

## Chapter 1

“You could have eloped.” Kelley Samuels jabbed another hairpin into the dark red clump of curls perched demurely—for the moment—on top of her head. “Really, Felice. If you loved Gallagher, you would have climbed out your window some cloudy midnight and driven to Vegas.”

“I would have if I’d had any idea what this . . . this . . .” Felice flung her arms dramatically, as if she was at a loss for words to describe the event unfolding around her.

“Circus? Fiasco? Spectacle?” Kelley supplied.

“Not *nearly* expressive enough.” Felice squinted in the mirror. “I look pale.”

“Anyone wearing that much white would look pale.”

“I *feel* pale.”

“Everyone who’s a part of this wedding feels pale.”

“Maybe I can cancel.”

“The priest is already in his robes. There are guests sitting in the pews.”

“Maybe I could tell them . . . maybe *you* could tell them that I’ve been struck down with some fatal . . . temporarily fatal disease.”

“Twenty-four-hour bubonic plague?”

“That’s the spirit.” Felice dropped to a chair, a cloud of white Spanish lace settling around her.

“You’re not supposed to sit. It’ll ruin the back of the dress.”

“You’ve been listening to my mother. We’ve all been listening to my mother.”

Kelley jabbed another pin in her hair, then reached for the floral wreath of white and yellow roses and baby's breath that was supposed to slip over it. "Was this thing—" she held out the wreath with distaste "—this concoction, your mother's idea?"

"No. It's exactly what I would have chosen, if I'd been given a choice," Felice said sarcastically. "You know I want you to look like a vestal virgin." She shut her eyes. "Kell, why did I let this go so far?"

"Because you're in love and feeling sentimental." Kelley plopped the wreath on her head and adjusted it. "All I need now is a Maypole."

Felice opened her eyes. "Your hair's coming down."

"I told you it wouldn't stay up."

"It's just a few curls. You look like Shirley Temple."

"I feel like a half-peeled tangerine in this dress."

"You have nice shoulders. And the color's good for you." Kelley's dress was a deep coral silk that bared her shoulders and had a fitted skirt with an overskirt that draped over one hip and tied in the back. The dress had been a compromise in taste between Felice and her mother, and like most compromises, it left something to be desired. The best thing Kelley could say about the dress was that she could take it off forever in just a few hours.

She finished fastening the wreath and stepped back for one final look. The woman staring back at her was a stranger. Kelley hoped she would continue to stay that way.

She turned to Felice. "Okay, partner. Stand up and let's get your mantilla in place."

"It's not time yet, is it?"

"Sure is."

"I wonder if Josiah's going to be waiting when I get to the altar."

"If he still wants to marry you after he's seen your mother in action, then it's true love."

Felice stood. “Mother’s been at her worst since the day we told her we were going to get married.” Her voice softened a little. “But the wedding’s meant so much to her. That’s why I’ve let things get so out of hand. I was never exactly the kind of daughter she’d had in mind. This seemed like the least I could do—”

Kelley wrapped her arms around her friend for a quick hug. “She’s crazy about you. And you’ve been a brave, brave soldier to go through with this for her.”

Felice laughed. “All I ever wanted was a little wedding. You, a few other friends, a case of Dom Perignon, a little beluga.”

The door to the dressing room whipped open. “You’re not ready, and it’s quarter to five!”

Felice rolled her eyes before she faced her mother. “But I will be, and in plenty of time. Don’t you look fabulous?”

Nita Cristy calmed visibly, like a prize hen preening her feathers. She was a shorter, curvier version of her beautiful dark-haired daughter, a woman who had the money to take exquisite care of herself. *Her* dress hadn’t been a compromise. Of royal blue silk in a flattering princess style, the dress was one of the few signs Kelley had seen of Nita’s famed good taste.

