## THE SUMMER OF SUNSHINE & MARGOT

## **Chapter One**

Social interactions fell into two categories—easy or awkward. Easy was knowing what to say and do, and how to act. Easy was witty small talk or an elegant compliment. Awkward social interactions, on the other hand, were things like sneezing in your host's face or stepping on the cat or spilling red wine on a white carpet. Or any carpet, for that matter. Margot Baxter prided herself on knowing how to make any situation fall into the easy category. Professionally, of course. In her professional life she totally kicked butt. Personally—not so much. If she were being completely honest, she would have to admit that on most days her personal life fell firmly in the awkward category, which was why she never mixed business and pleasure and rarely bothered with pleasure at all. If it wasn't going to go well, why waste the time?

But work was different. Work was where the magic happened and she was the one behind the curtain, moving all the levers. *Not in a bad way*, she added silently. Just that she was about empowering her clients—helping them realize it was all about confidence, and sometimes finding confidence required a little help.

She turned onto the street where her nav system directed her, then blinked twice as she stared at the huge double gates stretching across a freeway-wide driveway. She'd been told the private residence had originally been a monastery built in the eighteen hundreds, but she hadn't expected it to be so *huge*. She'd been thinking more "extra-big house with a guest cottage and maybe a small orchard." What she faced instead was a three-story, Spanish-style former church/monastery with two turrets, acres of gardens and an actual parking lot for at least a dozen cars.

"Who are these people?" she asked out loud, even as she already knew the answer. Before interviewing a potential client, she always did her research. Overdid it, some would say, a criticism she could live with. Margot liked being thorough. And on time. And tidy. And, according to some, annoying.

Margot pressed the call button on the electronic pad mounted perpendicular to the gate and waited until a surprisingly clear voice said, "May I help you?"

"I'm Margot Baxter. I have an appointment with Mr. Alec Mcnicol."

"Yes, Ms. Baxter. He's expecting you."

The gates opened smoothly and Margot drove through onto the compound. She parked in one of the marked spots, then took a moment to breathe and collect her thoughts.

She could do this, she told herself. She was good at her job. She liked helping people. Everything was going to be fine. She was a professional, she was trained and she was calm. *Calmish*, she added silently, then reached for the glasses she'd put on the seat next to her briefcase.

Margot stepped out of her car and smoothed the front of her slightly too-big jacket. The outfit—gray suit, sensible pumps, minimal makeup—was designed to make her appear professional and competent. The glasses, while unnecessary, did a lot to add gravitas to her appearance. She was thirty-one, but in shorts and a concert T-shirt, she could pass for nineteen. Even more depressing, in said shorts and T-shirt, she looked ditzy and incompetent and just a little bit dumb, and that didn't reassure anyone.

She walked up the stone path to the enormous front door. Although she knew nothing about Spanish architecture, she wanted to trace the heavy carved wood doors where angels watched over Christ as he carried the cross toward a hill. Yup, the big-as-a-stadium building really had once been a monastery and apparently the monks had been sincere in their worship.

Before she could get her fill of the amazing craftsmanship, the doors opened and a tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired man nodded at her.

"Ms. Baxter? I'm Alec Mcnicol. It's nice to meet you."

"Thank you."

She stepped inside and they shook hands. She had a brief impression of two-story ceilings and intricate stained glass windows before Alec was leading her down a hallway into a large office lined with bookshelves and framed maps of lands long forgotten.

She did her best not to gawk at her surroundings. While she was used to working with the rich and famous, this was different. The books made her want to inhale deeply to capture their musty smell and the maps had her itching to trace a path along the Silk Road.

She'd taken a step to do just that when her host cleared his throat.

She glanced at him and smiled. "Sorry. Your office is incredible. The maps are hand drawn?"

He looked slightly startled, his eyebrows coming together in an attractive frown. "They are."

She looked at them one last time. If she got the job, she would have to ask permission to study the framed drawings. She reluctantly pulled her attention away from the distractions around her and took a seat across from him at the wide desk.

When he was settled, he said, "As I explained on the phone, you're here to help my mother."

"Yes, Mr.-"

"Please call me Alec."

She nodded. "I'm Margot, and yes, I understand she will be my client."

"Excellent. She and I decided it would be easier if I conducted the preliminary interview to see if you and she are suited."

"Of course."

