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Fame

Written by Tilly Bagshawe

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TILLY BAGSHAWE

Fame

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For Viorel Rezmives
and in loving memory of Abel Teglas.

Heathcliff shall never know how I love him: and that, not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.

Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights

You can take all the sincerity in Hollywood, place it in the navel of a fruit fly and still have room enough for three caraway seeds and a producer's heart.

Fred Allen

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PART ONE

PROLOGUE

At the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, the Eighty-Fifth Academy Awards were about to get under way.

In the hushed luxury of the auditorium, opposite the vast, 130-foot stage, designed by David Rockwell especially with the Oscars in mind, two men took their seats. Tonight, their bitter feud would be settled for better or worse. It would be settled in front of their peers, the three thousand of Hollywood's chosen sons and daughters who'd been invited to tonight's ceremony. It would be settled in front of the estimated sixty million Americans expected to tune in to the broadcast at home, as well as the hundreds more millions who would catch the Oscars around the globe. For one of the men, tonight would be a victory so sweet he knew he would still be able to taste it on his deathbed. For the other, it would be a defeat so catastrophic, he would never recover.

As the ceremony dragged on interminably – *Best Live Action Short; Best Sound Mixing; Did anybody in the universe care?* – both men kept their eyes fixed straight ahead, ignoring the smiles of well-wishers as totally as they ignored the pruriently

intrusive television cameras constantly scanning their features for a reaction.

Disappointment.

Hope.

Humour.

Despair.

The cameras got nothing. Neither of the two men had got to where they were today by giving away their emotions. Certainly not for free.

At last, after almost three long hours of torture, the moment arrived. Martin Scorsese was standing at the podium, a crisp white envelope in his hand. He gave a short, pre-prepared speech. Neither of the men heard a word of it. Behind his diminutive Italian frame, a montage of images flashed across an enormous screen, clips from the year's most critically acclaimed pictures. To the two men, they were nothing but shapes and colours.

I hate you, thought one.

I hope you rot in hell, thought the other.

'And the Academy Award for Best Picture goes to . . .'

CHAPTER ONE

'I'm not asking you, Sabrina, I'm telling you. You *have* to take this part.'

Sabrina Leon looked at her manager with queenly disdain. Ed Steiner was fat, balding and past his prime (if he'd ever had a prime). In cheap grey suit trousers and a white shirt with spreading sweat patches under each arm, he looked more like a used-car salesman than a Hollywood player. He also had an intensely irritating, domineering manner. Sabrina did not 'have' to take the part. She did not 'have' to do anything. *I'm the fucking star here*, she thought defiantly. *I headlined in three* Destroyers *movies. Three! That's* Destroyers, the *most successful action franchise of all time. You work for me, remember?*

Ignoring Ed, Sabrina got to her feet and walked across the room to the French windows. Outside her room, a lush, private garden exploded with colour and scent. Bright orange, spiky ginger flowers fought for space with more traditional roses in white and yellow, and orange and lemon trees groaned with fruit beneath the perfectly blue, cloudless California sky. Then there were the views. The house was built at the top of a steep canyon, so even from the ground

floor they were spectacular, across the rooftops of the exclusive Malibu Colony, home to some of Hollywood's biggest, wealthiest stars, and beyond to the endless, shimmering blue of the Pacific Ocean. If it weren't for the resolutely hospital-like furnishings in all the rooms – white metal beds, uncomfortable, hard-backed chairs – you could almost imagine you were in a junior suite at the Four Seasons, and not locked up like a prisoner at Revivals, the infamous $2,000-a-night rehab of choice for burned-out Young Hollywood.

It had been Ed Steiner who had forced Sabrina Leon to check herself into Revivals. Two weeks ago, Ed had driven round to his client's mansion off Benedict Canyon at eight in the morning, packed an overnight bag while she watched, and frog-marched Sabrina into his shining new Mercedes E-Class convertible.

'This is ridiculous, Ed,' she'd protested. Still in her party clothes from the night before, a black leather Dolce & Gabbana minidress and sky-high Jonathan Kelsey stilettos, with heavy black eye make-up smudged around her eyes, Sabrina looked even more desirable and vixen-like than the tabloid caricatures that were wrecking her career. 'I'm not an addict. There's nothing wrong with me.'

'Grow up, Sabrina,' Ed Steiner snapped. 'This is not about you. It's about your career. Your image. Or at least what's left of it. How many ratzies saw you staggering out of Bardot last night looking like *that*?'

