waved at Tina. “Give me the phone.”

Tina handed it over with a sigh of relief.

“Hi, Mark. This is Lauren Pearce. How are you doing?”

The actor paused for a moment. “Oh, hi, Lauren. I'm fine. Did Tina tell you about my idea? I think it'll really boost the DVD sales of my last movie.”

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His last movie had been a laugh-out-loud comedy, and if his audience realized Mark was funny only if he had a script, they'd be disappointed. Few things were worse than disappointed fans. "Ellen is a great idea."

Tina stared at her as if she'd grown a pair of green antennae.

"See?" Mark said. "I told Tina you'd think so too."

"Yes, but the thing is, you don't have enough movies out yet to secure the lead guest spot."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Mark was silent for a moment. "Doesn't matter. The second guest spot is still great, right?"

"Depends on where you want your career to go," Lauren said.

"What do you mean?"

Lauren grinned. She had him now. Like all of her clients, he, of course, wanted his career to go all the way to the top. "Well, if you always accept the second guest spot, people will begin to think of you as second-best. I really think it's better to pass and hold out for the lead guest spot."

"Oh." Mark sounded like a little kid who'd just learned that Santa Claus didn't exist. "I guess we should wait until I have a few more movies under my belt."

"Definitely." With any luck, Ellen would have done the Oprah thing and retired her talk show by then. "I'll hand you back to Tina. I'm sure she can find you another great interview opportunity." Preferably one with a reporter who would send them the questions beforehand so they could go over the best answers with Mark.

Tina took back the phone and mouthed, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Lauren nodded and walked past her in the direction of her office. She needed to change into a new blouse, one without coffee stains, before meeting with Marlene.

But luck wasn't with her today. Marlene's office door opened just as Lauren walked by. Marlene crooked one finger at her.

Sighing, Lauren changed course, feeling like a child being called to the principal's office. She had always liked working for Marlene, but since she'd been taken off the Tabby Jones account, she wasn't sure where she stood with her boss anymore. Reluctantly, she entered the corner office.

"Close the door, please," Marlene said.

Lauren did.

Marlene rounded her large desk and sat in her executive chair. The black leather almost seemed to swallow her diminutive five-foot frame, but Lauren knew that appearances were deceiving when it came to Marlene Chandler. She might look like a fragile toy poodle, but she had the attitude of a pit bull. "Have a seat."

Lauren walked past Marlene's freshwater aquarium, peeking at the Siamese fighting fish, a male and his harem. Some of her colleagues said that the fish became aggressive whenever Marlene was in a bad mood. If that was true, Lauren

wasn't looking forward to the conversation with her boss, because the male flared his fins and gills.

Lauren slid onto the visitor's chair in front of the desk and waited for what Marlene had to say, knowing better than to ask and hurry her along.

For long moments, Marlene sat there without saying anything, just studying Lauren. She raised a brow at the coffee stains on Lauren's blouse.

Well, nothing she could do about them now. Lauren managed not to fidget under Marlene's disapproving gaze.

Finally, Marlene returned her attention to Lauren's face and leaned forward. "I'm sure you've heard of Grace Durand."

"Who hasn't?" She wasn't too fond of the type of movies Durand starred in, but Lauren had to admit the woman was hot.

Marlene nodded. "Right. Well, her mother—who is also her manager—just fired her publicist and wants us to take over."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Lauren said. Unlike many other former child stars, who had become tabloid fodder, ending up in rehab, prison, or reality TV, Grace Durand had avoided any scandals so far. Other than attending the occasional red-carpet event with her husband, Nick Sinclair, the golden boy of action movies, she'd stayed out of the limelight and hadn't created any PR nightmares for her publicist to clean up.

"That's what you think," Marlene said. "Her agent didn't want to discuss it over the phone, but apparently, there's been a recent development that needs to be nipped in the bud. You'll find out the details when they get here."

Lauren's eyes widened. "You want me to take over as her publicist?"

Marlene nodded calmly. "Yes."

If the other PR consultants found out that their firm was now representing Grace Durand, they would fight over the account like sharks over a piece of meat. Why was Marlene handing it to her? She couldn't shed the feeling that she was being tested, and she didn't like that feeling. In her eight years with Chandler & Troy, she had proven herself time and again. There had been talk of promoting her to account supervisor when she got back from touring with Crashing Guitars, the new, hip girl group. Instead, she was now back at square one.

"Do you feel up for it?" Marlene asked.

Lauren's spine stiffened. "Of course."