Margot relaxed. Hiring someone like her was often stressful. Her services were only required when something had gone very wrong in a person's life. Or if the potential client was anticipating something going wrong. Or was overwhelmed. Very few people looked around at their happiest moment and thought, Hey, I should find someone to teach me social etiquette and how not to be odd/uncomfortable/weird or just plain nervous. There was always a trigger that made a client realize he or she needed her services and it rarely grew out of an uplifting event.

Alec glanced at the papers on his desk. They were arranged in neat piles, which Margot appreciated. How could anyone find anything on a messy desk? Her boss, a man whose desk was always

covered with folders and notes and half-eaten sandwiches, was forever sending her articles on how messy desks were a sign of creativity and intelligence, but Margot would not be swayed in her opinion. Disorder was just plain wrong.

"You know who my mother is?" Alec asked, his voice more resigned than curious.

Margot filed away the tone to review later. The dynamic between mother and son could be significant to her work.

"I do. Bianca Wray was born in 1960. Her father died when she was an infant and she was raised by her mother until she was twelve." Margot frowned. "Why she was put in foster care isn't clear, but that's where she ended up."

She flashed Alec a smile. "She was literally discovered while drinking a milk shake with her girlfriends, propagating the myth that in Los Angeles anyone, at any moment, is just one lucky break away from being famous."

"You've discovered my deepest wish in life," Alec said drily.

"Mine, too," Margot said, allowing her mouth to curve slightly at the corners. "After a career in modeling, your mother turned to acting. She preferred quirky roles to the obvious ingenue parts that would have helped her have a more successful career. She had one son—you—when she was twenty-four. She and your father, a Swiss banker, never married, but you were close to both your parents."

As she spoke, she sensed tension in Alec's shoulders as if he were uncomfortable with her reciting the facts of his personal life. He might not be her client, but he was her client's son and therefore of note, she thought, but didn't bother explaining herself. Her methods were excellent and if he couldn't see that, then this was not the job for her.

"Bianca is a free spirit and despite facing her sixtieth birthday, is still considered a beauty. She acts in the occasional project. From what I could see, there doesn't seem to be a pattern in why she chooses the roles she does. She enjoys remodeling homes and has made a lot of money flipping upscale houses. She gives generously to charity and has many lovers in her life, but has never married. She is currently dating a man named Wesley Goswick-Chance. Mr. Goswick-Chance is the youngest son of an English earl. His parents divorced when he was an infant and he grew up in both England and the small European country of Cardigania. He is currently their senior attaché to the United States. He is stationed at the consulate here in Los Angeles."

There was a lot more she could have mentioned about Alec's mother. There was the time Bianca had been presenting at the Academy Awards and had dropped her dress on national television. Or her sex tapes that, back in the 1990s, had been quite the scandal, although they were fairly tame by today's standards. Bianca was a colorful protestor, a woman who slept with kings, movie stars, artists and, according to some gossip that was never confirmed, had once had a torrid affair with the wife of the world's largest yacht builder. While Margot would never admit it to anyone, she was equally intrigued and terrified by the idea of working with Bianca.

"That was very thorough," he said with a sigh. "And thank you for not mentioning all the salacious bits I'm sure your research uncovered."

Margot nodded. "Of course."

He looked at her. His eyes were very nice—dark, with thick lashes. She could see traces of his mother in his appearance— the eyes she'd admired, the curve of his mouth.

"My mother has recently accepted a proposal of marriage," Alec said, his voice stiff. "From Wesley. He's a nice enough man and he makes her happy, so I have no objection to the union."

Margot waited quietly, not showing her surprise. How unexpected that after sixty years and countless lovers, Bianca had finally gotten engaged.

Alec's gaze was steady. "If Wesley were a shipping magnate or a movie star, there wouldn't be an issue. But he is a diplomat and as such, he moves in the kind of circles that will not be very accepting of my mother's somewhat, ah, eccentric ways."

"She wants to learn how to fit in."

"Yes. To be clear, hiring you was her idea, not mine. I'm not pushing her into anything. She's worried that her impulsive behavior will be a problem for Wesley and she claims she loves him enough to want to change for him."

"What do you think?" Margot asked.

Alec hesitated, his gaze shifting from hers. "I believe most people are who they are. Asking Bianca to be a staid, polite and unobtrusive person is like asking the sun to shine less brightly. Ambitious, but unlikely."

