



The first time Clare Wingate found herself in a strange bed, she'd been twenty-one, the victim of a bad breakup and too many Jell-O shooters. The love of her life had dumped her for a blond art student with an impressive rack, and Clare had spent the night at Humpin' Hannah's, holding down the bar and nursing her broken heart.

The next morning she woke in a bed smelling of patchouli oil and staring up at a poster of Bob Marley, the guy snoring beside her drowning out the pounding in her head. She hadn't known either where she was nor the snoring guy's name. She hadn't stuck around long enough to ask.

Instead, she'd grabbed her clothes and bolted. As she'd driven home in the cruel light of morning, she told herself there were worse things in life than random sexual encounters. Bad things like flunking out of college or getting caught in a burning building. Yeah, those were bad. Still, a one-night stand wasn't for her. It had left her feeling disgusted and disturbed. But by the time she reached her

apartment, she'd chalked the whole thing up to a learning experience. Something a lot of young women experienced. Something to learn from, and something that was good to know for the future. Something she vowed would never happen again.

Clare had not been raised to reach for a shot glass and a warm body to make herself feel better. No, she'd been raised to curb her impulses and contain her feelings behind a perfect facade of warm smiles, kind words, and impeccable manners. Wingates did not drink too much, talk too loud, or wear white shoes before Memorial Day. Ever. They did not wear their hearts on the sleeves of their cashmere sweater sets, and they most certainly did not jump into bed with strangers.

Clare may have been raised on restraint, but she'd been born a romantic. In the pit of her soul she believed in love at first sight and instant attraction, and had a bad habit of leaping into relationships before she looked. She seemed destined to suffer repeated heartache, painful breakups, and the occasional drunken one nighter.

Fortunately, by her late twenties she'd learned to put into practice the restraint she'd been taught. For her reward, at the age of thirty-one her destiny blessed her and she met Lonny. The love of her life. The man she'd met at a Degas exhibit, and who swept her off her feet. He was beautiful and romantic and not in the least like the heart-breakers she'd dated in the past. He remembered birthdays and special occasions, and was brilliant when it came to floral arrangements. Clare's mother loved him because he knew how to use a tomato server. Clare loved him because he understood about her work and left her alone when she was under a deadline.

After a year of dating, Lonny moved into Clare's home, and they spent the next year in total sync. He loved her antique furniture, and they both loved pastels and had a passion for texture. They never fought or even argued. There was no emotional drama with Lonny, and when he asked her to marry him, she'd said yes.

Lonny really was the perfect man. Well . . . except for his low sex drive. Sometimes he didn't want sex for months at a time, but really, she told herself, not all men were horn dogs.

Or so she believed, right up to the moment she'd rushed home unexpectedly the day of her friend Lucy's wedding and found him *in flagrante delicto* with the Sears service technician. It had taken her several stunned moments to process what was happening on the floor of her walk-in closet. She'd stood there with her great-grandmother's pearls in hand, too shocked to move, while the man who'd fixed her Maytag the day before rode her fiancé like a cowboy. And none of it seemed quite real until Lonny glanced up and his shocked brown gaze met hers.

'I thought you were sick,' she'd said stupidly, and then, without another word, gathered up the hem of her silk and tulle bridesmaid's dress and ran from the house. The drive to the church was a blur, and she'd been forced to spend the rest of the day in a pink puff of a dress, smiling like her life hadn't jumped the rails and sailed off a cliff.

While Lucy read her vows, Clare felt her heart break piece by piece. She'd stood at the front of the church, smiling as she fell apart inside until she was hollow and empty, except for the pain squeezing her chest. At the wedding reception, she pushed the corners of her mouth up and raised a glass to her friend's happiness. She felt it

was her duty to make a suitable toast, and she did. She would rather have died than ruined Lucy's day with her own problems. She just had to remember not to get toasted, she told herself, and that one small glass of champagne wouldn't hurt. It wasn't like knocking back straight shots of whiskey, after all.

Too bad she listened to herself.

Before she opened her eyes the morning after Lucy's wedding, a feeling of *déjà vu* crept into her pounding head. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced in years. Clare peeked through scratchy eyelids at morning light falling through a wide crack in the heavy curtains and spilling onto the gold and brown quilt weighing her down. Panic tightened her throat, and she quickly sat up, the sound of her pulse beating in her ears. The quilt slid down her bare breasts and fell to her lap.

Within the lighter shadows of the room, her gaze took in the king-sized bed, a hotel desk, and wall lamps. In the armoire across from her, a Sunday morning news program was on television, the sound turned down so low she could hardly hear it. The pillow beside hers was empty, but the heavy silver wristwatch on the bedside table and the sound of running water behind the closed bathroom door told her she was not alone.