"Good. I scheduled a meeting with Ms. Durand, her agent, and her manager for ten."

Lauren glanced at her watch. That would give her just enough time to change into a clean blouse and get herself another coffee. She had a feeling she'd need it.

CHAPTER 2

“IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?” GRACE asked when she met her agent at the address he’d given her. “Why do I have to meet with a new publicist? I already have one.”

“No, you don’t,” her mother said as she climbed out of the SUV. She frowned back at Grace’s Ford Escape as she did every time she had to get into *that vehicle* and shouldered her purse the way a soldier shouldered his rifle. “I fired Roberta.”

Grace whirled around. “You did what?”

Katherine raised her chin. “I fired her. She didn’t do a good enough job as your publicist. Otherwise, your last movie wouldn’t have flopped at the box office.”

Thanks for the reminder. Grace bit her tongue. A sarcastic comment like that would serve no purpose and only hurt her mother. “It wasn’t Roberta’s fault.”

“Your mother is right,” George said. “Roberta wasn’t bad, but she doesn’t run with the big dogs, and these guys do.” He pointed at the high-rise building next to them, built of white travertine marble. “In fact, they eat other big dogs for breakfast. They’re one of the top damage-control firms in town.”

“Damage control?” Grace repeated with a frown. “You think I need damage control, just because of what *Tinseltown Talk* wrote about me and Jill? No one takes a tabloid rag like that seriously, right?” She looked back and forth between her mother and George.

“Probably not, but what if other, more widely read magazines or blogs pick up the story?” George ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “You can’t afford headlines like that. Not this close to the premiere of *Ava’s Heart*.”

Grace sighed. Maybe they were right. Better safe than sorry, right? It couldn’t hurt to at least check out the new firm before making a final decision.

The three of them walked past a glassed-in outdoor workspace, where employees sat, drinking coffee and typing away at laptops.

Grace whistled appreciatively. *Nice workplace.*

They crossed a plaza between two buildings that looked almost identical, except for the fact that one of the towers was a little higher than the other. Palm trees swayed back and forth in a light breeze like kelp in the tide, and the water in

a long pond rippled as several orange and white koi drifted close to the surface. A few employees sat outside on benches, enjoying their coffee break in the sun.

Grace wished she could join them and just sit under one of the palms with a good book for an hour. It had been a while since she was able to truly relax.

But even if she'd had the time, it wasn't meant to be. Heads started to turn as she walked past. If your face regularly graced the big screen, you couldn't fade into the woodwork. Grace straightened and put on an automatic smile when she felt gazes on her.

Right before they could escape into the building, a young woman in business attire stopped her. "Oh my God! You're Grace Durand, aren't you?"

Her mother tugged on Grace's arm. "Let's go in. We don't have time for this."

But Grace had promised herself that she would always make time for her fans and not become one of the arrogant divas who thought talking to ordinary people was beneath them. Gently, she pulled her arm out of her mother's grasp.

"Yes, I am," she said to the young woman, giving her a friendly smile. "Nice to meet you."

Red-cheeked, the young woman shook Grace's hand with a little too much enthusiasm. "I'm a big fan. I've seen all of your movies." She jumped up and down and waved to three of her colleagues, who sat on the raised marble edge of the pond. "Come here, guys! It's her!"

The woman's colleagues and other passersby joined them. Soon, Grace was surrounded by people. It always amazed her how fast a crowd could gather. She wondered if all of them even knew who she was. Several people took out their phones and snapped photos while others handed Grace scraps of paper to get her autograph.

Grace gamely signed her name, laughing when one young man bared his biceps and had her sign it.

Finally, the crowd dispersed, transforming from excited fans back into serious-looking business people.

Her mother pulled her into the building before new people could walk up to them.

Grace paused in the lobby for a moment to get her bearings. The interior of the building was as impressive as the outside. The lobby, with its shiny floor, was clearly designed to wow visitors. To the left, the clinking of porcelain came from a café, and to the right was a fitness center for employees. Grace scanned the directory listing the companies housed in the building—mostly real estate agents, investment bankers, and lawyers.

The PR firm really had to be a big dog to afford renting space in this building.

George herded them to the elevators and pressed the button for the twelfth floor.

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A short time later, the elevator opened into the PR firm's reception area. *Wow*. Chandler & Troy Publicity seemed to occupy the entire floor. Soft recessed lights reflected off a marble-topped desk and several leather lounge chairs. Tasteful works of modern art hung on two walls while a flat-screen TV filled the wall opposite a designer couch.

