

# Seduced and Betrayed

## Excerpt - Chapter 1

Zeke Blackstone followed the slender, mini-skirted receptionist down the wide, plushly carpeted hallway with all the reluctance of a truant schoolboy on his way to the principal's office.

He barely noticed the tastefully extravagant bouquets of fresh flowers that bloomed atop slender marble columns placed at intervals along the hallway. Or the faint scent of orange blossoms and money that perfumed the air. Or the muted, lilting sounds of the romantic Bach concerto being piped in through hidden speakers. Or that many of the famous faces in the soft-focus wedding photographs hanging on the pale cream, silk-covered walls were of people he knew and worked with. He didn't even notice the deliberately swaying hips of the receptionist.

His gaze was riveted on the ornately carved door at the end of the hall, his entire attention focused on what—*who*—was waiting for him on the other side. The expression in his dark eyes was identical to one a man might wear as he approached the judge's bench for sentencing—after having already been tried and found guilty of all the charges against him.

"You're the last one to arrive, Mr. Blackstone," the receptionist said, making sure she gave him her best side as she turned her head to smile over her shoulder. "But I doubt you've missed much."

"Missed much?" Zeke muttered, his eyes still on the door.

"Of the planning. Mr. Wescott and Ms. Fine always start the first meeting off with coffee and a little casual chitchat. To put everyone at ease, you know." She flashed him another twinkling smile, in case he'd missed the first one. "Here we are," she said brightly, reaching out to put her hand on the ornate gilt door handle.

Zeke reached out and grasped her forearm, halting her in mid-motion. "Who's everyone?" he asked, stalling for time. He knew very well who "everyone" was. That was the problem.

The receptionist frowned prettily, managing to look puzzled without a single line creasing her smooth forehead. "Excuse me?"

Zeke nodded at the door. "In there. Who's everyone?"

"Oh." The frown disappeared, replaced by a look of eager helpfulness. "The bride and groom. The bride's mother. The maid of honor. And Mr. Wescott and Ms. Fine, of course." She

smiled again, full face this time and giving it all she had. "Mr. Wescott asked me to show you in the minute you arrived."

"I'll show myself in," Zeke said, and let go of her arm to reach for the door handle himself. "Thanks," he added, giving her an absent nod of dismissal. "You've been very helpful."

Miffed at being so thoroughly ignored by such an infamous and internationally acclaimed lady's man, the receptionist turned on her heel and sashayed back down the hall to her desk. It was a stellar performance but a wasted one. Her audience of one was hardly paying attention.

Zeke stood in front of the door, his hand on the knob, paralyzed with what he could only describe to himself as an acute case of stage fright. Which was ridiculous, because he'd never suffered from stage fright in his life. He took a deep, steadying breath and reached up to loosen his too tight tie, only to realize that, as usual, he wasn't wearing one. He ran his hand through his hair instead, brushing the unruly waves back off his forehead, then took another deep breath, told himself to quit acting like an idiot, and pushed open the door. It got away from him, banging back against the gilt doorstop from the unintentional force of his inward thrust.

Conversation stopped abruptly at his noisy, unceremonious entrance. Six heads turned toward him. Six pairs of eyes widened in recognition and surprise.

"Sorry," Zeke mumbled sheepishly, careful not to look into any one pair of eyes. Or into one pair of eyes in particular.

For a second or two more the six people around the graceful, cabriole-legged conference table—delicate Limoges coffee cups or frosted petits fours halfway to their mouths—remained frozen in place, Zeke stood stock-still in the doorway, like an actor who'd forgotten his lines. The air crackled with a strange tension, ripe with anticipation, and everyone seemed to be holding his or her breath. And then a young woman put her coffee cup down and jumped up from her seat, breaking the strained silence.

"Oh, Dad. Dad, you're here! Finally." Cameron Blackstone flew across the room with her characteristic enthusiasm and threw herself into her father's arms, confident that she would be caught. "I was afraid you'd chickened out at the last minute and weren't coming," she said and hugged him. Hard.

Zeke Blackstone hugged her back, holding her close and pressing a kiss on the top of her head. "My plane was late. And the traffic was a mess." He lifted one broad Armani clad shoulder in an apologetic shrug. "I always forget how impossible L. A. traffic is, even when there's no

earthquake damage to contend with," he said, gazing down into eyes nearly as dark as his own. He ran his hand lightly over her hair, noting, as always, that it was the same pale golden blond as her mother's. "I'm really sorry, honey. I hope it didn't cause any problems."