She pushed the quilt aside and practically jumped out of bed. To her dismay, she wore nothing from the day before but a spritz of Escada and a pink thong. She scooped up the pink bustier at her feet and glanced quickly about for her dress. It was thrown across a small couch along with a pair of faded Levi's.

No doubt about it, she'd done it again, and like those

few times years before, she couldn't remember the important details after a certain point in the evening.

She remembered Lucy's wedding at St John's Church and the reception afterward at the Double Tree Hotel. She remembered running out of champagne before the first round of toasts, forcing her to refill her glass several times. She recalled trading in her champagne glass for an old-fashioned filled with gin and tonic.

After that things got a little sketchy. Through a boozy haze, she recalled dancing at the reception, and she had a vague mortifying memory of singing 'Fat Bottomed Girls.' Somewhere. She had flashes of her friends, Maddie and Adele, renting a room in the hotel for her so she could sleep it off before she had to go home and confront Lonny. The hotel mini bar. Sitting at the bar downstairs? May be. Then nothing.

Clare wrapped the bustier around her middle and endeavored to fasten the hooks between her breasts as she moved across the room toward the couch. Halfway, she tripped over one pink satin sandal. The only crystal clear memory in her head was that of Lonny and the repairman.

Her heart pinched but she didn't have time to dwell on the pain and utter astonishment of what she'd seen. She would deal with Lonny, but first she had to get out of that hotel room.

With the corset hooked partway between her breasts, she reached for her pink fluff of a bridesmaid's dress. She threw it over her head and battled yards of tulle, twisting and turning, fighting and pushing, until she had it down around her waist. Out of breath, she shoved her arms through the spaghetti straps and reached behind her for the zipper and little buttons on the back of the dress.

The water shut off and Clare's attention flew to the closed bathroom door. She grabbed her clutch purse off the couch and in a rustle of tulle and satin raced across the room. She held up the front of her dress with one hand and scooped up shoes with the other. There were worse things than waking up in a strange hotel room, she told herself. Once she got home, she'd think of something worse too.

'Leaving so soon, Claresta?' said a rough male voice only a few feet behind her.

Clare came to an abrupt halt against the closed door. No one called her Claresta but her mother. Her head whipped around and her purse and one shoe fell to the floor with a muffled thud. The strap of her dress slipped down her arm as her gaze landed on a white towel wrapped around the bottom row of hard six-pack abs. A drop of water slid down the dark blond line of hair on his tanned stomach, and Clare lifted her gaze to the defined chest muscles covered in tight brown skin and short wet curls. A second towel circled his neck, and she continued to look up past his throat and stubble-covered chin to a pair of lips pulled into a wicked smile. She swallowed, then glanced into deep green eyes surrounded by thick lashes. She knew those eyes.

He shoved one shoulder against the bathroom door frame and folded his arms across his broad chest. 'Good morning.'

His voice was different from the last time she'd heard it. Lower, changed from a boy to a man. She hadn't seen that smile in over twenty years, but she recognized that too. It was the same smile he'd worn as he'd talked her into playing War or Doctor or Dare. Each game had usually

ended with her losing something. Her money. Her dignity. Her clothes. Sometimes all three.

Not that he'd had to do all that much talking. She'd always been a sucker for that smile, and for him. But she was no longer a lonely little girl, susceptible to smooth-talking boys with wicked smiles who blew into her life each summer and made her little heart melt. 'Sebastian Vaughan.'

His smile reached the corners of his eyes. 'You've grown since the last time I saw you naked.'

With her hand clutching the front of her dress, she turned and pressed her back into the door. The cool wood touched her skin between the open zipper. She pushed a dark brown tangle of hair behind her ears and tried to smile. She had to dig down deep inside, into the part of her that had been pounded with good manners. Into the part that brought gifts to dinner parties and sent thankyou notes the second she got home. The part that had a kind word – if not thought – for everyone. 'How are you?'

'Good.'

'Fabulous.' She licked her dry lips. 'I suppose you're visiting your father?' Finally.

He pushed away from the door frame and reached for one end of the towel around his neck. 'We covered that last night,' he said, and dried the side of his head. As a boy, his hair had been blond like the sun. It was darker now.

Obviously they'd covered quite a few things she couldn't remember. Things she didn't even want to think about. 'I heard about your mother. I'm sorry for your loss.'

'We covered that too.' He dropped his hand to his hip.

*Oh.* 'What brings you to town?' The last she'd heard of Sebastian, he'd been embedded with the marines in Iraq

or Afghanistan or God knew where. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been eleven or twelve.

'Ditto.' His brows lowered and he looked at her more closely. 'You don't remember last night. Do you?'

She shrugged one bare shoulder.

'I knew you were shit-faced, but I didn't think you were so gone you wouldn't remember anything.'

It was just like him to point that out. He obviously hadn't developed manners along with those abs. 'I've never really quite understood that term, but I'm sure I wasn't "shit-faced."' '

'You always were too literal. It means you were drunk off your ass. And yeah, you were.'