A frosted glass door opened and closed to their left as someone entered, revealing a large room with cubicles to the left and right.

Grace followed George and her mother across the cushy, burgundy carpet.

The young brunette behind the reception desk smiled at them, obviously used to people pausing to take in their impressive reception area. "How may I help you?"

"This is Grace Durand," Katherine said before Grace could introduce herself. "I'm her manager, and this is her agent." She pointed at George. "We have an appointment with Ms. Chandler."

The receptionist's smile didn't waver. She never even stared at Grace. In her line of work, she was probably used to dealing with celebrities. "I believe your appointment is with Ms. Pearce, one of our senior account executives," she said without consulting an appointment book or her computer. "She's expecting you. Let me take you to her office."

While they followed the receptionist, Grace glanced at her wristwatch and winced when she realized they were late. Her encounter with the fans in front of the building had held her up longer than she'd realized. Maybe her mother was right and she did have to learn to say no to her fans sometimes. Being almost fifteen minutes late wasn't the way to make a good first impression.

The receptionist knocked on a closed door. When no answer came, she knocked again, hesitated, and then opened the door to peek in. "Oh. Ms. Pearce must have stepped out for a moment. Why don't you wait in her office, and I'll let her know you're here." She opened the door wider and let them enter. "Please have a seat. Can I bring you anything?"

"No, thanks," Grace said before her mother could bother the receptionist with an extravagant coffee order.

"All right. Ms. Pearce will be with you in a moment." The receptionist closed the door, leaving them alone in the office.

Grace looked around. The office wasn't overly large, but the panorama window behind the desk made it look bigger. It offered a great view of Century City, West Hollywood beyond, and the Santa Monica Mountains in the distance. The large desk took up one entire side of the room. It was covered in stacks of papers and files, yet didn't look messy at all. Quite the opposite, actually. The papers were neatly stacked and the folders sorted by color into piles of red, yellow, and green.

Did the colors mean anything? Maybe they symbolized the importance of the clients or how difficult they were to handle. Grace wondered what color she rated.

The office revealed no hints of the occupant's private life—no photographs of family members, no personal knickknacks, not even framed diplomas. Instead, autographed photos of celebrities lined the walls, probably famous people Ms. Pearce had worked with.

Grace turned and stepped back to take a closer look at some of the photos next to the door.



Five minutes earlier, Lauren had been sitting behind her desk, drumming her fingers on a stack of files. Every few seconds, she glanced at her watch.

Grace Durand was late. Fashionably late, some of her colleagues might have called it, pointing out that no one was on time in Hollywood.

Lauren didn't care about that. She hated when her clients were late for appointments. It didn't bode well for her working relationship with Ms. Durand. *You don't have to like her*, she reminded herself. *You just have to make sure everyone else does.*

A few more minutes ticked by and still no sign of the famous actress.

Huffing, Lauren grabbed her empty mug and stood to get herself another cup of coffee. Of course, as soon as she had entered the kitchen and was about to press the button for a cup of strong, black coffee, Carmen, the firm's receptionist, stopped her cold.

"Oh, there you are," Carmen said from the doorway. "Ms. Durand is here. She's waiting in your office, along with her manager and her agent."

Figures. Her caffeine fix had to wait. "Thanks, Carmen." Lauren put down the mug and headed back to her office. Before opening the door, she glanced down at her unstained blouse and the dark gray slacks, making sure she was presenting a professional image. When she was convinced that she looked fine, she swung the door open—only to be met with resistance.

The door hit something or rather someone, she realized. And not just any someone. She had never met her newest client in person, but she had seen her a million times before, on TV and celebrity blogs, in magazines and newspapers. The golden locks cascading halfway down her back, the contrasting dark eyebrows, and eyes as blue as a sunlit ocean were unmistakable. Lauren had just hit Golden Globe-winning actress Grace Durand.

The actress's full lips formed a startled "oh" as she stumbled back, rubbing her arm.

Still gripping the door handle, Lauren stood frozen in the doorway. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I thought you'd be..." Uncharacteristically rattled, she gestured

to the visitor's chair in front of her desk, where she'd assumed the actress would be sitting.

Grace Durand directed her world-famous smile at her. "It's all right," she said. "Despite reports to the contrary, I'm not made of glass." Her voice was husky and melodic, with faint undertones of a Southern drawl, which, as Lauren knew, were holdovers from portraying a character from Georgia in her last movie.