'Looking like what?' Sabrina bristled, her sultry, almond-shaped eyes narrowing into slits, like a cat about to pounce. 'Looking sexy, you mean? I thought looking sexy was part of my job.'

Ed fought back the urge to slap his truculent, twenty-two-year-old client across her spoiled, heartbreakingly sensual face. Sabrina knew full well she had no business being in that club

last night, or any club for that matter. She could be foolish, and reckless, but she wasn't stupid. He started the engine.

'Right now your job is to look contrite,' he said crossly. 'You are deeply sorry for your behaviour, for what you said to Tarik Tyler, you are addressing your problems, you are asking for privacy while you heal during this difficult time, yadda yadda yadda. You know the drill as well as I do, kid, so do us both a favour and quit playing dumb, OK?' He glanced over to the passenger seat. 'What the fuck is that?'

In the outside zip-up pocket of the overnight bag, a bottle top was clearly visible. Pulling it out, Ed Steiner found himself clutching a half-drunk bottle of Jack Daniel's.

Sabrina was unapologetic. 'Helps me sleep.'

'You think this is funny?'

'Oh, c'mon, Ed, give me a break. Rehab's boring. I'm not gonna get through it without a drink.'

'You think you're Marianne Faithfull or something?' To Sabrina's consternation, Ed flung the bottle into the rosemary bushes that lined her driveway. 'You think people are gonna forgive you this bullshit because it's so *rock 'n' roll*? Well, let me tell you something, Sabrina: they won't. Not this time. You are *this close* to being finished in this town.' He held up his thumb and forefinger, waving them inches from Sabrina's face. '*This close.* Now put your fucking seatbelt on.'

Sabrina yawned defiantly, but she buckled up anyway, slipping on a pair of Oliver Peoples aviators to shield her eyes from the sun's early morning glare. Outwardly, she continued to play the rebel – it was all she knew how to do. Inside, however, she felt her stomach flip over, a combination of last night's excessive alcohol consumption on an empty stomach and visceral, gut-wrenching fear.

What if Ed was right?

What if she really could lose it all?

No. I can't. I won't let it happen. If I have to go back to my life before, I'll kill myself.

The headlines of Sabrina Leon's rags-to-riches, *True Hollywood Story* were familiar to everyone in America. Homeless kid from Fresno gets plucked from obscurity by big-shot Hollywood producer Tarik Tyler, becomes a mega-star thanks to her lead role in Tyler's *Destroyers* movies, and slides spectacularly off the rails.

Snore.

No one was more bored by Sabrina's past than Sabrina, as she'd made patently clear in Revivals' group therapy sessions.

'Hi, I'm Amy.' A shy, middle-aged woman in a drab knitted cardigan introduced herself. 'I'm here for alcoholism and crystal meth. I pledge confidentiality and respect to the group.'

'I'm John, I'm here for cocaine. I pledge confidentiality and respect.'

'Hi, I'm Lisa, I'm an alcoholic. I pledge respect to the group.'

It was Sabrina's turn. 'What?' She looked around her accusingly. 'Oh, come on. You all know who I am.'

'Even so,' said the therapist gently, 'we'd like you to introduce yourself to the group. As a *person.*'

'Oh, "as a *person*",' Sabrina mimicked sarcastically. 'As opposed to what? A dog?'

No one laughed.

'Jesus, OK, fine. I'm Sabrina. I'm here because my manager is an a-hole. Good enough?'

Things got worse when patients were asked to talk about their childhoods. Sabrina sighed petulantly. 'Dad was a junkie, Mom was a whore, the children's homes sucked. Next question.'

'I'm sure there was more to it than that,' prodded the therapist.

'Oh, sure. There were the assholes who tried to rape me,' said Sabrina. 'From twelve to fifteen I was on the streets. Poor little me, right? Except that it wasn't poor me, because I got into theatre, and I got out. I got out because I'm talented. Because I'm different. Because I'm better.'

It was the first time Sabrina had expressed any real emotion in session. The therapist seized on it gratefully. 'Better than who?' she asked.

'Better than *you*, lady. And better than the rest of these junkie sad sacks. I can't believe you guys actually signed up for this piece-of-shit programme out of your own free will.'

