

CHAPTER ONE

The white-capped crests whipped against Paul's tensed-up muscles, his surfboard long forgotten. These waves could easily crush even the strongest of swimmers, and, at this ungodly hour of the morning, drowning would always precede a rescue of any kind. He said a silent prayer that today would be the exception, or else the lone figure thrashing around in the water would be transformed into shark bait.

He hurled himself through the pounding surf. Sharp breaths escaped his lips as he battled each crushing wave, inching closer to the listless blonde. God, her face was pale, almost deathly so. The wave launched them upward, and he caught her around the waist, heart thumping wildly at the sight of her sickly bluish lips. There was no time to waste. If he didn't get her out of that water fast... No, there was no other option. He had to save her. Christ, was she even breathing? Her skin was so cold. No wet suit? Was she seriously surfing in some glittery barely-there bikini? And what the hell was she doing out there by herself anyway? Goddamn novices always thought a few lessons turned them into pros.

Clutching the lifeless body with one arm, he propelled them through the dark, ominous swells with the other. His biceps burned with each stroke. The force of the surf constricted his chest, challenging his lungs to struggle for oxygen. Sea spray stung his eyes but didn't blind him enough to miss the big set of breakers roaring to life in front of them. Fuck. Not good. A cluster of jagged rocks jutted from a nearby cove. Terrific, maybe a great white might appear in that moment, too. Really make it a party.

Seconds felt like hours. Their very small window was rapidly closing. He dove forward, consumed by the force rocketing them toward certain annihilation. The swirling curl assaulted their bodies, driving them straight into the rocks. Drawing in what he feared might be his final breath, he flipped onto his back, squeezed his eyes

shut, and kicked with all his strength. God must have been smiling down on them because, seconds later, his feet hit the shore.

Staggering out of the water, his legs finally gave out. He collapsed onto the sand, arms wrapped around her still body. His chest heaved with ragged breaths. Please, let her be alive. He cupped her face with trembling hands, ready to start mouth-to-mouth when a pair of vibrant blue eyes fluttered open. Words caught in his throat as their gazes locked. Those eyes — *holy shit* — he'd never seen anything like them. Color had returned to her now-flushed face, and forcing his gaze away was near impossible. Within seconds, she flew into a coughing fit, spluttering water while gasping for air.

"Take it easy, you're okay." He eased her quivering body onto its side and stroked the side of her face. "How's your head?"

A loud groan escaped her full lips as she pressed a hand to the back of her head. "What the hell?"

Paul Emerson wasn't the type to be dumbstruck by a woman, but she was stunning... captivating, even after a brush with death. Bronze skin, so smooth and soft, a perfect contrast to her blond hair and those crystal blue eyes, glinting in the early morning sunlight. Pure perfection.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why are you on top of me?"

"Excuse me?" His ears must still be clogged from all the water. No way had she just uttered those words. Didn't she realize she'd have been shark bait if he hadn't pulled her out of harm's way?

She looked down and let out a yelp when she saw her exposed breasts. "I don't appreciate your sleazy hands all over me. Get off!"

"Are you fucking crazy? I just rescued you from what was pretty much guaranteed to have been an excruciatingly painful death, and you can't even manage a simple thank you?" His shoulders tensed. "Maybe I should be thanking *you* for allowing me to risk my own neck, Your Highness."

“You’re still on top of me.”

He leaped up as she wriggled around on the sand in search of her missing bikini top. Hot as hell, but obviously a fucking nutcase. Any stirrings generated by her nearness had been thoroughly extinguished. With one swift motion, he scooped up the metallic top lying nearby and flung it into the pounding surf. “Why don’t you press your luck and go after it if you’re so desperate to cover up? I can definitely see why. They’re not too impressive.” He stalked away, fists clenched at his sides, not bothering to wait for a reply.

“What a fucking bitch,” he muttered. His heels dug into the ground, leaving deep impressions in the wet sand. He refused to look back.

Avery hugged her arms around her bare chest, teeth chattering as the ocean breeze whipped against her damp skin. How freaking ironic that Paul Emerson, of all people, had saved her from certain death. Three years ago, she’d thought he was the one person powerful enough to catapult her company toward greatness. What started as a fun project had morphed into what she’d hoped would become a viable business. And, despite his reputation for being a sleazy manwhore with a rather large chip on his shoulder, Paul Emerson was the guy who could get her company the credibility and recognition it so desperately needed. But then, he flat-out rejected her pitch, and, dammit, it stung. *An utter waste of resources.* That was the final assessment. Not that she’d heard it from him, but that cocky lackey of his, all too happy to relay the message.