Lauren had never found a Southern accent all that sexy, but now she instantly changed her mind. She couldn't stop staring at the actress's classically beautiful face and her eyes. She had always assumed that those blue eyes she'd seen in movie posters were photoshopped, but up close, the color looked real. The rest of Ms. Durand didn't look as if it needed airbrushing either. She wasn't exactly a size zero like most other actresses in the business, but Lauren had never liked stick figure women anyway. She much preferred Ms. Durand's luscious curves.

Yeah, okay, she's gorgeous. So what? Each and every one of the women Lauren worked with was beautiful, but she had never let herself be impressed by their beauty. Much too often, the gorgeous shell hid a bitchy attitude, egoism, or shallowness. Reality never matched their kind, sometimes heroic on-screen personas, and this time wouldn't be any different. Besides, growing up around celebrities had made Lauren immune to being starstruck.

Oh yeah? You sure aren't acting like it. She gave herself a mental kick and moved forward, holding out her hand.

Grace Durand readily stepped forward. Her handshake was unexpectedly firm, and she looked Lauren straight in the eyes, although she didn't quite match Lauren's five foot ten.

Even up close, Lauren could detect no trace of makeup—not that Ms. Durand needed it. Admittedly, she was even more appealing off-screen, if that was even possible. "Good morning, Ms. Durand. I'm Lauren Pearce, senior account executive here at CT Publicity."

"Thank you for meeting with us on such short notice. And please, call me Grace."

Lauren nodded, even though she would have liked to keep a little more professional distance from this client. But the customer was king, so she said, "Call me Lauren, then." She realized she was still holding the actress's hand and quickly let go to greet the other two people in the room, George Benitez, an agent she'd dealt with before, and a peroxide blonde she guessed to be in her fifties. Lauren had done her homework, conducting some research while she waited for the actress and her entourage to arrive, so she knew that the older woman was Katherine Dovenbeck, Grace's mother. A quick search on Wikipedia had revealed that Katherine had been the one who had encouraged her daughter to go into

acting, taking her to her first audition for a diaper commercial when Grace had been just six months old.

At least my folks never did that.

“This is my mother, who’s also my manager, and George Benitez, my agent,” Grace said.

They shook hands, and Lauren gave them polite nods. “Mrs. Duvenbeck, nice to meet you. George, it’s great to work with you again.”

Katherine Duvenbeck’s eyes, not quite the same startling color as her daughter’s, widened when Lauren addressed her with the correct name.

Lauren smiled faintly. “Can I get you anything before we start?”

Grace started to shake her head, but her mother said, “That’d be nice. If you have it, I’d like to have a freshly pulled espresso with steamed low-fat milk that forms a foam cap, no higher than half an inch.”

Lauren nodded, but Mrs. Duvenbeck wasn’t through yet.

“It should be flavored with just a hint of sugar-free vanilla syrup and garnished with a sprinkle of cinnamon—organic, of course.”

Years of practice enabled Lauren to keep a straight face, even though she was inwardly cringing at the culinary crime Mrs. Duvenbeck was committing on a perfectly good cup of coffee. “Of course,” she said calmly.

Grace sent her an apologetic gaze, surprising Lauren.

Since Grace had been a child star, Lauren had expected her to be just as spoiled as her mother. Lauren pressed a button on the office intercom. “Carmen, can you do me a favor and get Mrs. Duvenbeck a coffee?” There was a moment of silence when she repeated the woman’s coffee order, but then Carmen gamely promised to deliver the coffee in a minute.

Lauren rolled her desk chair toward a small, round table and nodded at the three chrome-and-leather chairs surrounding it. “Why don’t we get started by talking about where you want to take your career and what, exactly, you feel your brand is? Or is there something in particular you wanted to discuss?”

Mrs. Duvenbeck gingerly settled herself into the chair next to Lauren instead of reserving that seat for her daughter. “Oh yes, there is.” She rummaged through a giant purse that probably held half the product line of Lancome and finally flung a magazine onto the table. “We need you to make this go away!”

Lauren read the sensational headlines and skimmed the article, managing not to raise an eyebrow at the mention of a gay tryst. She peered over at Grace, who met her gaze with an anxious expression. The actress didn’t set off Lauren’s gaydar, but then again, Tabby Jones hadn’t either, and the photo of Grace with Jill Corrigan looked awfully cozy. “Mrs. Duvenbeck,” Lauren said, deciding to be straightforward. “I’m a publicist, not a magician. I can’t just make this go away, especially not if there’s any truth to it.” She looked back at Grace. “If this is just

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news you weren't yet ready to put out, you should realize that the reporters are going to find the truth sooner or later. You might want to bite the bullet and—”

Grace, George, and Mrs. Duvenbeck all spoke at the same time, with Mrs. Duvenbeck's enraged voice drowning out the others. “My daughter isn't gay!”

