

Chapter One

Holly McCartney stepped out of baggage claim at LAX International Airport and came face-to-face with a sea of people, cameras and flashing lights. It took all of five seconds to realize the media circus was here for her.

Every nerve ending in her body stood on edge. As Hollywood's darling, this was the existence her sister had chosen. Daisy loved the limelight and had built a life on being the center of attention for as long as Holly could remember.

Holly couldn't think of anything worse.

Sucking in as much oxygen as she could inhale in one deep breath, she tightened her grip on her laptop bag and suitcase. Then, she lifted her chin high, pushed her shoulders back and prepared to walk through the crowd like she had no inkling that all the frenzied attention was focused on her.

And let's face it, she could be wrong. This was Los Angeles. Actors, rock stars, agents, producers, any number of starlets could have been on the plane and she, having no interest in such things whatsoever, would have been completely oblivious.

She flexed her toes in her comfortable travelling shoes and put her best foot forward. Immediately the crowd "ahhed," more lights flashed in her face and the people behind the lenses pushed even closer to the bar-

ricade. She gulped. Froze. Felt like the most popular exhibit in the zoo—the one everyone wanted to get their hands on.

Someone shoved a tiny microphone in her face. “How did you feel about your sister’s death?”

“Is it true you hadn’t spoken to her in three years?” Another face, another identical microphone. These people were good. They’d dug deep for their facts, but how could they justify making a living in such a manner?

Holly blinked as another camera flash almost blinded her.

What was it they said in the movies? No comment?

“Which designer created your dress for the awards night?”

She almost laughed at that question. She’d like to see their faces when she told them she hadn’t given a thought to what she’d be wearing should Daisy win a posthumous Academy Award for Best Actress. But hysterical laughter made way for sheer panic.

Perhaps stupidly, she hadn’t anticipated any of this. When her parents had convinced her to come, she hadn’t imagined for one second anyone would be interested in the plain, boring younger sister of Daisy McCartney. Not when Hollywood was filled with be vies of near-clones of Daisy. Skinny, blond, beautiful, bubbly glamazons.

Everything Holly was most definitely not.

“Perhaps she’s mute,” yelled a voice from the hoards. Cackles of laughter followed, making her feel about the size of an ant.

She had to say something but right now—after a fifteen-hour plane flight from Sydney during which she’d sat next to a know-it-all neurologist who spoke nonstop

about his successes—she was struggling to recall any of the questions. While Holly racked her brain for something to say, anything to get this unexpected and unwanted welcome off her back, a commotion erupted in front of her.

She peered through the tightly-knit wall of people to see a tall, dark, curly-haired head making waves in the crowd. A moment later the man had pushed through the photographers and come to a stop directly in her line of vision. Her heart skipped a beat. She reminded her lungs to pump. And tried damn hard not to stare. She'd never been big on movie stars—not the type of teen to wallpaper her bedroom in celebrity posters—but this man had to be someone famous. The kind of famous who inspired heartthrob status.

The dark curly hair she'd noticed above the masses was only the cherry on the top of the ice-cream sundae. For a second, Holly forgot the sticky situation she was in and simply took time to gawk. She'd been so focused on getting her Ph.D these last couple of years that she hadn't found time to go to the movies or watch TV, but if this man did have a role on the big screen, she envisioned he played a very sexy bad boy. Stretched over taut thigh muscles, his fitted, dark jeans left little to the imagination. He wore a tight white tee and a well-loved, black, leather jacket. Designer sunglasses rested atop his head, adding to his air of indifference.

The way he scanned the crowd as if he had a hundred other and better places to be intrigued her. When his gaze finally rested on her, her defenses crumbled and she found herself staring back.

“Sorry I'm late, sweetheart.” His words broke her reverie. In one graceful move, he leaped over the barri-

cade, and swept her suitcase from her fingers. He tucked the case under his arm like it was an empty shoebox. Then he moved in even closer and kissed her on the cheek.

Her skin tingled under the imprint of his lips and heat rushed to her face. Her ears still recovering from his gruff but devilishly sexy voice, she stared up into two of the most divine, almost-black eyes and fought the urge to lift her fingers to her cheek. To touch the spot his lips had.