She'd wondered if he would say it was wrong for Wesley to not accept his fiancée as she was. Interesting that Alec had gone in a different direction. "You're saying she can't change."

"I'm saying it's improbable." He returned his attention to her and leaned forward. "My mother is funny, charming and generous to a fault. I'm confident you will enjoy her company but if you take this job thinking you're going to succeed, I'm concerned you'll be very disappointed."

Margot smiled. "You're warning me off?"

"I'm suggesting you consider the possibility of failure."

"Which only makes me want to take the job more, Alec, if for no other reason than to prove myself."

"Not my intent, but I can see how it would happen."

He relaxed as he spoke. Margot found herself as curious about her client's son as she was about her client. She'd done preliminary research on Alec, in the context of him being Bianca's only family. She knew that Alec was a scholar who studied ancient texts. When he'd inherited the monastery nearly six years ago, he'd done extensive remodeling, turning much of the space into a research center for the study of obscure written works. He was reclusive, had never married and was rarely photographed. A few people had described him as stodgy and boring, but she knew they were wrong on both counts. Alec was a man who kept tight control over his emotions—a trait she could respect. To her mind, order was a kind of meditation that should be embraced by all.

"Shall we?" he asked, coming to his feet.

She rose as well and followed him out of the office and down a long hallway that opened onto the grounds. The hallway ceiling was fifteen feet high and all hand-carved wood. The stone floor was smooth and she could see faint grooves from the thousands of feet that had walked this same path. She wanted to ask about the history of the monastery and what it was like to live here. She wanted to know if sometimes, in the quiet of those hours after midnight, he heard the whispered echoes of so many prayers. Margot didn't consider herself religious but she admired those who were. Faith must be a wonderful thing. She was just a little too pragmatic to believe that any divine force was going to help her with her life. As such, she believed in being self-reliant.

To her right were huge gardens. The well-kept grounds went on for acres—a private paradise in the middle of Pasadena. She recognized several of the flowers and plants but many were unknown to her.

"The grounds are lovely," she said, wishing she had time to explore the paths she could see weaving through hedges and by trees.

"Thank you. They were in disrepair when I inherited the place but I hired a landscape architect to clean things up. He's done a good job."

He paused by a stone path and turned to her. "My mother recently sold her house and has moved in with me until the wedding," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "Should you take the job, she would like you to stay here, as well, for the time you're working together." He glanced at her. "Just to be clear, my mother sometimes keeps odd hours."

"Many clients do," she assured him, thinking of the business executive who had wanted to work on his Chinese etiquette between four and six in the morning.

"She's not—" he began, then pressed his lips together. "My mother is..." He shook his head. "You'll have to see for yourself."

He started across the lawn toward the garden. Margot followed him along the stone path that was just as worn as the open hallway had been. They passed between two flowering trees onto a huge patio created with paving stones. Stone benches lined the perimeter while hundreds of pots of various sizes overflowed with exotic flowering plants.

The scent was divine—sweet without being cloying. If she had to pick a single word, she would have chosen alive as the fragrance. She found herself longing to sit on one of the stone benches and turn her face to the sun. Farther on, she spotted a table and chairs and desperately wished for a slow-paced dinner at sunset.

"This is the most incredible garden I've ever seen," she admitted, unable to hold in the comment. "It's magnificent."

"I can't take credit." He gave her a slight smile. "But it is very nice."

Nice? Iced tea was nice. This was stupendous!

She reminded herself that she was here for an interview and reluctantly let go of her garden lust. As they moved toward the table and chairs, Margot saw a woman seated in a small, hidden alcove, reading a magazine. The woman glanced up when she noticed them and waved a greeting.

Margot rarely worked with celebrities. Her area of expertise was the corporate arena. If you had a quick trip down to Argentina, for example, she was the one who could give you a crash course on things like greetings—while the first greeting with a client or customer involved a handshake, in subsequent meetings, the greeting was likely to be a kiss on the cheek, even if the business meeting was between two men. She could advise that good posture was important and that dinner rarely started before nine. She found comfort in rules and knowing the right thing to do in any situation.

Each employee in her company had a profile that was made available to prospective clients. Coming to an understanding of who worked best with whom was a mutual decision. Movie stars and those in the music business rarely picked Margot and she was fine with that. She'd been on a couple of jobs with directors looking to be more successful in obtaining financing in China, but that was different. Which probably explained why she was unprepared to meet Bianca Wray in person.