There was no way they could have a productive discussion like this. If there was any truth to the gay rumors, Grace certainly wouldn't confirm them while her mother was in the room. Ignoring Mrs. Duvenbeck, Lauren turned toward Grace. “Maybe the two of us could go over to the conference room to talk while your mother enjoys her...coffee in peace.”

Mrs. Duvenbeck's makeup-covered face flushed. “I'm perfectly capable of talking while I enjoy my coffee.”

“I don't doubt that for a second,” Lauren said, managing to hide any hint of sarcasm. “But the thing is, if I want to represent Grace to the best of my abilities and handle this situation as efficiently as possible, I need to get a good feeling for who she really is as a person, and I can do that better if we're alone.”

Grace got up and put one hand on her mother's shoulder. “She's right. We'll be right back, I promise.” As soon as the door closed behind them, she lightly touched Lauren's forearm. “I'm sorry. My mother means well, but sometimes, she can be a little...”

Lauren said nothing. She'd learned the hard way that it was best not to comment on things like this. The loyalty of celebrities could be fickle and change faster than wind direction. Pulling her arm away from Grace's touch, she pointed down the hall. “This way, please.”



Grace kept her shoulders squared as she followed her new publicist to the conference room. At least they'd left behind that damn magazine in Lauren's office, but Grace knew she wouldn't be able to leave the rumors behind as easily.

They settled facing each other at one end of the long table in the conference room.

Lauren put her phone on the table and turned it off, giving Grace her full attention. For several moments, she didn't say anything; she just sat and looked at her.

Grace took the opportunity to study her too. In a city where even waitresses were drop-dead gorgeous, Lauren Pearce wouldn't rate a second glance. Her chin was a bit too assertive, her jaw too energetic, and her body a little too sturdy for her to ever make it in front of the camera, but she certainly looked like someone who could do wonders behind the camera, single-handedly rescuing reputations and

changing public opinion. Grace guessed her to be a few years older than her own twenty-nine—certainly not the elderly PR veteran she'd expected, but old enough to have a lot of experience in her job. She radiated confidence as she tucked a strand of her chin-length chocolate-brown hair behind one ear with a steady hand. The hazel eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses were so light that they almost looked golden.

"So," Lauren finally said, "let's talk openly."

Grace nodded. "I'd appreciate it." Most people in Hollywood were masters at beating around the bush, never coming right out and saying what they meant, so Lauren's straightforward style of communication was a nice change of pace.

"Look, I know many managers, agents, and even publicists try to keep their clients in the closet, fearing it'll ruin their careers."

"But I—"

"Yeah, I'm not a big fan of that strategy either," Lauren said. "I'm not saying it'll be easy. Coming out will cost you a few roles, but nowadays, it won't ruin your career. It's different for gay leading men, but for women—"

"I'm not gay," Grace burst out. She felt her cheeks heat, and she cursed her fair complexion.

"Okay," Lauren said calmly. Nothing seemed to rattle her. "Then what was going on in that picture? You have to admit the two of you looked pretty friendly."

Grace took a deep breath and tried to sound less defensive as she repeated, "I'm not gay. If Jill and I looked friendly, it's because we are. Just friends. Nothing more. I'd like for you to set the record straight."

The corner of Lauren's mouth twitched at her choice of words, and even Grace felt her tense features relax into a smile.

"No pun intended," she added. "What do you think we should do? Give a press conference, stating that I'm straight?"

Lauren firmly shook her head. "That would only drag attention to that gossip rag that most people don't even know exists. Besides, the more you swear you're not gay, the more it'll look like you're either in denial or outright lying."

"But I'm not!"

"That doesn't matter," Lauren said. "We both know that perception is everything in this business."

Grace slumped against the back of the leather chair. "So you want me to just do nothing? I can't afford any negative publicity right now. My new movie is premiering in two months, and I need it to do well at the box office, especially after my last movie didn't gross as much as the studio had hoped."

"What's the new movie about?" Lauren asked, appearing genuinely interested. "Some love story set in Georgia, right?"

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“Yes. I’m playing a widow from small-town Georgia. Her husband died in a farming accident, and she stopped believing that life has anything good in store for her.” Grace realized that the Southern accent that she’d worked on for months was back full force, and she tried to shake it off. “By the end of the movie, she finds her faith again and a good man to love.”