Her smile slid into a frown that she didn't even try to stop. 'I had reasons.'

'You told me.'

She hoped she hadn't mentioned everything.

'Turn around.'

'What?'

He made a turning motion with one finger. 'Turn around so I can zip your dress.'

'Why?'

'Two reasons. If my father found out I'd let you run out of here with your dress half off, he'd kill me. And if we're going to have a conversation, I'd rather not stand here wondering if you're going to fall the rest of the way out of that thing.'

She stared at him for several moments. Did she want him to help her out? It would probably be best if she didn't dash from the room with her dress open in the back. Then again, she really didn't want to stick around and converse with Sebastian Vaughan.

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m only wearing a towel here. In about two seconds it’s going to be real obvious I’m hoping I get to see you naked.’ He smiled, showing a perfect row of straight white teeth. ‘Again.’

Her cheeks caught fire as she got his meaning, and in a rustle of satin and tulle, she turned and faced the door. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him exactly what they’d done together the previous night, but she didn’t want the details. She also wondered what she’d told him about Lonny, but she supposed she didn’t want to know that either. ‘I guess I drank more than I intended.’

‘You were entitled to tie one on. Finding your fiancé on all fours like a bronc would drive anyone to drink.’ The tips of his fingers brushed her spine as he reached for the zipper. He chuckled and said, ‘I guess the Maytag man isn’t the loneliest guy in town after all.’

‘It’s not funny.’

‘Maybe not.’ He brushed her hair aside and slowly slid the zipper up her back. ‘But you really shouldn’t take it so hard.’

She pressed her forehead into the wooden door. This could not be happening.

‘It’s not like it’s your fault, Clare,’ he added as if it were a comfort. ‘You just don’t have the right equipment.’

Yes, there were worse things than waking up in a hotel room with a stranger. One of those things was seeing the love of your life with a man. The other was zipping up her dress. She sniffed and bit her bottom lip to keep from crying.

He let go of her hair and fastened the two hooks at the top of the zipper. ‘You’re not going to cry are you?’

She shook her head. She did not show excessive

emotion in public, or at least she tried not to. Later, after she'd confronted Lonny and was alone, she would fall apart. But, she figured, if she'd ever had an excuse to cry, this was it. She'd lost her fiancé and slept with Sebastian Vaughan. Barring a flesheating disease, she didn't think her life could get any worse than it was at that moment.

'I can't believe I slept with you,' she moaned. If her head hadn't already been pounding, she would have beat her forehead against the door.

He dropped his hands to his sides. 'There wasn't a whole lot of sleeping going on.'

'I was drunk. I never would have had sex with you if I hadn't been drunk.' She looked at him over her shoulder. 'You took advantage of me.'

His gaze narrowed. 'Is that what you think?'

'It's obvious.'

'You didn't complain.' He shrugged and moved toward the couch.

'I don't remember!'

'Now, that's a real shame. You told me I was the best sex you'd ever had in your life.' He smiled and dropped the towel. 'You couldn't get enough.'

He obviously hadn't outgrown the habit of dropping trow, and she kept her gaze pinned to the bird painting on the wall behind his head.

He turned his back on her and reached for his jeans. 'At one point you were so loud I thought sure hotel security was going to beat down the door.'

She'd never been loud during sex. Never. But she knew she wasn't in a position to argue. She could have been yelling like a porn star and wouldn't remember.

'I've been with some aggressive women . . .' He shook

his head. 'Who would have thought that little Claresta would grow up to be so wild in bed?'

She'd never been wild in bed. Sure, she wrote about hot, steamy sex, but she never actually lost control enough to have it. She'd tried a few times, but she was too inhibited to scream and moan and . . .

She lost the battle and her gaze slid down the smooth planes of his back and slight indent of his spine as he pulled his Levi's over his bare butt. 'I've got to get out of here,' she muttered, and bent to retrieve her purse from the floor.

'Do you need a ride home?' he asked with his head bent over his task.

Home. Her heart squeezed and her head pounded as she straightened. What she faced at home was an even bigger nightmare than the one standing across the room from her. The one with those rock-solid abs and a really nice butt. 'No. Thanks. You've helped enough.'

He turned and his hands paused over his buttoned fly. 'Are you sure? We don't have to check out till noon.' One corner of his mouth slid up and his wicked smile was back. 'Wanna create some memories you *won't* forget?'

Clare opened the door behind her. 'Not a chance,' she said, and walked out of the room. She'd made it about ten feet before he called after her.

'Hey, Cinderella.'

She glanced over her shoulder as he picked up her pink sandal and tossed it to her. 'Don't forget your slipper.'