"No harm done," Cameron said, instantly forgiving him. "You're here now. That's all that matters." She tucked her arm into the crook of his, turning him toward the conference table.

"Come and meet Michael," she said, her voice warm with love and pride as she drew her father across the room to meet her fiancé.

The young man in question was already on his feet. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, sir," he said and offered his hand. "Cami talks about you all the time." He flashed an easy grin, showing a glimpse of white, even teeth. "According to her, you practically hung the moon."

"Really?" Zeke cast a teasing sideways look at his daughter as he took the young man's hand. *Cami?* His daughter hadn't allowed anyone to call her by her childhood nickname since...well, since she was a child. "All I've heard for the last two months is how wonderful you are. Every time I've talked to her lately, it's been 'Michael this' and 'Michael that.' I've been expecting to meet a cross between Brad Pitt, Albert Einstein, and the archangel Gabriel."

"Oh, Dad," Cameron said, blushing slightly as she swatted her father on the arm. "I never said anything like that."

But Zeke ignored his daughter for the moment, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied the young man who intended to marry his precious only child. He decided he liked what he saw. Michael Everett had calm, intelligent blue eyes, a confident, easygoing manner, and a firm handshake. But how did a father *really* know if a suitor was good enough to be entrusted with his daughter's happiness and well-being?

"If you ever hurt her," Zeke said, very softly, "I'll come after you with a loaded gun and a skinning knife. And you'll be begging me to use the first before I've finished with the second."

"Dad! For heaven's sake," Cameron protested. "What an awful thing to say. Michael doesn't know what a big tease you are," she chided gently. "He might take you seriously."

Zeke didn't shift his gaze from that of his prospective son-in-law. "Michael had better take me seriously."

"I do, sir. Very seriously." Michael's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed but his gaze remained steady. "And you don't have to worry, sir. I promise I'll take care of her," he vowed.

"Always."

Zeke nodded, satisfied. "See that you do," he said, and released the young man's hand.

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Cameron rolled her eyes. "Anyone would think I was some poor defenseless halfwit about to be handed over to Bluebeard or something."

"Your father just wants to be sure I'll take proper care of you," Michael said.

"Completely ignoring the fact that I can take care of myself," Cameron retorted, her tone hovering somewhere between amusement and feminine indignation. "And have been for a while now."

"Now, honey," Zeke drawled, his tone deliberately—and provocatively—placating. "Don't go getting all upset. Neither one of us meant to imply that you couldn't take care of yourself." He cocked an eyebrow at his future son-in-law. "Did we, Michael?" he prompted.

"No, sir," Michael agreed, instantly following his soon-to-be father-in-law's lead. "That wasn't the implication at all. I would never suggest that Cami couldn't take care of herself." He sighed, the epitome of the long-suffering, put-upon male. "I know better than to do anything like that."

Zeke smiled his approval at Michael's quick uptake, flashing the lazy good-natured grin that made men think they might like to share a beer with him—and women think of sharing something more intimate. "See there?" he said to his daughter. "Michael didn't mean to insult your feminist principles." His dark eyes twinkled wickedly. "And neither did—"

"You remember Susan, don't you, Dad?" Cameron said pointedly, discreetly tugging on her father's arm to move him along. "She's going to be my maid of honor, so I wanted her to be in on the planning right from the first." Cameron flashed a quick smile at her best friend. "I promised her I wouldn't even consider a bridesmaid dress she didn't absolutely love, too."

"Yes, of course, I remember Susan. Vividly," Zeke said, disengaging his arm from his daughter's as he leaned down to kiss the young woman's cheek. "Playing chaperon while the two of you ran amok up and down the Cote d'Azur last summer is the reason for all these gray hairs." He ran a hand through the silver-flecked hair at his temple. "It put *'Til Death Do Us Part* seriously over budget, too, if I remember rightly."

"That was three summers ago, Dad," Cameron corrected him.

"Three? Are you sure?"

"Between my junior and senior year at UCLA," she assured him. "And *'Til Death Do Us Part* went over budget because your leading man had a problem with the bottle. He ended up at

the Betty Ford Clinic after the movie wrapped, if I remember rightly," she said, giving him the same innocent look he'd bestowed on her just a minute ago. "And you had those gray hairs way before then, too."

Zeke winced in mock pain. "The child doesn't understand the concept of dramatic license," he said dolefully. "And she has no respect for her old man. I hope you're more respectful to your father, Susan."

Susan didn't even try to hide her smile. "I do my best," she said.