Lauren tapped her chin. “Hmm. I have to admit that doesn’t sound like the kind of movie that would benefit from having the media out its lead actress.”

“No,” Grace said, gritting her teeth. “It sure doesn’t. So, what can we do to stop this madness?”

“In my experience, one of two things will happen. One,” Lauren raised her index finger, “some starlet is caught driving under the influence or something else happens in Tinseltown that draws the paparazzi’s attention. They’ll simply forget about you. Or, two...” Lauren lifted her middle finger as well.

“I don’t think I’m going to like option number two,” Grace murmured.

“Two,” Lauren said, “if it’s a slow news week or something else happens that gives those gay rumors any ammunition...”

Grace shook her head. “Nothing like that will happen; I can assure you.”

“Okay, then let’s hope for option number one.” Lauren looked as if she’d prepare for option two nonetheless. She sent Grace a warning glance. “From now on, refer all media inquiries to me. If you do address the press, keep it short and simple. Remember that you can’t be caught lying or dodging questions, or your credibility will be shot.”

Grace nodded tersely.

“Lay low for a while and stay out of the headlines,” Lauren continued in the same stern tone. “No parties, no drinking, no warm embraces with other actresses that could be construed as something more.”

It irked Grace that Lauren thought she was one of the fun-loving party girls. *Come on. What do you care what she thinks?* But she couldn’t change her nature. She cared what people thought of her, always had and probably always would. Her livelihood depended on people liking her. “I’m not into any of that anyway.”

“Embraces with other actresses?” Lauren asked, a tiny smile lurking at the corner of her mouth.

Against her will, Grace had to smile as well. She felt herself relax a little. “Drinking and partying. I don’t mind the embraces—in a strictly platonic way, of course.”

“Of course,” Lauren said, now completely serious again.

“So that’s it?”

Lauren nodded. “Yes. That’s our plan of action. Letting the fire die down by not pouring more fuel into it. It also wouldn’t hurt for you to be seen out and about

with that handsome husband of yours, as long as it doesn't seem like you're putting on a show for the press."

That would be much harder to do. Her interactions with Nick had stopped long ago to feel loving and passionate. They were affectionate, but more like old friends and less like two people still madly in love with each other. Not wanting to discuss it with her new publicist, though, she just nodded.

They got up, and Lauren walked her to the door, where they paused to shake hands.

Lauren's fingers around hers felt strong and capable, and Grace allowed herself to relax and believe that Lauren would guide her through this situation. "Thank you." She gave Lauren's hand one last squeeze and walked out to gather her mother and George and make it out of the building with as little attention from fans or the media as possible.

CHAPTER 3

“DINNER AND DANCING?” LAUREN REPEATED, glad that Peyton couldn’t see her lack of enthusiasm through the phone.

“Yes. You know, that thing normal people do on weekends,” Peyton said, her tone teasing.

After five business lunches, two cocktail parties, and one premiere this week, the last thing Lauren wanted to do in her free time was to get dressed up and head out again, yet she found herself saying yes anyway. Too bad most women didn’t consider hanging out on the couch in sweatpants a proper dating activity.

An hour later, Lauren met Peyton in front of El Niu, the trendy restaurant Peyton had suggested.

“Hi, you.” Peyton kissed her on the lips. “Long time no see,” she said as the hostess led them to their table. Her voice held an undertone of accusation.

Lauren suppressed a sigh. “Yeah, it’s been a busy week.”

“More like a busy month,” Peyton said.

“That too.” Sometimes, Lauren wondered why she even bothered with dating. Her relationships never worked out anyway.

It wasn’t as if she was too picky or had unrealistically high expectations. The only requirement she had was that her date couldn’t have anything to do with the entertainment industry. She wanted a girlfriend whose only connection to show business was going to a movie theater to enjoy a film, popcorn, and tacos on a Saturday night.

As a dentist, Peyton definitely met that requirement. She was also pretty and intelligent, but Lauren still found her attention drifting as they studied the menu and talked about what food they’d order. Behind the cover of the menu, she discreetly peered at her phone, which lay next to her on the table, wondering whether Judy had remembered to keep track of Ben’s social media.

Her cell phone vibrated, indicating that she had new messages, but she valiantly ignored it and kept listening to Peyton’s adventures on her three-day cruise to Ensenada.