Had she heard him right? She didn't know this man. As far as Holly could recall she knew absolutely nobody in America and she was frickin' certain she'd remember this face.

Seemingly a mind reader as well as a man-God, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her in a light touch that sent a quiver through her veins. He whispered into her ear, "I'm a friend of your sister's. Follow my cues and I'll get you out of this jungle."

"You're rescuing me?"

He leaned back, breaking their contact. "I guess you could call it that."

Although the idea appealed for a second, reality slapped her hard. She didn't need a man to save her, not anymore. And, any real friend of her sister's would probably not come within a ten kilometer radius of her. Besides, how had he known she was arriving today at this precise moment in time?

She shifted a bit, away from him. How had any of them known? For all she knew he could be a particularly crafty member of the press trying to lull her into a false sense of security before he swooped.

She eyed him again, trying to see past those dark, hot

eyes. He didn't seem like a crazy-psycho. Then again her first impressions radar had malfunctioned years ago.

"You knew Daisy?"

"Yes." Contempt filled his features, erasing the friendly ease of a moment ago. And in that second she understood.

Daisy had fed him poison.

"Then why do you want to rescue me?"

"I wouldn't leave a dog to these sharks."

When she didn't reply to his harsh words, he grabbed her hand—traitorous hormones jolted at his touch—and said, "Come on."

I don't think so. The words were perched on the tip of her tongue ready to jump, but she looked past him and saw the hungry eyes of the cameramen waiting to devour her. Did she really have any other choice? If she stepped past the barricade on her own, she wouldn't have the faintest clue how to handle what confronted her. And, due to her less than sugar-sweet relationship with Daisy, she wouldn't know how to answer the questions without putting at least one of them in a bad light.

Despite her opinion of her late sister, and for her parents' sakes, she refused to speak ill of the dead.

He tightened his grasp and looked questioningly into her eyes.

His opinion of her didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was obviously accustomed to this kind of media attention and would therefore have the know-how to get her out unscathed. It wasn't like she was marrying the guy—all she needed to do was stay close while he escorted her out of the airport to find a shuttle bus. She'd thank him politely and hopefully never see him again.

“Lead the way,” she said.

Without another word, her reluctant knight in black leather wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her tight enough against him that she could feel muscles rippling beneath his tee but loose enough that they could still walk. He angled one impossibly broad shoulder toward the crowd and began to push through.

As they walked, Holly tried not to look in the direct line of any camera. Thankfully there were so many questions being hurled in her direction that she couldn't be expected to hear any one in particular. She refused to look back but got the distinct impression the media frenzy wasn't subsiding much. If anything she had the feeling more people were following them.

Her heart rate kicked up a notch as she started to panic. What would she do when she parted ways with her rescuer and had to handle any aggressive cameramen on her own? Although she'd planned on doing this trip on a shoe-string budget, a taxi suddenly seemed a much safer option than a shuttle bus.

“Is there usually much of a wait for taxis?” she asked as they filed past a row of fast food joints. She silently prayed LAX would be the exception to the other airports she'd traveled through.

“I wouldn't know.” His voice had powers to melt her bones but his dismissive attitude irked her.

“Sorry I asked,” she muttered under her breath.

“You don't need to worry about cabs,” he said dryly. “We're taking my car.”

Until that moment, her sights had been so focused on the paparazzi that she'd paid little attention to her surroundings. Now she looked up to see a sign that read Valet Parking.

“Oh. No.” Forgetting he still had a firm grasp on her hand she froze and yanked him to a standstill. “I couldn’t possibly put you out.”

He turned his head, sighed and raised a brow. “I’m already here. And I’m heading back that way anyhow.”

She pursed her lips—her brain engaging in a full-on brawl with her nerves.

He tapped his boot-clad foot against the floor. “Saying that, I don’t have all day.”

She barely heard his words over the shouts of the media at their heels.

Despite being intoxicatingly good-looking, this friend of Daisy’s really was one of the most arrogant, rudest men Holly had ever had the displeasure of meeting. But it was a choice between him and the unscrupulous vultures behind her.

And she didn’t have a death wish.