Everyone knew that Sabrina Leon was not at Revivals by choice. That her manager, Ed Steiner, had staged an intervention as a last-ditch attempt to salvage her career.

Stumbling out of a Hollywood nightclub a few weeks ago, with a visible dusting of white powder on the tip of her perfect nose, Sabrina had lashed out at Tarik Tyler, the producer who'd discovered her and made her a star, calling him a 'slave driver'. Tarik, who was black and whose great-grandmother had been a slave, took offence, as did the rest of the industry, who demanded that Sabrina should apologize. Sabrina refused, and a scandal of Mel Gibson-esque proportions erupted, with outrage spewing like lava across the blogosphere. *Access Hollywood* ran Sabrina's feud with Tyler as their lead story, devoting three-quarters of their nightly entertainment roundup to a vox-pop of 'celebrity reactions' to Sabrina's ingratitude, all of them suitably disgusted and appalled. Even Harry Greene, the famously reclusive producer of the hugely successful *Fraternity* movies, emerged from his self-imposed house arrest to brand Sabrina Leon 'a graceless, racist brat'. In one, single, ill-judged night, the tide of public affection and goodwill that had swept Sabrina Leon to unprecedented box-office success – America loved a good rags-to-riches story

and Sabrina had been the ultimate poor girl made good – turned so suddenly, so violently and completely, it was as if her career had been swept away by a tsunami.

And when the tide finally receded, she'd washed up at Revivals.

'There's no need to be insulting,' chided the therapist.

Isn't there? thought Sabrina

She had to get out of this place.

Two weeks she'd been here now. It felt like two years, what with the early-morning starts, the gross, tasteless health food served at every meal, the boring, self-obsessed patients. All the faux emotion of the therapy sessions, the embarrassing over-sharing of feelings, the fucking hand-holding. It made Sabrina want to throw up. Rehab was such a cliché. And, according to Ed Steiner, she still had six weeks to go.

Now, turning back from the window, Sabrina glowered at her manager defiantly.

'I'm not working for free, Ed,' she announced bluntly. 'Not in a million fucking years.'

Ed Steiner sighed. He was used to spoiled, ungrateful actresses, but Sabrina Leon really took the cake. She ought to be on her knees, kissing his hand in gratitude. Here he was offering her a life-line – not just a role, but the *lead* role in Dorian Rasmirez's much-hyped remake of *Wuthering Heights* – at a time when she couldn't get cast in a fucking Doritos commercial. And she was bitching because Rasmirez wasn't going to pay her. *Why the hell should he? Dorian Rasmirez doesn't need you, you dumb bitch. You need him. Wake up and smell the coffee.*

'Yes you are,' he said robustly. 'I accepted on your behalf this morning.'

'Well you can damn well un-accept!' screamed Sabrina. 'I decide what roles I take, Ed. It's *my* life. *I* have control.'

'Actually, according to the release you signed when you admitted yourself into the eight-week programme here, *I* have control. At least over your career and business decisions.' He handed her a piece of paper. Sabrina glanced at it, balled it up in her fist and threw it to the ground.

'And it's a good job I do,' said Ed, unfazed by this childish show of temper. 'Let's not go through this charade, OK, Sabrina? It's boring, it's bullshit, and you know I'm not buying it. You know as well as I do that you need this part. You *need* it. Right now no other director in Hollywood would piss on you if you were on fire. Sit down.'

Sabrina hesitated. In jeans and a long-sleeved navy-blue tee from Michael Stars, with no make-up on and her long hair pulled back in a ponytail, she looked about a thousand times prettier than she had the last time Ed had seen her. Healthier too, less scrawny, and with the glow restored to her naturally tawny, olive skin. *This place must be doing something right*, he thought. *All she needs is to lose the attitude.*

'Sit,' he repeated.

Sabrina sat.

'Dorian Rasmirez has had his issues,' he went on, 'but he's still a big name, and this is gonna be a big movie.'

Sabrina softened slightly. 'When does it start shooting?'

'May probably. Or June. They're still scouting for locations.'

'Locations?' Sabrina pouted petulantly. A location shoot meant months away from LA, from the clubs and parties and excitement that had become her drug of choice. 'What's wrong with the back lot at Universal?'

'Nothing,' said Ed sarcastically, 'except the fact that it's not a Universal Picture. And it's *Wuthering Heights*.'

Sabrina looked blank. She'd never been big on literature.

