

Chapter Two

The stranger

Margaret is on my permanent access list with the concierge and I gave her a key for my private elevator. She can just come up without the concierge notifying me. When I configured this condo loft space, I opted to put in a small, enclosed lobby so that the elevator didn't land right in my living room. The wooden door with etched glass insert added an elegant touch and was rarely locked but Margaret always knew better than to barge in without ringing the doorbell buzzer. It's a purposely-harsh sound that I can hear when lost in thought in my study at the other end of my loft. Finishing the wine in one gulp, I open the door.

I greet Margaret with forced enthusiasm. I still wasn't in the mood for company, but it was worse than that. She was not alone. I sigh and brace myself for another hanger-on trying to get into our inner circle. At least he's better looking than some of Margaret's other sycophants. Adoring fans wanting me to sign their books is one thing. People wanting to invade my space to gawk right here in my loft, well that's entirely another matter. Invasions of that sort still annoy me, especially when I'm unprepared mentally to receive anyone. But then, I guess it means my mojo is still working to some degree.

"Hey, how's it going?" I say smiling slightly as I let them in.

"Lex...Alexa, I'd like you to meet my cousin, Alex. How funny is that?"

A cousin this time. How tiresome.

"Nice to meet you," he says while nodding and shaking my hand. "That Chinese Emperor in plastic in your anti-room there is quite..."

"Lucite, not plastic," I interrupt.

"Yes, of course, wearing those beautiful red-silk robes. It's quite a lovely piece and that porcelain umbrella stand almost too pretty for an umbrella."

What is he a decorator?

"The emperor was a present from one of her Asian..." Margaret adds before I interrupt again.

"It was sent to me through my agent by a loyal Asian-American fan and is one of my prized possessions. The umbrella stand was bought at the big flea market in Paris. The mahogany console that the emperor sits on is a valued antique and the Art Deco octagon-shaped beveled wall mirror I found in SoHo. So, you're a designer, interested in that sort of thing, I guess? I wasn't forewarned that Margaret was bringing someone, but I'm in no need of a designer just now."

I give Margaret my blank stare of annoyance. Then I study her cousin and immediately become transfixed. Something...odd. He doesn't seem to notice my scrutiny. Walks right past me into the living room. Something about this guy is not right. Something...is...very weird. I get a rush of a nervous feeling. An awful creeping premonition of strangeness. Unsettling. *What is it? Hmm.* He reminds me of someone.

But who?

"Didn't I tell you this was a fabulous place?" Margaret asks Alex as she drags him over to see the view. "Nice, huh?"

He nods slowly, like he's impressed.

"Can I get you something? Water, coffee, tea?" I ask being polite but actually becoming increasingly irritated along with feeling rattled at this intrusion. Margaret should know better than surprising me with a guest. I'm not that vain, but come on. She knows what I look like when I'm working. No make-up. Greasy hair. Comfortable sweats. It would have been nice for a heads up.

Plus, I'm in no mood to be social after working almost all night with just a few hours cat nap. Maybe if I yawn, they'll leave soon. I yawn. No reaction. But then I remember, she has some important news for me. Oh well. Better make the best of this.

"Some ice water would be great," he says.

"I'll get it," says Margaret and runs into the kitchen slamming cabinet doors and getting ice water from the fridge dispenser. "Wait," she yells, "Do you want sparkling water or plain?"

"Great, I'll have some Pellegrino," he says in a strong, deep voice with no discernible accent.

"No, it's straight from the fridge, one of those fancy-schmancy kind that serves sparkling from the dispenser," she calls to us. "How about you, Lex?"

"Sure, fizzy sounds good."

I direct him to have a seat and he walks with a slight limp over to my cushy cream-colored leather, L-shaped sectional sofa, puts his briefcase on the floor and sits down resting his arms on the back. The body language of being in charge. I sit opposite in my club chair from my old apartment. This well-worn greenish, suedeish recliner, a garbage night found treasure, is a constant reminder of how far I'd come and stands out as an oddity in my well-furnished home. It's also my talisman for chasing away writer's block. Sit in the chair and ideas being to flow. I don't understand how it works, it just does. I'd had a lot of need for its remedy in the last few years.