The woman who had entered the room with her looked like a chorus girl in comparison. A bleached blonde with the olive coloring of a brunette, she was dressed in a bubble-gum pink miniskirt that revealed every dimple in her chubby knees. “Felice, dear.” The woman held out her hand. “I’m Susan Sanders. I write for the—”

Felice took her hand. “I’ve read your column. Hello, Miss Sanders. This is my maid of honor, Kelley Samuels.”

Susan held out her hand to Kelley. “Call me Suzy.”

Kelley restrained her response to a polite murmur, but Suzy was already speaking to Felice again.

“Thank you for inviting me. This is exactly the kind of event I like to cover. Heiress marries top government official. Society guests. Movie star guests. What more could anybody ask for?”

Felice’s gaze flicked to her mother’s. Nita had the grace to examine her shoes. “I’m glad to have you,” Felice said politely, returning her gaze to Suzy’s. “And I hope you’ll come to the reception?”

“I wouldn’t miss it, dear. Will Griff Bryant be there, too?”

Kelley listened to the polite exchange. Griff Bryant was the icing on this, Palm Springs’s most elaborate wedding cake. He was a friend of Felice and Gallagher’s, and Kelley had not had the opportunity to meet him yet. But, along with a million other moviegoers, more than once she had seen him in living color. He was Hollywood’s man of the moment, and had been for several years.

As a breed, Kelley disliked actors with an intensity born of experience. But as fantasy material, she, like almost every woman who had ever seen one of his films, didn’t think Griff Bryant could be topped. Apparently Suzy didn’t, either.

The conversation ended and the door closed behind Suzy’s jiggling tush.

Felice held her mother back when she tried to follow. “Mother! Suzy Slander, for God’s sake. Tell me you didn’t really invite her.”

“I sent the wedding announcement to all the Los Angeles newspapers, and Suzy called and asked me if she could attend. What could I say?” Nita gave a helpless shrug.

“I think I’m going to check on the flower girl . . . or somebody,” Kelley said. She ignored Felice’s emerald-eyed plea. “Mrs. Cristy, you’ll help Felice with the mantilla?”

“I’d like that.”

Kelley nodded. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

In the hallway she had to restrain herself from disappearing into the parking lot. She was here because she was Felice’s best friend, but where she wanted to be was at home in jeans and a sweatshirt watching the Dodgers play the Giants and screaming her heart out. She wanted a beer and popcorn and the company of her almost-purebred Newfoundland monster, Neuf.

Instead, she was going to get French champagne and the company of the who’s who of Southern California. Of course if she was truly unlucky, by the end of the night somebody was bound to tell her who had won the game so that she couldn’t even enjoy the recording.

“You don’t look like you’re having fun.”

Kelley looked up and saw Gallagher coming toward her. He was a big man, and his shoulders seemed to strain his black tux. Kelley had never seen him this dressed up, although his style was always a bit more formal than hers. Almost anybody’s was.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, barring the door to Felice’s dressing room. “You’re not supposed to see Felice before she comes down the aisle.”

“I’ll bet her mother told you that.”

“Good sense tells me that. I mean, she hasn’t spent the last two hours getting ready so that you can give her a quick once-over before you ask if she remembered to invite old Uncle Fred to the reception.”

Gallagher grinned, and one very masculine dimple signaled relaxed good humor. He, at least, seemed to be enjoying himself. “How’s she doing?”

“She keeps threatening to call the whole thing off. You should have eloped.”

“She’s heard that suggestion from me, too.” He touched Kelley’s wreath. “Not exactly a Dodger’s cap.”

“Now, that would have been a unique touch.” Kelley propelled Gallagher back the way he had come. “Go away. We’ll see you in a little while.”

“Then tell Felice that Simon and Tate finally got here. Simon’s dressed and ready to go.”

Kelley had never met Simon, but she knew he was Gallagher’s best man. Before moving to Southern California to head the FBI offices here, Gallagher had worked in Washington in a high-level Justice Department position. Simon Vandergriff had often worked for him, although what he had done was top secret.