'*Wuthering Heights*? One of the greatest classic novels of all

time? Cathy and Heathcliff? Set on wild, windswept moorland?' Ed shook his head despairingly. 'Never mind. The point is, it'll do you good to get out of Los Angeles for a while. Out of the public eye altogether, in fact. We issued your apology statement the day after you came in here, which may have helped a little. We'll probably do another one before you check out. But it's still a shit-storm out there. You need to disappear and you need to work. Come back in a year, healthy and happy and with a hit movie under your belt—'

'A *year*!' Sabrina interrupted. 'Are you out of your mind?'

Being away from the LA party scene was bad enough. But the thought of being out of the media glare for so long – of not having her picture taken or seeing her face in magazines – made Sabrina's heart race with panic. You might as well tell her she couldn't breathe, or eat. Without attention she would wither and die, like a sunflower locked in a cellar.

Ignoring her, Ed Steiner went on.

'I know they're filming some of it in Romania, at Dorian Rasmirez's Schloss. I'm told that's worth seeing,' he added, trying to strike a more cheerful note. 'Oh, and I didn't tell you the best part. It's not a hundred per cent confirmed yet, but it looks like Viorel Hudson's signing on as Heathcliff.'

Sabrina rolled her eyes. *That was the 'best part'? What was the worst part? Were they filming it naked in Siberia?* The one, the only, good thing about Dorian Rasmirez's offer was that it would be a vehicle for re-launching Sabrina back into the box-office big league. If Viorel Hudson was involved, she'd have to fight for top billing, and probably for the dressing-room mirror as well. Rumoured to be unimaginably vain, Viorel Hudson was probably the one man in Hollywood whose sex appeal, and arrogance, rivalled Sabrina's own. They had never met, but Sabrina knew instinctively that she would loathe Viorel Hudson.

Ed Steiner looked at his watch. 'I'd better go. I have a meeting at The Roosevelt in an hour.'

Rub it in, why don't you? thought Sabrina bitterly. *I have a meeting with a bunch of whining alcoholics and a 'speerchal' healer from Topanga Canyon whose last brain cell died in 1972.*

'I'll bike you over the script tomorrow. Give you something to do between sessions. How's it going, by the way? This place helping you at all?'

Serena smiled sweetly. 'Go fuck yourself, Ed.'

That night, staring at the ceiling in her hard, uncomfortable single bed, Sabrina hugged herself and said a silent prayer of thanks.

She'd played it cool with Ed, just as she played it cool with everyone. But she knew what a miracle Rasmirez's offer was. Dorian Rasmirez was one of the most respected directors in Hollywood. He'd have had actresses lining up to play the part of Cathy. Actresses whom the world wasn't unfairly branding a racist. But for some reason, Rasmirez had chosen her.

Fate, she thought. *I was born to succeed. It's my destiny.*

All Sabrina had to do now was to give the performance of her life. And to make sure she out-dazzled the smug, self-satisfied Viorel Hudson. *Still*, she reassured herself, *that shouldn't be too hard.* If all else failed, she could always seduce Hudson. Once Sabrina Leon slept with a man, her power over him was total.

Hollywood might have written her off. But Hollywood was wrong.

Sabrina Leon was on her way back.

CHAPTER TWO

'Oh my God, Vio! Don't stop! Please don't stop. Oh . . . Jesus!'

Viorel Hudson had no intention of stopping. The girl lying spread-eagled beneath him on the soft-pink bed of the Chateau Marmont's exclusive Bungalow 1 was Rose Da Luca, currently the highest-paid model in America and number one on most adult males' 'fantasy fuck' lists. Unusually for such a stunning girl, Rose was also good in bed: coy on the surface, but wildly passionate and adventurous underneath. *In fact, scratch adventurous*, thought Viorel delightedly as he felt Rose's index finger circling his asshole. *She's filthy. I think I might be in love.*

Flipping Rose over onto her knees – much more of that finger and he was going to come on the spot – he entered her from behind, slowing his pace till he could feel her writhe in delicious, agonizing frustration. Looking down at her arched back, and that famous mane of red hair spread over the pillow like a halo, he felt a familiar rush of triumph. It was the same feeling he got whenever he bedded a woman he wanted, or landed a role that he knew countless other actors coveted. For Viorel, the pleasure of any experience

was always enhanced by the sense of competition. Acting was fun. Sex was even better. But *winning* . . . that was the biggest thrill of all.