She took a deep breath, swallowed her pride and let a reluctant smile tug her lips. “Thanks. A ride would be lovely.”

* * *

Nate Devlin bit down on the retort that there was nothing lovely about this situation and instead strode through the gates to valet parking. He greeted the attendant, handed over his ticket and tried not to gaze sideways at Daisy’s surprisingly attractive sister. In direct opposition to Daisy’s stick-thin frame, Holly had the kind of curves most men found striking. On first impressions, she wasn’t at all how he’d imagined her based on Daisy’s comments and even the photo, which

when he thought about it must have been taken when Holly was in her late teens.

He'd been hemming and hawing all morning about whether or not to come and finally caved to Daisy's memory. She'd wanted more than anything to see her sister again. The least he could do was take a look. But he certainly hadn't anticipated talking to the woman. Ten minutes max—that's how long he'd guessed it would take to look from a distance and watch Daisy's wicked sister leech onto the fame that rightly should have been Daisy's.

Holly McCartney stood there clasping her bag as if she feared for her life, the truth masked behind lilac eyes. She had to have some kind of mammoth nerve to contemplate getting up at the Oscars in front of hundreds of cameras that would beam her performance to the world. Especially when she'd been giving Daisy the cold shoulder for the last few years. She'd refused to visit, wouldn't even talk or email when Daisy was alive, but the moment she was dead and up for a world renowned award...sure, Ms. McCartney could forget her bones-to-pick then and bask in the associated glory.

He'd only intended to look. Didn't know what good it would do seeing the woman he'd already decided had no scruples whatsoever—it wasn't as if he had powers to stop her self-centered behavior—but something had made him come. He missed Daisy and maybe on some subconscious level he'd hoped seeing her sister would be like seeing her. As if.

A book and a car had more similarities.

Yet, as he'd watched from the distant sidelines, his gut had clenched and his faith in his instinct wavered.

She didn't seem at all like a woman on the hunt for fame.

Dressed in demure jeans and a plain white, slightly-oversized shirt, Holly McCartney, with her lush titian hair tied back in a ponytail, was far more beautiful than the sophisticated women of L.A. Her head had darted from side to side like some frightened animal as she'd taken in the mob of cameras. He recognized that look and appreciated that people who were scared of the cameras generally weren't after celebrity status. True fame-seekers played to the camera, flashing coy smiles and, if they were extra daring, a slash of bare skin.

Not Holly. And that puzzled him.

His beloved Dodge Viper pulled to the curb in front of them. The valet driver got out and opened the trunk. Another attendant stepped forward to assist them with Holly's luggage while the driver opened the passenger door and aided her into the car. The man's hand skimmed the small of her back. The touch was miniscule, barely noticeable but something wild and crazy tugged Nate's muscles tight and he pushed away the thought he wouldn't mind touching her either.

He got into the driver's seat and shoved his seatbelt in with perhaps a little too much muscle.

"Where are you staying?" he asked, leaning forward, ready to punch her hotel into his GPS.

He blinked twice when she mentioned a cheap hostel.

"What?" Defensiveness tinged her voice. "Is it crawling with rats or something?"

"No idea. I expected you to be staying somewhere more up market."

She folded her arms across perky breasts. "Not everyone's made of money, you know."

“I know.” She’d never guess how much he knew. He’d thought Daisy had split her fortune between Holly and her parents but perhaps the estate hadn’t been settled yet.

He didn’t say anything more until they’d vacated the underground parking lot and hit the road. Neither did Holly. She stared ahead, her face a vision of awe as she took in the clear blue skies and abundance of palm trees. Things he took for granted.

“Do you have any plans for while you’re here?” he asked eventually.

She turned to look at him and shrugged. “I’d hoped to see the usual tourist sites and indulge in a bit of window shopping, but after that welcome at the airport I’m a little nervous about getting around.”

He frowned, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. “What exactly did you expect?”

“I expected to walk out into a busy arrivals hall, find the exit and then catch a shuttle to my hostel.”

He snorted. “Daisy said you were naive.” But he’d pay to remember she was also cold and calculating.