Just when the waiter approached the table to take their orders, Lauren's phone rang. She had kept it turned on, explaining to Peyton that it was just in case of emergency. Of course, an emergency for one of her clients could be anything from a broken nail without a manicurist on set to a dead body in bed next to them. A quick glance at the display showed her that Marlene was calling. "I'm sorry. I have to take this. It's my boss."

Peyton nodded with a stony expression.

Lauren pressed the button to accept the call. "Marlene?"

"K-Cee just got evicted from a hotel in Vegas," Marlene said, not bothering with a *hi* or a *how are you?*

"What did he do this time?"

"He took a swing at the concierge. Lauren, I need you to talk to the hotel manager and convince him not to press charges."

Lauren tightened her grip on the phone. "I'm not sure if we should continue to represent him. This is the third mess he's created since we took him on last month. No matter how often I talk to him, he just doesn't want to understand that the old adage 'the only bad publicity is no publicity' stopped being true two arrests ago."

"Let's discuss this another time," Marlene said. "Take care of this matter first."

"All right." It was Marlene's company, so she got to make the decisions. Lauren just hoped she was billing K-Cee enough for having to pull his ass out of the fire time and again—on a Saturday night to boot. "I'll be there in thirty minutes." Lauren slowly lowered the phone, pocketed it, and met Peyton's resigned gaze. "I'm sorry. I have to go. One of my clients got himself into trouble. Why don't we try for dinner sometime next week? Things should have settled down by then."

Peyton refolded her napkin and put it on the table. "I don't think so. By then, you'll probably have another fire to put out."

Lauren couldn't even deny it. She'd canceled their second date at the last minute, too, because something had come up at work. If she was perfectly honest with herself, her job had always come first.

"As nice as it's been, I'm not into *ménages à trois*."

Halfway out of her chair, Lauren froze. *Ménages à trois*? What the heck did Peyton mean?

Peyton gestured to the spot on the table where Lauren's phone had been. "You, me, and your phone."

Ouch. Lauren winced but again didn't try to defend herself. She rounded the table and took Peyton's hand. "I'm sorry," she said again, meaning it. "Let me at least pay for your dinner so you can stay and enjoy the rest of the evening."

"No, that's okay," Peyton said, now sounding a little more friendly. She stood, leaned up on her tiptoes, and kissed Lauren, lingering for a moment.

They both knew it was a kiss good-bye not just for tonight.

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As Lauren headed for her car at a fast clip, she felt like a loser. She did damage control for celebrities every day, yet couldn't control the damage her job did to her private life.



The waiter walked up to their table. "Good evening, ladies. My name is Marc. I'll be your waiter for—" His gaze came to rest on Grace. He did a double take and paused in the middle of introducing himself. "Uh, you are..."

Long since used to it, Grace just smiled and said, "Good evening."

"Can I get you something to drink while you look over the menu?" Marc asked when he recovered. "Our wine list is excellent."

"I'll have a glass of pinot grigio, please," Katherine said.

"Right away, ma'am." The waiter turned a questioning gaze on Grace.

Grace suppressed a sigh. On days like this, it was really tempting to order a glass of champagne, her drink of choice in the past. But, as she had every day for the last thirteen years, she shook her head. "Just a Pellegrino for me."

"Very well." After bowing slightly, he walked away and returned with their drink orders within less than five minutes. He started to recite the specials of the day, but Grace's mother stopped him with a shake of her head.

"My son-in-law will be joining us," Katherine said, apparently enjoying calling Nick that as long as she still could. "We'll wait to order until he arrives."

"Very well. Let me know if you need anything else." After one last lingering glance at Grace, the waiter walked away.

By the time they had both emptied their glasses, there was still no sign of Nick. Grace was beginning to doubt he would arrive anytime soon, if at all.

"What's keeping Nick so long?" her mother asked.

"I have no idea, Mom. Maybe he's stuck in traffic or something." She bit her lip when she realized she was falling into the old habit of finding excuses for him.

Her phone vibrated, rattling around in her clutch, and when she checked, a message from Nick had arrived.

Sorry. Can't make it. Rooney had us do fifty takes on this damn scene, and now I'm just fried.

"Nick can't make it," she told her mother. "He got held up on set."

While her mother went on and on about neither of them putting any effort into saving their marriage, Grace shook her head at herself. *Serves you right.* Normally, she wasn't the calculating type, but after her new publicist had suggested she be

seen out and about with her husband, she had let her mother talk her into meeting Nick for dinner in this restaurant, where the waiters were known to tip off the paparazzi as soon as a celebrity arrived. Now they could photograph her having dinner with her mother.