Nailing Rose Da Luca was actually the final triumph in what had been a uniquely triumphant day. Not only had Viorel signed on the dotted line to play Heathcliff in the remake of *Wuthering Heights*, which meant he would be working with one of his all-time idols, Dorian Rasmirez; but to his surprise (and his agent's frank astonishment) Rasmirez had offered him five and a half million dollars for the privilege. Five million was the magic number in Hollywood, the number that separated successful film actors from bona fide movie stars. It was a rubicon that, once crossed, pretty much guaranteed you a place in the pantheon of the greats. Until your first big box-office flop, of course, at which point you could slide back down the snake into the twos, or sometimes even lower. For Viorel Hudson, however, it was a win–win situation. Despite his high public profile (last year he'd been named Sexiest Man Alive by *People* magazine, an accolade that he claimed to be embarrassed by but secretly revelled in), Viorel had never earned more than a million dollars on a movie. That was because he'd carefully chosen projects with artistic merit over blockbusters with multimillion-dollar budgets. As a result he was revered by many of his peers as an actor with integrity, an actor's actor: low-key, professional, devoted to his craft.

In fact, nothing could have been further from the truth. While it was true that Vio preferred to work with good scripts than poor ones – who didn't? – his apparently eclectic choice of movie roles was actually part of a diligently planned strategy, the purpose of which was to make Viorel Hudson as rich and as famous as possible as fast as possible. By carving out a niche and a name for himself on the indie circuit (he'd

already starred in two Sundance winners and this year's runner-up at Venice), while simultaneously using his publicist to push his image as a mainstream sex symbol, Viorel's intention was always to make a sideways leap into big-league commercial movies, leapfrogging past his rivals faster than he could have hoped to had he taken a string of small parts in forgettable box-office hits. Even in his wildest fantasies, however, Vio had not imagined that he would sign a contract of this size for at least another three or four years. And to get it for a Rasmirez movie! – to be able to combine the pay-cheque he craved with the genuinely good-quality work he enjoyed – that was really the icing on the cake. He'd have accepted the part for a million, maybe even less. Rasmirez must have been dead set on casting him to have offered so much over the odds. Either that or he was secretly gay and hoping to get into Viorel's boxer shorts; which, given that Dorian had a reputation as the most happily married man since Barack Obama, was probably unlikely.

Rose Da Luca's perfect body shuddered as she finally climaxed, her taut muscles clenching and spasming gloriously around Viorel's dick. 'Oh Christ,' he moaned, exploding inside her in what was undoubtedly the best, most satisfying orgasm he'd had all year. *If only my bastard classmates from school could see me now*, he thought joyously, savouring the moment, knowing in that instant that there wasn't one of his childhood tormentors who would not have sold their souls to trade places with him.

Yes, today had made it official.

Viorel Hudson was a winner.

Shortly after midnight, Viorel was back behind the wheel of his Bugatti Veyron, driving west on Sunset Boulevard, when his mother called.

'Darling. You rang.'

Martha Hudson's clipped tones instantly made him feel tense. Incredible how in three short words, England's most celebrated adoptive mother, MP for Tiverton and a saint in the eyes of much of the British public, could convey so much disappointment. *Why the hell did I call her?* thought Viorel angrily. He was angry because he already knew the answer. He'd called because deep down he still wanted Martha's approval. And he wasn't going to get it.

He tried to keep his tone casual. 'Yes. I thought you and Johnny might like to know. I scored a huge part today. I'm playing Heathcliff in the new Rasmirez movie.'

Johnny Hudson, Martha's much older husband, was Viorel's legal father, but Viorel had never called him 'Dad', nor had Johnny ever asked him to. The two weren't close.

'Heathcliff?' Martha Hudson MP sounded disapproving. 'You mean somebody's remaking *Wuthering Heights*?'

It was eight in the morning in England now. Viorel pictured the hallway of Martha's Devon rectory – he'd never thought of it as home, just the house he came back to after boarding school: the faded Regency wallpaper, the neatly stacked pile of constituency post on the hall table next to the phone, and thought how far away it all was. Not just geographically, but emotionally. It was another world.

'Yes, Mother,' he said wearily. 'Dorian Rasmirez is remaking it. He's one of the—'

'But why?' Martha interrupted. 'The original was a masterpiece. Let's face it, my love, with the best will in the world, you're hardly going to do a better job than Olivier. Are you?'