Cousin Alex sits looking at me and then around at the loft and back to the view offered by my wall of glass, like he's making a mental calculation of the cost of my lifestyle. The rather large sofa that he's sitting on is dwarfed by the 15 ft. ceilings and more than ample square footage of the open floor plan. Soft, soothing earth tones are the color palate for my walls, pillows and throws, offset by the large, woolen antique Oriental rug in opulent blues, reds, and greens over my dark, bamboo floors. I see him eye my wildly colorful and quite costly Chihuly hand-blown glass bowl, the perfect complement to the glass coffee table designed by Piero Lissoni, where it is placed for optimum enjoyment. While he studies the surroundings, I study him boldly in the silence before Margaret comes in with the drinks. He wasn't much of a talker and I wasn't feeling like making small talk myself, which afforded me the opportunity to continue observing him quite intensely until I knew why he seemed familiar.

Stonily observing every detail of his face, it suddenly became clear to me in a rush, that Alex was actually someone I knew very well. It was so startling that I almost gasped audibly at the shock when I realized he was a character from one of my books sprung to life. Not in name, of course, but in every other way. A dark-haired, blue-eyed handsome lad that is the consistent image in my mind when I write the villain or the love interest. With his chiseled features, thick black hair, lightly tanned skin, sexy stubble of facial hair, Alex is the manifestation of the exact words used to describe the good guy in my debut.

And he is right here in this room. Right here in the flesh. Alive. Sitting on my sofa. I know that description is not like looking at a photo and readers can come up with their own mental image. But here's the thing, his face, Alex's face is what I saw in *my* mind when I wrote his character, Rick, in *Foregone*. The first romantic hero that I pictured and the basic model for all the others that came later. His exact face. A knot forms in my stomach. *How does one deal with absurdity?*

"Okay, here we are," says Margaret, as she sets the tray of drinks on the coffee table and joins Alex on the sofa. "Let me give you some background here. Alex just moved here from LA. He's the creative director and set designer for Off Street Films, a newly formed but apparently well-funded production company in TriBeCa that's looking for new projects. I gave him the first

two manuscripts of your trilogy and told him about *Darkside*.” Now it makes sense why he’s been scoping out my apartment. A set designer.

“Let me take over here, Peggy.” Peggy? I ask her with my eyes and she just shrugs.

“I love the concept of these books,” Alex continues, “the different dimensions of the female psyche manipulated by life’s challenges, molded by unique circumstances. From what Peggy tells me, *Darkside* is kind of a modern day *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* meets *Sons of Anarchy*. So I was thinking of combining all those stories into one. Have a tragedy happen just after Jodie gets married when she graduates college, and before any kids, throwing her into the Jodie of *Darkside*. That version of Jodie and her terrible choices becomes the main plot of the movie.”

This angers me. “Whoa. Stop right there,” I say in a tone of displeasure. “Is this the interesting marketing idea you mentioned when you called me, Margaret?” She looks at me perplexed. Then to Alex, “You sound as if there’s an imminent deal. There’s no imminent deal. This is the first time I’ve heard about this. Did Margaret tell you she spoke to me and I was interested? If she did, she was deceptive. She knows how strongly I feel about this.

“I swore I would never allow any of books to be made into a film again after my horrible experience with *A Foregone Conclusion*. I felt violated. The story was in tatters, the movie was a bomb and probably led to my subsequent work not selling as well, now that I think about it. Right off the bat, you brazenly tell me how you *intentionally* want to destroy the integrity of the trilogy. No-no. Emphatically, no. I don’t even know the movie you mentioned, the mister candy and the other...sons...whatever you are referring to.”

I stand up to signal the end of this meeting. My eyes send daggers to Margaret and I have already fired her in my mind. She knows she’s in trouble when she catches my look.

“It’s *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, a financial and critical success, I might add, and the other was a recent hit TV show about a biker gang.”

“I don’t care. Not interested. Sorry. I’m busy just now and exhausted. I need to rest before taking care of important business. If you’ll excuse me. You can show yourselves out.”

“Wait, Lex! Hear him out. This is different,” says Margaret jumping up and looking petrified as if she just saw a spider. *She definitely caught the meaning of my look.*

“No, I’m done. As I said, not interested. Good day.” I walk into the hallway to my bedroom and shut the door firmly. I hear murmuring in the living room for about two minutes and then the front door clicks shut. I’m furious and run the water for a bath to calm myself. Half undressed, I decide another glass of wine is warranted and walk out to get one. I stop short and let out a startled scream.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he says, as I run back to get a robe and turn off the bath before coming back out.

“What in the hell are you still doing in my loft? Look, Alex, mister, whoever you are,” I say calmly trying to recover some decorum by acting in control, the mature and successful woman who’s no longer half-naked. “I could have you arrested for being here uninvited. When I asked you to leave, I meant it. Margaret’s cousin or not. I don’t know you. And actually, I don’t care to. So please leave. At once.” And I walk toward the door.