"Good. That's good," Zeke said, absently patting his daughter's hand when she slipped it back into the crook of his elbow. "Maybe you could give Cam—"

He turned his head sharply, reacting to the tug on his arm, and met his daughter's gaze. There was a split second of heat from both of them—her at him for dragging his feet, him at her for forcing him to face something he'd rather not. Their gazes cooled almost instantly, softening into understanding and appeal on her part, melting into grudging acceptance and resignation on his. Stalling wouldn't change a thing, and he knew it. His only child had asked this one simple thing of him and he was going to give it to her. Even if it killed him.

"Dad, this is Alan Wescott, one of our wedding consultants."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Blackstone," Alan Wescott said as they shook hands. "A real pleasure."

"My pleasure, as well," Zeke said graciously.

"And his partner, Leslie Fine."

"Ms. Fine," Zeke said, unconsciously adding an appreciative twinkle to his gracious smile.

"Leslie, please," the woman said. "We're all going to get to know each pretty well before the wedding day arrives."

"Leslie," Zeke said with a polite nod.

And then there was only one person left in the room he hadn't greeted. His gut tightened. His heartbeat quickened. His nerves began to scrape against the inside of his skin, in a way they hadn't done since his earliest days in Hollywood. He did what he had done back then, taking a brief second to center himself. *You can do this, Blackstone*, he told himself. *You can do anything you put your mind to. It isn't really going to kill you.* And then he turned, and faced the mother of his only child.

She was still heartbreakingly beautiful but, then, he had known she would be. Like everyone else who owned a television set, he'd watched her career progress from the beautiful daughter on *Family Fortune*, to the beautiful young career woman in *On My Own*, to the beautiful wife on *Maggie and Me*. For the past two years, her beautiful face had been plastered all over the advertising landscape as Gavino Cosmetics' symbol of Ageless Beauty.

And ageless she was.

Her eyes hadn't lost any of their sparkle over the years; they were the same vividly intense shade of blue they had been when she was eighteen. Her hair, though no longer cascading down her back like Alice in Wonderland, was still the same pale, gleaming golden blond. Her lips, even under a coating of precisely applied peach lipstick, were still deliciously kissable. But it was the planes and angles of her small, fine-boned face that made her truly ageless. Truly beautiful. Her always exquisite bone structure had been refined and sharpened by the passing years, adding elegance to what had once been a kind of fragile coltishness.

Standing there, staring at her, Zeke could vividly remember running his fingertips over the delicate bones in her face, tracing the lush shape of her lips and the arch of her brows, telling her how beautiful she was. And she had looked back at him with wonder in those incredible blue eyes of hers.

There was no wonder in them now. Far from it. Her expression was guarded and wary. Suspicious, even, as if she expected him to do or say something that would cause a scene or start a scandal.

He was almost tempted to live down to her expectations. It was what he would have done before, when he was a neophyte actor with a James Dean attitude. It was what he might still do, if she kept looking at him like that. Except for Cameron, he reminded himself. He was doing this for Cameron and it had to be perfect for his adored daughter. With that thought foremost in his mind, he fought down the urge to haul his ex-wife up against him by the lapels of her stylish Carolina Herrera jacket and shake her—or kiss her—senseless.

"Hello, Ariel," he said pleasantly and offered his hand. "Long time, no see."

As opening lines went, it was pretty lame but he'd made the first move and now the ball was in her court.

"Hello, Zeke," she said, and put her hand into his.

It was a mistake.

She knew it the minute their palms touched.

The heat was still there, as strong, as vital, as tempting as it had been the first time he'd ever touched her. It sizzled up her arm like wildfire, heading straight to the hidden core of her. Thank God, there was no chance she would succumb to its lure this time, she thought, belatedly steeling her nerve endings against him. This time she would be strong. Invulnerable. Invincible. *Immune*. Because this time she wasn't a breathless, wide-eyed ingenue, eager to taste life and oh-so-ripe for the plucking. This time, she knew that heat and sizzle was all there was to Zeke Blackstone.

All right, not *all*, she amended grudgingly. In the years since they'd last seen each other, he'd matured into a brilliant actor and then into an even more brilliant director. And he was a good and loving father to their daughter. But he'd been a lousy husband. And not just to her. There had been another ex-wife between then and now, as well as a live-in lover or two... or three. If one could believe even half of what was printed in the tabloids, he'd also indulged himself in an uncounted number of brief flings, one-night stands, and sizzling location romances over the years as well.