And there you had it. Just like that, Viorel's mother had taken his triumph and squeezed all the joy out of it. Just like she always did.

The British public revered Martha Hudson for her heavily publicized fight to rescue Viorel as a baby from a horrific Romanian orphanage. Viorel's earliest memories were of strangers coming up to him and telling him how lucky he was, and what a wonderful mother he had. In reality, however, his childhood had been horribly lonely. Though he didn't want for material comforts, he knew that Martha never really loved him. It wasn't personal. Martha Hudson had never really loved anyone except Martha Hudson. But it left Viorel feeling doubly rejected, not to mention permanently displaced.

His career had driven a further wedge between him and his mother. Martha Hudson had never wanted her son to become an actor. She wanted Viorel to be a doctor. In her fantasy, he would have gone back to Romania, the country of his birth, to help the poor, orphaned children still left there – ideally his return would be documented by photographers from the *Daily Mail*, which would inevitably remind readers of Martha's own selflessness (for adopting him in the first place), and devotion to children's causes everywhere.

But it hadn't worked out that way. Viorel had selfishly decided to pursue fame and fortune instead. Martha could have forgiven him for trying. What galled her was that he had succeeded, to the point where he was now infinitely more famous than she would ever be.

'I'll be better paid than Olivier,' said Viorel. 'They've offered me five million dollars.'

Even Martha Hudson paused at this number. It was a pause-worthy number.

You're impressed, you mean-spirited cow, thought Viorel. *Just admit it.*

But of course, Martha didn't. 'Oh well,' she sniffed,

ungraciously. 'That's all well and good, I suppose. But money isn't everything you know, darling. Now look, I must run. I've got a select committee meeting this afternoon and I'm going to be late for my train.'

It was Terence Dee who had rescued Viorel from England and his mother's stifling ambitions. Martha Hudson had only ever seen her son as a PR tool, an adorable, photogenic prop with which to bolster her image as the caring face of the Tory party. But Terence saw something else in Viorel: talent.

After Eton, Viorel dutifully followed his mother's bidding and went up to Cambridge to read medicine at Peterhouse. But that was where Martha Hudson's fairytale abruptly ended. After joining Footlights, Cambridge's famous dramatic society Viorel was talent-spotted at the end of his first year by a London agent, and immediately cast in a British rom-com, *Bottom's Up*. The movie went straight to video, but Viorel Hudson's smouldering performance as a Casanova con man was good enough to get him noticed by Terence Dee, then the most powerful casting agent in Hollywood. In his mid-fifties, with a shaggy mop of dyed blond hair and a penchant for wearing pastel sweaters draped casually around his shoulders, Terence Dee was as flamboyantly gay as any Vegas drag queen, and it would be fair to say that his early interest in the edible young Englishman was not strictly professional. But clearly, Terence had no hard feelings over Viorel's *lack* of hard feelings, for his own sex in general, and Terence in particular. He swiftly found the boy both a manager and an apartment in LA, on condition that Viorel drop out of university and pursue his acting career full time.

Viorel did not need to be asked twice. After a brief, frosty farewell with his mother over lunch in London (and a longer, warmer one with his girlfriend Lucinda, his co-star on *Bottoms*

Up, and the woman who had finally relieved him of his virginity; despite his astonishing good looks, Viorel was a late bloomer), he boarded a flight to LAX and never looked back.

That was five years, six movies and countless hundreds of women ago, and in all that time Viorel had not returned to England once. Largely because of Martha, but also because he wanted to leave his shy, lonely childhood self behind. US audiences might idolize him for his Britishness: that clipped, Hugh Grant accent that for some unfathomable reason seemed to make American girls swoon, but Vio Hudson considered himself an Angelino through and through. From day one he had adored Los Angeles: the sunshine, the optimism, the gorgeous, liberated, oh-so-available women. Best of all, no one in LA had ever heard of Martha Hudson MP. And, though the US press had inevitably got hold of the story of Viorel's childhood adoption, with the help of a first-class PR team, Vio had at last managed to shake off the image of victimhood that had haunted him all his life. Yes, he was adopted. Yes, his mother was a politician. So what? All that mattered now was that he was a star, a player, a *winner*. Hollywood had offered Viorel Hudson the second reinvention of his short life, and this time, it was on his own terms.

He'd made it. And he had no one to thank for his success but himself.