“At least read the offer,” he says as he pulls a packet out of his briefcase and puts it on the coffee table before walking over to the door. “Read the offer and then come out with me for dinner tonight. Make reservations at your favorite and most expensive restaurant. I’ll come back here at 8:00. Even if you’re still not interested in working on this project, I’d like to take you to dinner.” He leans in as if to kiss me and his alluring, strong, masculine scent, a mix of the freshness of a pine-tree forest, wood fires burning, worn leather, and the wind-whipped sea knocks me back and

arouses me. My unexpected reaction confuses me, as he hands me his business card instead of a kiss.

“Oh,” I say awkwardly after snapping my head back before realizing what he’s really doing. I look at his card. “What? What is this? Your name is Wainwright? Alex Wainwright? This is a joke, right? And not funny at all, I might add.”

“One of life’s strange coincidences,” he says playfully. Before I can say any more, he’s out the door and jumps in the elevator. I’m more than shocked. A coincidence? He being a ringer for Rick? Having the same name as me? Well, not *really* my name. Of course, Alexa Wainwright is a made-up perfect pen name that I changed legally.

Gladys Lipschitz, my real name, a major misstep on the part of my mother, was a name that belonged embroidered on the shirt of a pink waitress uniform. Gladys evokes an image of a woman who wears a hairnet and keeps a small lead pencil tucked behind her ear and an order pad shoved into her skirt pocket. She works the late shift serving greasy food at a dive luncheonette on the upper far West Side under the elevated trains. That Gladys personified my obsessive fear of being a failure as a writer. I wanted to get as far away from her as I could. Alexa connoted sexy and sophisticated. Wainwright sounded snooty, British, non-ethnic.

I also played with the idea of calling myself Alex instead of Alexa, but I really didn’t want any gender confusion. I was proud of being female and wrote mainly for a female audience. If I had done that, though, Alex Wainwright and I would have the exact same name. Odd, so odd. Also odd is his lingering scent. From that quick close encounter when he leaned in and his masculine aroma filled my nostrils, I now smell it everywhere. It has taken over my loft. I spray Pledge on my furniture and mop the floors. Pour my favorite perfume all over me after I take that bath. Spray it into the rooms. No good. His scent is in my nose. In my being. Leaves me restless and uneasy and doesn’t go away. I’m edgy, unsettled, fearful that I’m being marked for something. A spider web of intrigue is ensnaring me. Pulling me closer to its center where I can’t escape. First it’s his scent that I can’t get rid of.

What’s next?

The packet stays untouched on my table for several days. Not interested. *Why bother reading it?* Finally, I grab it and throw it in the trash. Sitting down in my club chair with my morning coffee the next day, I pick up one of my gossip magazines that’s sometimes on that table with the mail, a guilty pleasure. Actually, it’s more of a compulsion, checking to see if there are any articles about me. Of course not. Not anymore. But wait. *What the...?* It’s not a magazine. It’s that damn proposal. Shape shifting into a magazine and then back again to mock me. I drop it in horror on the table and then throw out the rest of my magazines. The packet gives me the willies, but I won’t touch it again. Trying to bring logic into the equation and rekindle the memory of throwing it out, I recreate the steps. Envision the garbage can and try and feel the packet in my hands. Can’t completely remember doing it. I don’t know, maybe I really didn’t throw it out. Still creepy, though.

Margaret repeatedly calls and I won’t answer. She texts me incessantly and I don’t respond. She knows better than to just show up here when I’m angry at her, afraid of my reaction. Afraid I might actually fire her. She’s learned that it’s best to give me a cooling off period when I’ve outright threatened to fire her in the past or just have given her that look she’s come to know. It has worked before but not now. I’m so livid with her presumptuousness. A movie deal! When she knows full well how I feel. Then I just go for it. “You’re fired,” I finally text her at a random moment on a random day.

I had already begun busying myself with editing and copyediting *Darkside* and, although boring, it was important. By now, I was pretty good at catching wrong words that spellcheck didn't catch, "faze" instead of "phase" and the like, and missing periods at the end of sentences. So...who needs Margaret? Saved me money and her bothersome obsequiousness. The editors at Jameson would go over it again, so no real worries about missing something.