Kelley was familiar with top secret. She was familiar with law enforcement all the way from high-tech computer crime down to parking tickets. She had once been a cop. So had Felice. Now she was a private investigator, and so was Felice—when she wasn’t too busy getting married.

“You know, a good third of the people sitting in that church right now routinely carry guns,” Kelley said.

“Nobody’s carrying a gun today.”

She ticked off the number on her fingers. “You, me, Felice, Simon. All our friends from the LAPD. All your FBI buddies.” She smiled. “Even Griff Bryant. He’s a regular walking arsenal in his movies.”

“Have you met Griff yet?”

“Nope.”

“He’s nothing like the guy he plays on-screen.”

“He’s an actor. That’s worse.”

“Hollywood brat.”

“Arrogant Fed,” she said cheerfully.

He shot her another grin. “Tell Felice I’m going home for a shot of Scotch.”

“I’ll do no such thing.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. Then she shooed him down the hall. She wondered, as she watched him walk away—all supreme male confidence and stalking-lion grace—if somewhere in the world there was a Josiah Gallagher for her.

She hoped so. But if she ever found him, *her* mother wasn’t going to run the wedding.

She was whistling “The Chapel of Love” when she went back into the dressing room to rescue Felice.

\*\*\*

“You’re late.”

“The traffic on the freeway wasn’t to be believed.”

“I asked Cam for one cameraman. I get an entire production company?” Griff Bryant pulled his starched white collar away from his throat. It might be officially fall, but no leaves were turning in Palm Springs. The sun was on its way down, but the temperature was still above eighty. Even the tall palms lining the churchyard looked wilted.

“You said you wanted the best. We’re the best. You said you wanted discreet. We’re so discreet Superman couldn’t find us in the shadows. You know Cam, she overcompensates.” The spokesman of the three men hurriedly unloading equipment from the van marked Zephyr Productions shrugged. “You want us or not?”

“I suppose you come as a team.”

“You got it.”

“I’m not kidding about discreet. I told the bride I’d get somebody to film this so that her mother wouldn’t hire one of those guys who parades backward up the aisle two steps in front of her. This is my wedding gift, but believe me, Felice doesn’t want to know you’re there.”

“As far as she’s concerned, we’re not.”

“Go on in, then, and set up.” Griff watched the men finish unloading. Two carried in the equipment while the spokesman got back in the van and moved it to the parking lot.

Though the afternoon was uncomfortably warm, Griff liked the atmosphere here in the shadows by the side door of the church better than that inside. At least here no one was pointing at him, or worse, trying not to show that they’d ever seen his movies. He was used to having a face so familiar that even the sea lions along the Pacific Coast Highway seemed to recognize him. He wasn’t used to the feeling of alienation that went with it. He never would be.

He rarely went to weddings. Marriage in his part of the world often seemed nothing more than the first step toward divorce. True, he knew a few Hollywood marriages that had held together through the ups and downs of screen careers, but he knew many more that hadn’t.

His own hadn’t, and now he had a hostile ex-wife and an unhappy daughter to show for it. It was no wonder that he didn’t usually want to celebrate what had turned out so sadly for him.

He reminded himself that he had come tonight because Felice and Gallagher’s relationship seemed to have all the earmarks of success. He was not so jaded that he couldn’t see love when confronted by it. He was nothing if not a disciple of possibilities.

Inside the church the wedding prelude began. Griff had been unable to attend the rehearsal, but Felice’s mother had made certain he received a schedule of events. He knew that the carefully timed pipe organ prelude would last exactly twelve minutes. Then Felice’s attendants would process. That would take four and a half minutes, five if the flower girl forgot to drop her rose petals and went back and started over again.

Felice would process on her father’s arm. Two minutes flat, and Lord help her if she tripped.

He had been on movie sets that weren’t as well structured as this, and he’d worked with directors who couldn’t summon half the fear that Felice’s mother did. Nothing was going to go wrong with this wedding, because nobody would have the courage to face Nita Cristy and tell her.