She caught the shoe in one hand and hurried down the hall without looking back. She raced down the stairs and rushed through the lobby, afraid she might run into out-of-town wedding guests staying at the hotel. How could she

possibly explain her appearance to Lucy's great-aunt and uncle from Wichita?

The hotel doors whooshed open, and with the cruel morning sun stabbing her eyes, Clare walked barefoot across the parking lot and thanked God her Lexus LS was exactly where she recalled leaving it the day before. She gathered up her dress, shoved herself into the car, and fired it up. Popping it into reverse, she caught a glimpse of her face in the rearview mirror and gasped at the sight of black mascara under bloodshot eyes, wild hair, and pale skin. She looked like death. Like road kill. And Sebastian had looked like he belonged on a billboard selling Levi's.

As Clare backed out of the parking space, she reached into the console for her sunglasses. If she laid eyes on Sebastian again in this lifetime, she thought, it would be too soon. She supposed his offer to take her home had been nice enough, but then in typical Sebastian style, he'd ruined it by offering to create unforgettable memories. Putting the car into drive, she covered her eyes with her gold Versace's.

She supposed he was staying with his father, just as he had as a boy when his mother used to send him to Idaho from Seattle for the summer. Since she didn't plan to visit her own mother anytime soon, she knew there wasn't a risk she'd see Sebastian again.

She drove out of the parking lot and headed up Chinden Boulevard toward Americana.

Sebastian's father, Leonard Vaughan, had worked for her family for almost thirty years. For as long as Clare could remember, Leo had lived in the converted carriage house on her mother's estate on Warm Springs Avenue. The main house had been built in 1890 and was registered with the

Idaho Historical Society. The carriage house sat at the back of the property, half hidden by old willow trees and flowering dogwood.

Clare couldn't recall if Sebastian's mother had ever lived in the carriage house with Leo, but she didn't think so. It seemed that Leo had always lived there alone, overseeing the house and grounds and playing chauffeur from time to time.

The traffic light strung across Americana connecting Ann Morrison and Katherine Albertson parks turned green as Clare blew through. She hadn't been to her mother's house in more than two months. Not since the morning Joyce Wingate had told a room full of her Junior League friends that Clare wrote romance novels, just to spite her. Clare had always known how her mother felt about her writing, but Joyce had always ignored her career, pretending instead that she wrote 'women's fiction' – right up until the day Clare had been featured in the *Idaho Statesman* and the Wingates' dirty secret was out of the closet and splashed across the Life section. Clare Wingate, writing under the pen name Alicia Grey, graduate of Boise State University and Bennington, wrote historical romance novels. Not only did she write them, she was successful and didn't have any plans to stop.

Since the time Clare had been old enough to put words together, she'd made up stories. Stories about an imaginary dog named Chip or the witch she'd always believed lived in her neighbor's attic. It hadn't been long before Clare's naturally romantic nature and her love of writing melded and Chip found a poodle girlfriend, Suzie, and the witch in the neighbor's attic got married to a warlock that looked a lot like Billy Idol in his *White Wedding* video.

Four years ago her first historical romance novels had been published, and her mother had yet to recover from the shock and embarrassment. Until the *Statesman* article, Joyce had been able to pretend that Clare's career choice was a passing phase, and that once she got over her fascination with 'trash,' she'd write 'real books.'

Literature worthy of the Wingate library.

In the cup holder between the seats of her car, Clare's cell phone rang. She picked it up, saw it was her friend Maddie, and set it back down. She knew her friend was probably worried, but she didn't feel like talking. All four of her friends were the very best women to have around, and she'd talk to them later, just not right now.

She didn't know how much Maddie knew about the prior evening, but Maddie wrote true crime and would probably put some kind of psychotic killer spin on it whatever it was. Adele was just as well-meaning. She wrote fantasy and had a tendency to cheer people up by relating bizarre stories from her personal life, and Clare didn't feel like being cheered up at the moment. Then there was Lucy, who had just gotten married. The rights to Lucy's latest mystery novel had recently been optioned by a major studio. And Clare knew that the last thing Lucy needed was to have her own problems steal an ounce of her happiness.

She turned onto Crescent Rim Drive and continued past houses that overlooked the parks and the city below. The closer she drove toward her home, which she'd shared with Lonny, the more her stomach twisted. As she pulled her car into the driveway of the light blue and white Victorian she'd lived in for five years, her eyes stung with the painful emotion she could no longer hold back.

Even though she knew it was over with Lonny, she loved him. For the second time that morning déjà vu tightened the back of her skull and settled in the top of her chest.

Once again she'd fallen in love with the wrong man.

Once again she'd given her heart to a man who could not love her as much as she loved him. And like those other times in the past, she'd turned to a stranger when it all fell apart. Although she supposed that technically Sebastian wasn't a stranger, it didn't matter. In fact, it made what she'd done worse.

Once again she'd turned self-destructive and ended up disgusted with herself.