However, there's one aspect of Margaret's help that I will miss, but oh well. She gives my writing a brightness that sometimes gets lost in the complicated story lines. Tightens the narrative. Fills in the plot holes. Sharpens the tone. Her instincts are genius. She's the perfect collaborator. I found her on a jobs website for editors and she polished up *Foregone* for not much money. She was probably responsible for Gloria, saying "yes" and then Jameson House offering that three-book deal and hefty advance. Yeah, she was a real find and was also company. A welcome disruption from the intrinsic isolation of being a writer. I admit, I'll miss her spontaneity, her easy laugh, and her off beat style. But I'm stubborn and she crossed the line. No regrets. Well, maybe. Firing her in a text was a chicken shit thing to do. I feel better about myself after I mail her a large severance package.

Done.

Not done.

I forgot to take her off the easy access list and to lock my front door, which I rarely ever do because my private elevator needs a key. Margaret still has a key, an unfortunate oversight on my part.

"Please Alexa, don't do this," she says hysterically crying as she rushes into my study unexpectedly and makes me burn my tongue on a hot sip of coffee. "I'm sorry I brought him here. He's not really my cousin. I just met him at a script-writing seminar. He was giving one of the classes..."

"Wait. Thstop," I say, my sore tongue making it hard to speak for a moment. "What? You brought some jerk that you didn't even know up here to my home? You know what, Margaret, you're still fired...and moreover fired again! Now get out and don't come back." And I turn back to my computer screen and cool off my tongue with a sip of bottled water.

"Alexa, please listen. He's not some jerk. He can do what he says. Okay, the cousin thing was stupid. But when I saw your face as you opened the door, I had to think of something fast, so you would let us in. Please just listen. This could be big for you. Put you back in the spotlight."

I turn around slowly. "Peggy," I say sarcastically, "you are not in charge of my career. *You* cannot create any spotlights for me. You and your fake cousin Alex Wainwright do not have the magic. I make my own magic. I alone. Now get out."

"Wait. What? His name is Alex Wainwright?"

"He didn't tell you his name?"

"Well, I knew it was Alex, but I never really paid attention to the seminar materials listing the leaders. They just called him by his first name and only mentioned his title as the creative director of the production company holding the seminar. And it never came up at dinner."

"You went out with this guy?"

"Well, yes. He asked me after the lecture when I mentioned to the group that I worked for you. He wanted to know if you were working on the third book of the trilogy. When I told him you were, he took me out to dinner to discuss it."

"This makes me angry on so many levels. The book hasn't been published yet and you're discussing the plot with him before it's officially out, and worse yet, giving him manuscripts,

which probably violates something in my publishing contract.” I shake my head in disgust. “I should probably sue you, but I know you’re broke.”

“Except for my severance pay. Do you want it back?” she asks sheepishly.

“You’re fired. It’s yours. Go away. But first tell me how did he know anything about my first two books of the trilogy? That there even *is* a trilogy. Jameson is waiting to begin a big marketing push and until then keeping things very secretive. No one knows, outside of my editorial team.”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t tell him anything because he already knew. All I did was mention that I work with you, as I said. Maybe he knows someone at Jameson? Or possibly, Gloria? I’ll try and find out. But let’s look at the bright side, pun intended. The trilogy is already creating some buzz.”

Bingo. She said the exact right words to bring me around.

“Anyway, as I was leaving that afternoon to come here, he called and asked to join me. To have me introduce you to him. We met in the coffee shop and he showed me the offer.”

“Wait, so you called me before you met him? What were the marketing ideas *you* had that you wanted to tell me about?”

“What? I called? I never...”

Just then the phone rings. “Hello...hello?” No one there. No caller ID.

“So, what did you think of it?” she continues forgetting our conversation thread, as did I. “The offer. You can’t be upset about the offer. It’s mind boggling.”

“I haven’t looked at it.”

“No *wonder* you’re so angry. It’s an amazing offer. You *have* to look at it.” She sees me contemplating what she’s just said and senses the fight is out of me. At least toward her. “How about I make us some fresh coffee and those grilled cheese sandwiches that you love so much, and you come into the living room and read the proposal packet, okay? By the way, your place smells nice. Have you installed an air freshener?”

I just look at her not knowing what to say. I haven’t left the apartment, so I don’t smell him anymore. Gotten used to it, I guess. It’s too weird to explain, so I just nod my head “yes” and she goes happily into the kitchen. I sigh. You just can’t get rid of some people. And really deep down, I don’t want to. I’ve been quite lonely during this altercation and missed her...a lot. I’ve also been missing my mom. Right now, she’s probably sleeping off an all night observation after gazing at the stars somewhere for a well-funded research project. I’ve become accustomed to her absences as a professor in Theoretical Astrophysics, but there are times I really need her.