The desert sky was turning a darker blue as the sun edged toward the horizon. Stars would be out for the wedding supper. For the moment Griff was diverted by the music, the prelude to a glorious sunset, the thought of the vows that were about to be exchanged. Life seemed kinder than it had in the recent months. Love seemed real, something to strive for, something that might even be attained.

He laughed a little, embarrassed at his own sentimentality, and he wondered if maybe he should attend weddings more often.

\*\*\*

“You look perfect. Exquisite. Dazzling.” Kelley draped one side of Felice’s mantilla over her shoulder again. It had belonged to Felice’s grandmother and perfectly complemented her dress.

“I should have a rose in my teeth.”

“You can have one of the ones from my bouquet.”

“Not unless you have castanets to go with it.”

“Fresh out of them. But I could stand behind you and pop gum in rhythm.”

Felice whirled. “I’m leaving.”

Kelley held her by the shoulders. “No, you’re not, not unless it’s to go out there and get married.” She glanced at her watch. “Which you’re supposed to do in one minute.”

“I just have a bad feeling about all this.”

“Every bride gets the jitters.”

“How would you know?”

“I read. I’m planning to get them myself someday, just as soon as somebody cranks out another Josiah Gallagher.”

“The world wouldn’t survive it.”

“The world would be a better place. Now, come on. Gallagher’s having fun. He looks relaxed and confident. You do the same.”

There was a knock at the door, and Felice’s father poked his head inside. “Prelude just started. Your mother’s being seated.”

Felice slapped her hand over her heart. “You mean she won’t be back in here to tell me what to do?”

“Things are looking up.” John Cristy, tall and distinguished, beamed at his daughter. “You’re gorgeous.”

Kelley started toward the door. “I’d better get in position. Mr. Cristy, don’t let her go anywhere except down that aisle.”

“You look gorgeous, too, Kelley,” he said gallantly.

“Yeah, yeah.” Kelley kissed his cheek as she passed. “I’ll warm up the crowd for our glamour girl.” She turned and threw Felice a kiss, too. Then, without a backward glance she abandoned her.

There were three bridesmaids, distant relatives of Felice’s, and Gallagher’s fidgety four-year-old niece, who was shredding rose petals faster than her mother could snatch them away. Kelley took her place behind them, whispering her appreciation of how lovely everybody looked.

She was calculating what inning was being played at Dodger Stadium when the music for the flower girl began. The little girl straightened her petticoat and held out her hand for her basket, as confident in her role as any movie queen. Her mother reminded her that just this once it was all right to litter, and the little girl was off. Her mother disappeared, and Kelley was left alone with the bridesmaids. In another minute and a half they were gone, too.

The church was packed with people. Felice had been firm about wanting the wedding in Palm Springs, where she and Kelley had their office. The church here was smaller than the one her parents attended outside of Santa Barbara. Felice had believed that a smaller church, away

from her childhood home, would mean a smaller attendance. She had underestimated her mother's influence.

Kelley's introduction sounded. She had what a Hollywood vocal coach had called a tin ear. But even she could recognize her introduction. Mrs. Cristy had taped it and urged her to play it every night for a week so that she wouldn't fail to enter on time. Kelley knew better than to miss a cue.

She started down the aisle. The church, with its ornate statues, its dark wood and gold leaf trim, seemed strange to her. She was Kelley O'Flynn Samuels, Irish-American hybrid but also daughter of Dottie and Fletcher Samuels, who had always thought that Christmas, Easter and funerals were the only acceptable excuses for darkening a church door. As a child, when she might have been disciplined and instructed by nuns, she had run wild on a Hollywood back lot, learning things about the world and its inhabitants that the sisters probably didn't know.

She walked slowly and serenely and wondered who was up at bat.