“Did she?” Holly could well imagine what other lies her drama queen sister had fed him. It wasn’t like they’d actually been a major part of each other’s lives since Daisy had moved to Tinseltown at twenty-one. She shouldn’t care, but something about this man—she didn’t even know his name—made her want to stand up for herself. Still, he’d made it pretty clear he and Daisy had been close. She didn’t think he’d take it kindly if she launched into her side of their sordid sibling rivalry.

Not wanting him to actually answer her question, she rushed in with another. “I guess you know who I am. What’s your name?” She hoped he’d tell her a lot

more, like why he'd decided to meet her at the airport in the first place.

But she was disappointed.

"Nate. Nate Devlin." Short, sharp and to the point—she got the impression he was like that in action as well as name. For some bizarre reason it fascinated her.

"Well, pleased to meet you, Nate. I won't offer you my hand since you're driving." As soon as the words were out she cursed their futility, but this situation was so unnerving, she wanted to fill the uncomfortable silence with meaningless small talk. Anything to pass the time until she could escape into her hostel, find a bed and crash for a couple of hours.

She made the mistake of looking at him again and caught the bemused rise of his eyebrows. Or was it disdain? She wished he'd say something. Anything.

But perhaps hoping he'd return the "pleasure" was a bit much.

Although never in the popular crowd at school and not a person who had a mammoth circle of friends, Holly mostly got on well with people and she'd certainly never come across someone who had disliked her on sight the way Nate seemed to. It wasn't fair that, even from the grave, Daisy was orchestrating the path of her life.

She turned back to the window and tried to take in the sights as they flashed by. She hadn't imagined Los Angeles, Hollywood to be more specific, would have much she'd find appealing. But every person, every building, every palm tree all added up to offer this fabulous, carefree existence that made it hard not to smile. It seemed so alive, so fresh.

And then there was Nate. Guarded and grumpy but

still as toned, tanned and gorgeous as the rest of them. More so.

She refused to give in to the urge to look at him again but her body couldn't be fooled. His mere presence filled the car, taunting her nose to the extreme as she tried not to inhale his unique male scent. She sniffed, failing dismally, and recognized something citrus, something woody and something else she couldn't quite decipher.

Get a grip, Holly. Since when have you had nothing better to do than agonize over men's cologne? She'd barely even looked at a man in three years.

"Not long now."

At the sound of his voice, she almost jumped out of her skin. Recovering, she asked, "To the hostel?"

"No, to the moon."

How could one man be so dangerously sexy and so irritatingly rude at the same time? Well, she'd had enough biting her tongue for propriety's sake. "You do know sarcasm is the lowest form of wit?"

"Really? And you learn something new every day."

Before Holly could concoct a witty reply to that cliché, he turned a corner and she forgot about their inane conversation, instead gulping hard as he pulled up in front of what had to be her accommodation.

She could barely make out the front of the hostel, which was crowded with yet another mob of hyped-up cameramen, every one of whom stood to attention the moment they saw her in Nate's car. He swore.

Her heart sky-dived into her stomach. Had they put some kind of tracking device on her? Or was that over-effusive travel agent who'd booked her flights and accommodation as dodgy as she'd suspected. She guessed

the latter but it still perplexed her that anyone even cared.

Nate, true to form, didn't feel the need for further conversation. She hadn't expected him to leap out of the car and rush to open her door but...

Oh, who was she kidding? She couldn't think straight when her pulse was beating so damn fast she could practically hear it.

Neither her Bachelor degree or her Masters in Cultural Anthropology or her years of tutoring younger university students had schooled her for being stalked by paparazzi. She allowed herself the luxury of one deep breath, undid her seatbelt and then forced her hand onto the door handle. Somehow she managed to speak. "Thank you, Nate Devlin, for looking out for me."

"Don't be ridiculous." The car doors clicked locked.

She looked into his eyes—her stupid, juvenile heart flipping over at their irresistible intensity. She couldn't speak.

"How long are you here?"

"Six days," she managed. If only her parents weren't relying on her to make this connection to Daisy, perhaps she could forget the Awards and flee back to Australia. If only...

"You can't stay here with the cameras camped out." Closing his eyes for a split second, Nate hissed air out through his teeth, ran a hand up through his thick dark curls and said, "You can stay with me."