Oh, she'd seen pictures of the actress and had watched three of her movies the previous weekend. She was familiar with the sound of her voice and the way she moved, but none of that had equipped her for the reality of seeing her up close. Bianca was far more delicate in person. Slim, but also small boned. There was a glow to her bare skin, a grace to her movements. Her deep blue eyes were wide and her light brown hair was wavy, just past her shoulders.

Taken individually, the features were nice enough but unremarkable. Yet there was something about the way they were put together. Something...breathtaking. She supposed that was the difference between the chosen and the ordinary. An undefinable quality that couldn't be manufactured, only recognized and worshipped.

Her great-grandmother had talked about star power. She couldn't say what it was, but she'd been able to recognize it when she saw it. Bianca had star power. When she smiled, Margot instantly felt like the most special person on earth. Even as she reacted viscerally, the intellectual side of her brain cataloged how Bianca stood, smiled and moved toward them. She was looking for clues to the problem, along with any information that would help her do her job to the best of her ability.

"Have you thought about what I said, Alec?" Bianca asked as she approached. She wore jeans and a loose T-shirt. Nothing out of the ordinary, yet both suited her perfectly. Her feet were bare, her toes painted with little American flags. "I'm sure they would enjoy it."

Alec exhaled. "My mother thinks I should invite a few nuns over for lunch."

Margot glanced at him. "You know nuns?"

"No. She wants me to find a local convent and ask them over."

"Why?"

He looked at her, his expression clearly indicating there was no reasonable explanation and with luck, this, too, would pass. Bianca stopped in front of them. She was maybe five-four or five-five, at least three inches shorter than Margot.

"Because of what Alec has done with the monastery," she said, her voice light and happy. "They would be delighted to see how you've kept the spirit of the building while modernizing it."

"The master bedroom is in what used to be the church," he said drily. "I doubt the nuns would approve."

Bianca linked arms with him. "Oh, darling, don't worry about that. It's not as if you're having sex there." She winked at Margot. "Alec goes out for that sort of thing. He's a little bit like a groundhog. Once a year he makes an appearance, so to speak, then retreats to his regular world."

Margot wasn't sure if the comment was meant to shock her or test her or humiliate Alec. Given the warm tone and loving expression, she doubted it was the latter. Still, it was an unusual thing to say to a stranger—especially about her own son.

"I'm Margot. It's nice to meet you." Margot held out her hand.

Bianca shook it. "It's nice to be met." Her smile broadened. "I'm a fairly hopeless case, as I'm sure Alec has told you. I'm impulsive and reckless and not the sort of person who should be marrying a professional diplomat. But here we are, trying to make it work." Her smile faltered. "It's just that Wesley is all I've ever wanted. I love him and I don't want to be the reason he loses his job."

For a second her eyes were no longer bright but instead filled with fear and uncertainty. Margot studied the flash of emotions and saw the exact moment self-preservation kicked in.

"Imagine falling in love at my age!" she said with a laugh. "What a ridiculous thing. Until now I've only really loved one person and that's Alec." She smiled up at him. "I'm sure he'll be delighted to have someone else share that burden."

Margot nearly felt dizzy from the emotional ping-pong. Bianca had shifted from the odd comment about Alec's sex life to a flash of honest vulnerability with a quick return to fact, all couched in a protective shield of humor. There was a lot more going on here than the desire to learn which fork to use.

One of the advantages of being socially awkward—not that there were many—was the ability to recognize it in others. Bianca might be more beautiful than 99 percent of the population, but that didn't mean she was comfortable in her own skin. She was obviously afraid of disappointing everyone she cared about. Perhaps she thought she'd been doing it for years. *How intriguing*, Margot thought, suddenly itching to get on her computer and begin working on her development program.

Alec squeezed his mother's hand. "I just want you to be happy."

Bianca flashed him a smile that was brighter than the sun Alec had mentioned earlier, then turned to Margot. "Shall we have a little talk to see if we suit?"

"I'd like that."

Bianca led her to the table in the center of the paved garden while Alec retreated to the house. When they were seated across from each other, Bianca studied her for a second.

"You don't need to wear glasses, do you?"

The question surprised Margot. "No. How did you know?"