Zeke's legendary bad boy charm and sizzling sexuality attracted women like moths to the proverbial flame but it burned them up and burned them out in short order. And she should know. She had the scars to prove it. Not that anyone had ever seen—or would ever be allowed to see—those scars, least of all the man who had inflicted the wounds that caused them.

She forced her lips into an empty little smile. "It's good to see you, Zeke," she said, feigning a credible and convincing coolness as she withdrew her hand from his.

Without conscious thought, Zeke tightened his fingers on hers, holding her captive for a scant moment longer, silently demanding that she look at him—really look at him, dammit!—before he would let her go. He tried to tell himself it was just a test of wills, a power play, a game of one-upmanship. And, on one level, it was.

It was also a need.

An urgent, burning, utterly inexplicable need.

Loath to let him gain the upper hand, Ariel reluctantly lifted her gaze to his. Wide blue eyes met smoldering brown for the first time in years.

They both felt the pull.

It was primal.

Visceral.

Frighteningly real.

"Is it really good to see me?" Zeke murmured, his voice low and disturbingly intimate. It shivered along her nerve endings, as real and tactile as a touch.

"Yes," Ariel said, aghast to realize she meant it. *Oh, God, I don't want to mean it!* "Yes, of course it is," she added, managing to make the words sound offhand and casual, like a polite social lie one didn't really care if the hearer believed or not.

"It's good to see you again, too, Ariel," he said softly, surprised at just how much he meant it. And how much he wanted her to mean it, too.

And then he let go of her hand and turned to smile down at his anxiously hovering daughter. "What do you say we get this show on the road?" he said jovially, as if he hadn't just been shaken to his very soul. "I had my secretary make reservations for us at Le Dome at one-thirty."

"Then we'd definitely better get started," Alan Wescott said, inviting everyone to sit down with a wave of his hand. "We've got a lot to cover in this first meeting."

"Where do we start?" Cameron asked, her eyes bright with eagerness.

"We usually find it's best to decide on the type of wedding you want first," Leslie Fine told her. "Formal or casual. Traditional or something more unconventional. We've found that everything else flows from that."

"Definitely a traditional church wedding," Cameron said decisively. "We've already talked to the minister and booked the church for the last Saturday in September."

The two wedding consultants exchanged a startled glance. "Not *this* September, surely?" Wescott asked.

"Yes, this September. I know it's kind of short notice but once we decided to get married, well..." Cameron turned her head and smiled at her fiancé. "There just didn't seem to be any point in waiting. And the end of September was the soonest we could get the church."

"But that leaves us with less than six weeks to plan an entire wedding," Wescott pointed out.

"That isn't going to be a problem, is it?" Zeke asked, subtly letting the two consultants know that it had better not be, not if they wanted their company to orchestrate the Blackstone-Everett wedding—and collect the fat check that would go with it.

"No. No, problem," Leslie Fine rushed to assure him. "We'll have to adjust the usual timetable a bit but I'm certain we can accommodate your wishes." She flipped open a three-ring binder covered in smooth cream-colored leather and already stamped with the names of the happy couple. "Have you decided on a time of day, as well?"

"Well, we thought maybe ten o'clock for the actual ceremony?" Cameron suggested. "And then the reception at home afterward," she added, referring to the Beverly Hills mansion where she'd grown up, and not the Brentwood condo she'd been renting for the past two years. She glanced across the table for confirmation. "Mom? Is that okay with you?"

"Of course, darling. Whatever you want." Ariel smiled at her daughter, trying not to let her memories of another wedding spoil her joy in this one. It didn't help that the man who'd stood beside her then was sitting beside her now, bringing it all back in every painful detail. "It's your wedding, Cameron, and your decision. I want you to have exactly what you want."

She'd made no decisions, voiced no opinions concerning her own wedding to Cameron's father, not about the place or the time, not the guest list or the food or the bridesmaids. She hadn't even seen her wedding dress until it was time to put it on.

"Then ten o'clock," Cameron said. "With a sit-down champagne brunch and dancing on the patio after. How does that sound, Mom?"

"Perfectly lovely."

"Dad?"

"Sounds like a plan," Zeke said decisively, as if his whole attention were riveted on the discussion of his daughter's upcoming wedding. A part of him was. His daughter's wedding day was, after all, one of the most important days in her life and, thus, in his.

But another part of him was in utter shock, reeling from discovery that he was still apparently ass-end-over-teakettle in love with a woman he hadn't seen since their own wedding day, nearly twenty-five years ago.