By the time she took her place at the front and turned to watch Felice come up the aisle, she had put baseball out of her mind. The woman walking slowly toward the altar didn't look like the same rookie police officer who years before had walked through the door of Kelley's division and announced that they were going to be friends. She didn't look like the woman who had held Kelley's hand and let her cry when, despite Kelley's best efforts, a child she had rescued from an automobile accident had died in her arms. She didn't look like the woman who had gotten her gold shield the same year as Kelley, or who had gotten fed up with police bureaucracy and convinced Kelley to be her private-eye partner in Palm Springs.

She looked like Gallagher's bride.

For the first time Kelley realized how different things would be now that Felice was getting married. She wanted to stop time. She understood Felice's last-minute panic; she, too, was seized with the feeling that everyone in the church should leave. And though she told herself that she

was just experiencing a natural reluctance to change, she realized she was standing as erect as a soldier, as tense as a tightrope.

Felice's father presented his daughter to Gallagher. The priest began the ceremony. The words were solemn, important, and Kelley could not concentrate on them. She let her gaze drift over the wedding party, then to the front row where Felice's parents sat. Mrs. Cristy looked weepy; Mr. Cristy looked as if he wished he were allowed to cry.

Behind them sat a man only familiar to her from movie theater screens. Just as she got her first good glimpse of him, he stood and started toward the altar. She had known Griff Bryant was going to do a reading, but she hadn't realized it was so soon in the ceremony.

Kelley knew a lot about film stars. She knew that some photographed superbly and looked ordinary in real life. She knew that some looked ordinary on the screen and were as handsome as the devil if encountered on the street. Rarely had she known anyone with the same presence, the same larger-than-life persona offscreen and on. Griff Bryant was one of those men.

Felice and Gallagher liked Griff. They had met him while investigating the case that had brought them together. Later they had bought a house not far from his, and he had extended the friendly hand of a neighbor to help them with renovations. Because they liked him, Kelley had been prepared to give him a chance. Now she found that hard to do.

She knew in one glance that he *was* the man he played onscreen, or worse, he believed he was. To her knowledge, Griff had never starred in a film where the equivalent of a small city's population didn't expire somewhere between the credits. He had taken more gunfire, had more grenades and bombs launched in his direction, survived more daggers and bayonets than a regiment of soldiers.

She'd rarely seen him in a role that required anything but fatigues, but the perfectly tailored suit he was wearing tonight did nothing to detract from his masculine swagger. He walked like a pirate, a man comfortable with the rolling swell of waves, a man comfortable anywhere. He was gracefully lean, honed to nothing but muscle, bone and sinew by a life of action and drama. His eyes were a peculiar blue, the color of a bleached winter sky, a blue that could freeze the heart of an enemy. His mouth was locked in a cynical smile, his dark hair cut with military precision.

Undoubtedly he thought the world was a better place because he was in it.

She watched as he settled himself in position not six feet away from her. If he was going to do a reading, he had forgotten to bring it with him. His hands were relaxed, dangling at his hips. He surveyed those gathered before him, like a television evangelist benignly calculating souls by the dollar. Then he began to recite.

The congregation of guests was in his pocket before he had uttered six words. His voice was a rich, mellow baritone, his enunciation perfect. He spoke as if to friends, but Kelley knew how much work, how much training and talent had gone into sounding that warm, that natural. Reluctantly she admired him. He was more than a screen sex symbol, more than an image that other men wished they could live up to. He was an actor, a good one. He was giving the gift of his talent to Felice and Gallagher tonight.

She felt the tension in her spine melt away. Sometime during her childhood, she had been told that an actor's greatest talent was transportation. If he—or she—couldn't transport his audience to the fantasy universe he inhabited, then he wasn't an actor at all. Knowing that, knowing that Griff was just manipulating words to take her to some mythical place where love existed and happily-ever-afters happened every day, she still felt herself succumb. Tears welled in her eyes. She looked at Felice and Gallagher and silently wished them a long and happy life together.

At that precise moment the first burst of automatic-weapon fire exploded through the room.