"I've worn prop glasses before. Why do you do it? No, don't tell me. Let me guess." Her gaze turned probing. "You want to look smart. Oh, because you're pretty. You must be very serious about your work. I never was. I liked acting but I was never passionate about it." The mega smile returned. "However, they do pay me a ridiculous amount of money for it, so why not?"

One shoulder rose and lowered. "Tell me. Can I be fixed? Do you have the skills to make me just like everyone else?" Margot saw the trap in the question immediately. She sensed that Bianca was testing her in a hundred different ways and wasn't sure what that meant. If she was the one who had requested assistance, then surely she was motivated to change. Yet the way she phrased the question...

"I can certainly teach you how to behave in formal occasions, whether social or political," she began. "As for fixing you, I'm afraid that's not my job. I want to make you feel comfortable so everyone can get to know who you really are."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Bianca said quickly. "They couldn't handle the real me."

"Then the you you want them to know."

"What's your background?"

Margot smiled. "I started in hotel management. I received training to work with our international clients and loved it. I was recruited by my current employer and have moved to helping people deal with our ever-shrinking world."

"Hmm, yes, that's fascinating, but what's your background? Where are you from? Who raised you?"

A different question than "tell me about your parents." It was almost as if Bianca knew there hadn't been parents. "My maternal great-grandmother," she said slowly. "She owned a beauty and charm school for nearly fifty years. She trained pageant contestants."

"Were you in pageants?"

"No. I'm lacking certain skills." Like the ability to speak to a group. Margot still remembered the first time Francine had made her get up on the mock stage they had in the workroom and address the group. She'd barely taken her place when she'd projectile vomited and promptly fainted. It had been a fairly quick end to any hopes her great-grandmother had had about Margot taking the crown.

Margot had forced herself to overcome her deficiency and could now give a decent lecture, but she would never be a natural up on stage. Not that she'd ever aspired to be a beauty queen. She just wanted to do her job and live her life. Oh, and not be dumb about men, because she'd already done that enough already.

"Alec picked you," Bianca said. "He looked over all the people at your agency and he picked you. Now I see why."

Did she? Margot hadn't known he'd been the one to make the decision. Why her? She wasn't an obvious choice, was she?

"Can you do it?" Bianca asked before Margot could question her statement. "Can you help me be who I need to be so I don't embarrass Wesley?"

"Yes."

"You promise?"

Margot leaned forward. "I will use every technique I have, and if those don't work, I will create new ones. I will work tirelessly to get you to a place where you are comfortable in Wesley's world."

"That's not a promise."

"I know. I don't make promises when I can't be sure of the outcome."

Bianca looked away. "I make promises all the time. I rarely keep them. It's just that in the moment, I want the person to be happy."

"And later?"

Bianca shrugged again. "They always forgive me. Even Alec." The smile returned. "All right. Let's do this. Alec thinks I need about two months of instruction. You'll have to move in here. There are a few guest rooms upstairs. I have the big one and I'm sorry but I'm not moving out for you."

"I wouldn't expect you to." Margot looked at her potential client. "Bianca, I don't live that far from here. I could easily drive over—"

"No. You have to stay here. It'll be like we're on location. Alec doesn't care. He rarely looks up from his work to notice anything. The house is beautiful. You'll love it and I'd feel better if you were close."

Margot nodded slowly. She'd lived in before. She didn't prefer it but when the client insisted, she agreed.

"As you wish. I'll send over the contract as soon as I get back to the office. Once it's signed and you've paid the retainer, I'll be in touch to discuss a start date."

"Monday!" Bianca sprang to her feet and raced around the table. She crouched in front of Margot, took both her hands and smiled. "We'll start Monday. Oh, this is going to be fun. We'll be best friends and have a wonderful time."

Bianca rose and twirled, then ran to the house, her laughter trailing after her.

Margot watched her go. There was something, she thought, some secret driving Bianca. Margot wasn't sure if she was running to something or away from it, but whatever it was, it was the key to the problem. Finding out what it was would be difficult, but she knew in her gut if she could figure out the mystery, she could teach Bianca what she needed to know and be gone in far less time than two months.

She glanced around at the beautiful gardens and the monastery's worn, red-tiled roof and reminded herself that whatever she might have to deal with while helping Bianca, at least her living

quarters were going to be extraordinary. Perhaps, if she were lucky, she might even run into a ghost monk or two.

Need to know what happens next?

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