

1

UNEXPECTED

The cell I left at home started ringing as I rounded the back of my house. I raced across the terrace, wrenched open the door, and grabbed the phone off the kitchen counter. “Hello!”

“... lex, ... office trashed... kicked in ...”

“Andrew—You’re breaking up. What happened?”

“... need to talk—”

The phone cut out again, then dropped the call. I hit speed dial. No response.

I was dripping on the tile floor after a chilly January morning run along the hills behind my house. I needed a shower, but my partner in adventure was in trouble, so I didn’t linger over the view of sagebrush canyon and the city of Los Angeles below.

After a quick wash, I pulled on the first pair of jeans I could find and a rumpled but still wearable plaid shirt, then slid into a pair of loafers and tossed my favorite old corduroy jacket over my shoulder. I grabbed my keys, and the adrenaline rush spiked as I raced out the door and vaulted into my vintage Jag convertible. Glad I’d left the top down. Saved time.

My name is Alex Cort, art theft investigator for the Carter Museum here in L.A. I receive emergency calls from time to time from other clients, but this was different. Real panic filled Dr. Seaton's voice, and I was on my way to his office to find out why. I reached for the ignition, but in such a hurry that the keys slipped out of my hand and dropped between my feet. Cursing in frustration, I reached down to find them.

"Did you drop these?"

I stopped rummaging under the seat and peered up at a young woman leaning over the passenger door with her hand stretched out toward me. I saw a flash of light, and my keys suddenly materialized, dangling from her fingertips. I thought I must be mistaken, just seeing a trick of light and shadow because I was distracted and in a hurry.

I was wrong, and it was only the beginning. I looked up from my keys into the bluest eyes I'd ever seen, and a very attractive and unusual woman entered my life. Tall and slender, not too thin, and the dress that matched her eyes clung with just enough curve to look softly feminine. I had questions, but no time to ask. I took the keys and smiled regret that I couldn't stay.

"Thanks. Don't know how you found them, but I'm glad you did." I pushed the key into the ignition. "I have to leave, I'm sorry."

Her mouth softened in a slow smile, steady blue eyes regarded me.

"Well," I hesitated. She made me wish I could stay. "Thanks again."

"Wait. I'd like to go to the museum with you."

My chest tightened in surprise. "You know where I'm going?"

"Yes, and about you, too, Alex."

My brow furrowed in suspicion. "How do you know my name?"

"Come on. I'll explain on the way."

This mysterious woman did have some explaining to do, and the way she looked at me made me want to hear it. Curiosity overrode caution. "Okay—but don't know when I'll be getting back."