Her sister Tara had one wish before she died — to be a successful performer. That melodious voice, so hauntingly beautiful, it needed to be heard, to be revered. Useless guilt coupled with Paul’s rejection fueled Avery’s determination, and she’d

worked tirelessly to grant Tara that final wish before the lymphoma ravaged her already-weakened body and claimed her young life.

Seeing him in the flesh tore open those old wounds, exposing the misery she'd been so intent to bury and the angst over things she'd never be able to change. Paul Emerson was just a harsh reminder of everything she'd lost. All rational thoughts dissipated into the crisp sea air. The fact that he'd saved her life didn't even register. He hadn't believed in her business, hadn't trusted in its ability to make peoples' dreams come true or to give them hope for the future. That harsh dismissal was soul-crushing.

A nagging little voice reminded her that, despite his decision, Tara had still gotten her wish. Other investors had embraced her concept and had thrown money at it, propelling the company to the top of the food chain where it was known as the premier virtual stage for aspiring singers and musicians. But awakening to that ice-blue gaze had sent up the stockade walls and made her lose all sensibilities. Maybe instead of carrying this ridiculous grudge, she should have taken the high road and thanked him for way more than just his heroics in the surf. Because of him, her singular focus had become a success. It could never bring back her beloved sister, but it had been enough to make Tara happy during those final days. That was worth more to Avery than anything else.

Thankfully, her beach bag had escaped Paul's attention. Who knew where he might have flung it if he'd seen it? She wrapped a fluffy, pink towel around her, shivering against the soft terrycloth. Regrettably, it was more from the memory of his body pressed on top of hers than the chill in the air. *Argh! You're officially not allowed to waste another second thinking about that jackass!*

Sharks and rocks deterred a lot of surfers from this beach, making it one of the more secluded in the San Francisco Bay area. Weekday mornings were pretty much desolate, and the alone time helped clear her extremely overpopulated mind before the insanity of her daily life commenced. Unfortunately, what she loved most about Pietro

Point was also what might have gotten her killed if Paul Emerson hadn't shown up when he had. Shark bait was probably an accurate assessment. Maybe it was time to start surfing somewhere with more people, since it was guaranteed he'd leave her for dead next time.

She trotted to her blacked-out Range Rover and packed up her surfing equipment before sliding into the cool, leather bucket seat. *It's six-thirty, just enough time to—*

Her thought was interrupted by the blaring iPhone. Who the heck could be calling at this hour? Even the sun hadn't fully embraced the day. "Avery Hunter."

"Hey, it's Carly. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

Jesus, did the woman ever sleep? There was no way the rest of the publishing house was humming at such an ungodly hour. "Not at all. What's up?"

"I need you to come in to the office to discuss some press inquiries."

Avery furrowed her brow. "What kind of inquiries? I can't risk my cover being blown."

"I think you may want to reconsider some of the offers. We can try to find an angle where you don't have to appear on screen."

"Can't we just do email interviews? Wouldn't that be the safest way to—"

"Your book is generating a lot of buzz right now. We need to capitalize on it. I understand your concerns, but it's in your best interest to engage with your very captive audience."

Her therapist had said writing would help her deal with the unresolved emotions and inner conflict she'd been battling, so she'd written a book under a pen name — a cathartic experience, to say the very least. Several embellishments, a boatload of edits, even more tears. Her life, or rather, T.A. Powell's life, was exposed for the world to see... and judge. Anonymity was critical. But how much could Carly really be

trusted, especially when she had such a huge financial stake in the success of this novel?

“Do you have a plan?”

“Of course. I’ve been working with the public relations team on some different options. What do you think? Are you game, Avery?”

She gnawed at her thumbnail, chipping the purple nail polish. People would give up a hell of a lot to be in her position. But nerves trumped any modicum of excitement. If word ever got out about her true identity... Christ, the last thing she’d want was to be perceived as some bitter antagonist. Everything could crumble around her like a house of sand. She’d worked too hard to build her business, and would do nothing to jeopardize its future. Treading with caution was an absolute must. “Okay, let’s do this.”