Her mother stopped mid-rant and stared at something at the other end of the room. "Isn't that your new publicist?"

Grace turned her head. From their discreet corner table, she let her gaze sweep through the room.

Most of the guests were couples holding hands across the table, the candles throwing flickering shadows over their engrossed features. Grace didn't recognize any of them. "Where?"

"There." Under the pretense of fluffing her hair, her mother reached up and pointed.

Grace looked in that direction. "Yes," she said. "I think that's her."

At one of the smaller tables, Lauren and another woman were sharing a bottle of wine. Well, the woman was gulping down wine while Lauren was on the phone. Probably an occupational hazard. Just when Grace was about to look away, Lauren stood and rounded the table. She took her companion's hand and kissed her on the lips, lingering a little too long for it to be a gesture between friends.

What the...? She's gay? Grace swiveled around to face her mother. "Did you know about that when you hired her?"

Katherine clutched the table with both hands and looked as if she were about to faint, so apparently she'd been as clueless as Grace. "Oh my God," she whispered. "What on God's green earth was George thinking? Hiring a lesbian to handle your PR?"

"I have no idea," Grace murmured, still watching Lauren, who now turned and walked toward the exit.

"Call him!"

"Now? It's almost nine already."

"Call him," her mother repeated. "This can't wait until tomorrow."

Grace pulled her phone back out of her clutch. She hesitated for a second before pressing the icon with George's picture on it. "Hi, George," she said when he answered. "Sorry to bother you this late, but...did you know that Lauren Pearce is gay?"

George didn't answer for several seconds. "Uh, yes, I knew. Why's that important?"

Grace wasn't sure it was, but somehow, it felt that way. "I don't know, but I would have liked to know before I decided to hire her."

"So you wouldn't have hired her had you known?" George asked, sounding stunned.

Honestly, Grace had no idea how to answer that question. “I probably would have hired her anyway, but...”

Her mother waved at her to hand over the phone, but Grace pretended she hadn’t seen. If she let her talk to George, her mother would only shout at him, and George didn’t deserve that.

“Ms. Pearce comes highly recommended,” George said. “Everyone I talked to has good things to say about her. In the last few years, she has made a name for herself as the go-to publicist for celebrities wanting to come out as gay. She’s the best in the business for that kind of thing.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t *that kind of thing!* I’m not gay.” Grace realized she’d spoken more loudly than intended and quickly lowered her voice. She looked left and right, glad when she found that no one seemed to pay them any attention in their secluded booth. “My publicist is a reflection on me, and I’m trying to convince people that I’m straight, so do you really think it’s a good idea for me to work so closely with a gay person?”

George was silent for a moment. “You already do,” he said quietly and took an audible breath. “I’m gay, Grace.”

In the sudden silence, the background buzz of the restaurant sounded incredibly loud. “I know,” Grace finally said just as quietly.

“You...you knew?” George stuttered. “You never said anything.”

“I wasn’t sure.” George wasn’t exactly obvious, but since she’d worked in showbiz all her life, Grace could usually tell when she met a gay man. That skill apparently didn’t extend to lesbian women. She hadn’t even considered for a second that Lauren might be gay. “And it just didn’t matter to me.” Grace peered over at her mother, who watched her impatiently. “Listen, George, this isn’t about Ms. Pearce’s sexual orientation. I couldn’t care less about whom she does or doesn’t sleep with. I just don’t want people to think I’m preparing to come out.”

George sighed. “Do you want me to hire someone else?”

Grace hesitated.

“What is he saying?” her mother asked.

“He’s asking if I want him to hire someone else.”

“Yes,” her mother said immediately. “Tell him to fire her and hire someone else. There have to be plenty of competent straight PR consultants in this town.”

Grace nibbled her lower lip until her mother’s disapproving stare made her stop.

“Grace?” George asked. “Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to—?”

Grace made a split-second decision, for once listening to her gut instead of her mother. “No,” she said. “Sorry for bothering you with this. I’ll talk to you later.” She hung up.

Her mother stared at her. “Why didn’t you tell him to fire her?”

Slowly, Grace put her phone away and looked into her mother’s eyes. “Because it’s not right to hire or fire people based on their sexual orientation.”

For a moment, she thought her mother would start ranting and raving again, but Katherine just sighed. “You get that from your father. He was too soft to make it in this business too. Good thing you have me, or people would take advantage.” She got up and gestured for Grace to put a couple of bills on the table. “Let’s get out of here.”

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