After hanging up on his mother, Viorel was home in ten minutes. He had left Rose Da Luca in bed at the Chateau (but not before paying the bill in full and ordering breakfast and roses for her the next morning – no need to be a dick about these things). As much as he loved bedding beautiful women – and Rose really had been beautiful, in a class of

her own – Viorel was pathological in his need to wake up alone and, whenever possible, in his own bed. By using hotels for sex, he was able to satisfactorily compartmentalize his life and protect his privacy. His apartment, right on the sand at the end of Navy, a quiet, no-man's-land between Santa Monica and Venice proper, was his sanctuary. Vio unashamedly adored the attention, glitz and glamour of Hollywood, but even he needed to know he could shut the door on the madness at the end of the day. Viorel Hudson the man was outgoing, sociable and charming. But the lonely, angry little boy he had once been still needed a fortress to retreat to.

Hidden from the street by a forbidding grey stone wall, into which was set a pair of prison-like, reinforced-steel security gates, Vio's apartment *was* that fortress. Once inside, however, the feeling of space, light and openness was incredible. In the living room, floor-to-ceiling windows provided a jaw-dropping view of the ocean, shimmering grey-blue beyond the empty, white-sand beach. Give or take the occasional cyclist, no one came by this quiet stretch of coastline. Sipping his coffee on the balcony in the mornings, Vio often forgot he was in a city at all, with nothing but the distant caw of seagulls and soft crashing of waves to break the silence. The apartment wasn't huge by movie-star standards: about two thousand square feet of lateral space. But Viorel had made it feel infinitely bigger with his simple, modern decor, the clean, geometric lines of his furniture and the calming palette of whites and greys that somehow managed to feel warm in winter and cool in summer. Had he not been an actor, he often thought he might have made a good designer, or perhaps even an architect. Every time he walked through his front door he felt a warm sense of pride, like a parent coming home to

a beloved child. It was the first and only place he had ever felt completely at home, and he loved it.

Throwing his keys on the kitchen countertop, he kicked off his shoes and wandered back into the master bedroom. Dropping the rest of his clothes in a heap on the floor – Cecilia, his housekeeper, would clean up in the morning – he skipped the bathroom and crawled straight into the delicious comfort of his Frette sheets. His limbs throbbed with exhaustion, Rose had really put him through his paces, but he was too preoccupied to sleep.

Five and a half million *dollars.*

For five months' work.

God bless Dorian Rasmirez!

Viorel had yet to meet the great director in person. Today's deal had been entirely brokered through his agent. He wondered how soon he would be asked to come to a read-through, and when the locations would be finalized. Already, a bizarre aura of secrecy was growing up around the movie, with Rasmirez drip-feeding Vio's agent information on a need-to-know-only basis. Then again, every director had their little quirks. And some things, presumably, could be taken as read. Because it was *Wuthering Heights*, an English classic, most of the film would have to be shot in England. In all other respects, getting the role of Heathcliff was a dream come true, but this was a homecoming that Viorel was not looking forward to. Worse still, according to his agent there were rumours swirling around that a lot of the interior scenes were to be shot at Rasmirez's ancestral family castle in, of all places, Romania. It was an ironic twist of fate that both Viorel and his director should have been born in the same, distant, impoverished country. Although clearly, Rasmirez's family must have come from the opposite end of the social scale to Viorel's. *My ancestors probably polished*

his ancestors' silverware, thought Viorel wryly. If there was one country on earth that he felt less enthusiasm for than England, it was bloody Romania. He hoped the rumours were untrue.

What was true, confirmed a couple of days ago, was that Sabrina Leon had been definitively cast as Cathy Earnshaw, his leading lady. This also bothered Viorel. Sabrina might be the hottest thing on legs (or, in her case, on back) in Hollywood, but she was also a complete liability, the biggest Tinseltown train-wreck since Lindsay Lohan. Viorel couldn't imagine what had possessed a seasoned pro like Rasmirez to hire her, especially with the flames from her most recent scandal still raging through the industry like a forest fire.

He must have got her on the cheap. Perhaps that's how he can afford to flash so much cash at me.

He could have done without England, Romania *and* Sabrina Leon. But for five and a half million bucks, they were three crosses that Viorel Hudson was willing to bear.

Fuck you, Martha.

Switching off the light, he finally drifted into sleep, dreaming of England, Heathcliff and Rose Da Luca's deliciously soft thighs.