And I need her right now. Need to be in her presence. Need a hug. Being overwhelmed by the emptiness and fear when I complete a new book project can be assuaged by a little mother/daughter time. Her remarkably inquisitive mind and nurturing attention has the power to soothe and the sweet scent of her signature lavender perfume always calms me. I also want to know if she thinks *Darkside* will be my big comeback. Being desperate for positive feedback and assurances borders on the ridiculous and is embarrassing. But I’m trapped by these hated insecurities. I know she’s proud of me. Proud of my accomplishments thus far. Just then the phone rings, again.

“Hi, my darling.”

“Mom! Hi! Where are you?”

“Well, I can’t really tell you. Top secret location and all that,” she says laughing. “I tried to call a few minutes ago but couldn’t get through. Bad signal. Damn cell phones.”

“Is the research going well?”

“Better than expected. The additional funding has been approved and I get to stay and play for a few more weeks, maybe longer. I must say, the work here is so exciting. We’re finding some very interesting things about dark matter. All of us are psyched about making major advances in this field. Might solve all the mysteries of the universe,” she says laughing, “but we have to do it before the funding runs out. What a crazy business. And how about you? I’m glad you finally finished that book. I know it was a hard one for you. Emotionally, that is.”

“How’d you know I finished it? I haven’t spoken to you in a while.”

“You know, one of my silly dreams. I see big things with this one darling. But be careful.”

“Be careful? Why be careful?”

“Not quite sure. Just a feeling. Big successes sometimes come with drawbacks, as you are well aware. Anyway,” she laughs again, “you’ve been warned, so be alert. By the way, has Jerry called you?”

“No.”

“Well, if he does, tell him I’ll call him in the next few days and send him kisses. Gotta go now, darling. I’ll call soon. Love you. And remember, just be careful.”

Jerry was my mother’s most recent beau. No one can call *her* because of security. Also, due to the delicate aspect and precision of the work, none of the scientists wanted to be disturbed by ringing phones. When she wasn’t at the observatory she was asleep. So *she* made all the calls and everyone respected that, even me. This latest project was top secret because it was funded by NASA, the results solely owned by the agency. It was kind of fun thinking of my mother as a NASA scientist involved in a high stakes game.

Maybe she was really at Area 51 interviewing aliens. I pictured the aliens looking at my *mother* with awe and wonder. She’s tiny, only about 5 feet, like the grays, those big-eyed aliens of myth and legend, but she wears dangerously high heels to disguise her height. Her blazing red hair is cropped short and her enormous blue eyes, aided by colored contacts, are mesmerizing and make her appear touched by the gods. She’s a curvy size 6 with ample breasts and can pull off wearing body conscious clothing of tight jeans and boob hugging tops. No stodgy scientist attire for her even at her age, which she won’t tell me.

I assume she’s at least in her late-40’s or early-50’s because I’m 31. Sometime ago, I found a hard to read birth certificate but she told me it was fake. So her exact age remains a mystery. With limitless energy and a magnetic personality, she attracts all within her purview. In articles written about her, she has been described as a fireball, a force to be reckoned with, a dynamo, and so on. I’ve tried to capture her essence, her vitality, to own it for myself, but alas, I never could. The genetic pool of my DNA must favor my father, whom I have never met or even seen in photos. I would have loved to be a red head and have her coloring, but my hair is nearly black and so are my eyes. No one would describe me as petite at 5 feet 7 inches and although I’m slender, I can’t get my butt into her jeans or walk for very long on the circus clown stilts that she calls heels and wears even when home.

“Coffee and sandwiches are ready,” Margaret calls from the kitchen.

I waddle into the kitchen, still in my bathrobe and slippers and grab a sandwich and almost swallow it whole without chewing. I realize that I haven’t eaten since yesterday, my absorption into grammar, style, and usage being my sole focus. It will be a relief to hand it off to Margaret. Even with her *meshugas*, Yiddish for craziness, her input will be invaluable. Margaret watches me wolf down the food and sits down with me at the kitchen table in the breakfast nook of my chef’s kitchen. The kitchen has all the current trends in design with its concrete countertops, stainless steel Miele appliances, and multi-colored mosaic glass tile backsplash. The rage. It opens to the

living room/dining room combo where the untouched packet can be seen still on the coffee table from the week before and it still looks...sinister.