

# ONE

## DAPHNE

"I NEED A PENIS," Daphne said.

On the other side of a laptop screen, a thousand miles away, Nia's chopsticks clattered to the cafe table. "Yes! I have been waiting for this day." She snatched up her phone and jabbed the screen. "I've been thinking Plenty of Fish or—"

"I'm not talking about dating."

Nia stared, and then burst out laughing. "Well, okay then. Ms. I-don't-do-casual-sex has finally been in the wilderness too long."

"None of that," Daphne said. *Although, to be perfectly honest . . . No, none of that. Sadly.*

Daphne leaned back in her patio chair. She was on the deck of her Yukon home "having lunch" with Nia, who was in Vancouver. Daphne got Nia's scenery—the busy city patio, with its bustling street and sidewalk—and Nia's got hers, with its lake and forest and mountains.

Daphne continued. "Remember that article about an author who submitted her book under a man's name?"

"And got five times the responses as she had under her own. You're thinking you could sell *Winter's Sleep* easier if you were a man. I know it can feel that way, but . . ."

"I did sell it."

Nia bolted upright. "What?"

"I'd gotten another rejection, and I drank some wine and remembered the article and said, 'Screw it. Let's try that.' So I tweaked a few things in my cover letter—more survivalism, more zombies, less romance."

"What? Tell me you didn't get rid of the romance."

"Not in the book. Just in the description. I pasted in the new cover letter, attached the manuscript and hit Send."

"I thought you were only supposed to send the full manuscript if they asked for it?"

"I figured if I was going to be a man, I didn't need to follow the rules."

"And it worked?" Nia snorted. "I'm not sure whether to laugh or dissolve into a puddle of weeping despair. So you got an agent who thought you were a guy. What'd they say when you told them the truth?"

Silence.

Nia's eyes bugged. "They still think you're a guy? You've talked, right?"

"I told him I live off-the-grid in the Canadian wilderness and don't have cell service. I expected he'd want me to get my ass into cell range so we can talk, but apparently, you don't tell guys like Zane Remington to do that. You accommodate the quirks of their literary genius."

"Zane Remington?"

"I was drunk."

"So your agent thinks you're a dude named *Zane Remington*?"

"Who lives in a house he built himself, from trees he felled himself. Zane hunts and fishes and is completely self-sufficient up here. Like Theo is in the book. Except without the zombies. Oh, and Zane has an MFA."

"Of course he does. So you got an agent who sold *Winter's Sleep* to a publisher. What happens when that publisher goes to look up this Zane on social media? Have him sign a contract? Deposit a check with his totally fake name?"

"Er . . ." Daphne waved a hand. "Well, you see, I have this friend, who is not only a lawyer but has an MBA, and she's rather brilliant. I'm certain she can suggest the perfect solution to my dilemma."

"Uh-huh. Do you know my hourly rate, McFadden? How much did you get for this book?"

"Five hundred."

"Yeah, no offense, but that'll get you an hour and a half of my time, even at the friends-and-family rate."

"Five hundred *thousand*. Three publishers wanted it, and there was a bidding war."

Nia blinked. She looked . . . Well, she looked exactly how Daphne probably did when *she* got the news. Daphne had never come near to fainting in her life, but for a moment there the world had faded dangerously close to black.

"Hold on," Nia said. "I'm doing this wrong." She cleared her throat and raised her voice. "Oh my God, Daphne! You sold your book!"

Daphne smiled. "I did, thank you. As for hiring you to fix my mistake, I'm kidding, of course. I need to come clean. I was hoping my terribly brilliant business lawyer BFF could advise me on how to do that without losing my deal . . . or getting my ass sued for fraud."

"Do you *want* to come clean?"

"Honestly? I would love to be Zane Remington, ridiculous name, outrageous backstory and all. This is exactly what we've discussed—whether I could hide behind a pen name so I don't need to . . ." Daphne shrugged. "You know."

"Deal with the insta-fame that will land at your door when the world discovers your freaking amazing book?"

Daphne made a face. "More like avoid the utter humiliation of failure. I just . . ." She shifted. As much as she loved to write, she was terrified of putting herself out there as a writer. Better to cloak herself in the anonymity of a pseudonym than to mess up her book's chances with her own awkward shyness. "I never considered

using a male pen name, but it's been . . . freeing, you know? It can't last, though. So I need a lawyer-approved escape hatch."

Nia pursed her lips and studied Daphne's face. "Would you stick to being Zane if I could come up with a plan that let you?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Then leave it with me."

## TWO

### CHRIS

CHRIS STANTON HAD A JOB INTERVIEW. To be a writer. Or, at least, to play one for author photos. That's what Nia had told him, though she'd also suggested the job might entail more, depending on what the client—the *actual* writer—required.

Whatever Daphne McFadden required, Chris would be it, because he desperately needed this gig.

Chris was in trouble. Business trouble. He'd made the mistake of trying to help a university buddy who'd lost his shirt in a divorce. His buddy convinced Chris to leave a good job and open their own accounting firm together. Chris soon discovered it wasn't the divorce that bankrupted his friend. It was the thousand-dollar-a-week coke habit.

When his new partner started dipping into the business's piggybank, Chris caught him fast because, duh, *accountant*. Yet Chris's name was still on the door, meaning he got sued along with his buddy. That's when Nia Paramar—a lawyer who'd been his client for years—offered him an escape hatch: if he would portray author Zane Remington for her best friend, Nia would help Chris with his legal problems. That could be the difference between him needing to sell his car or live in it.

Chris had done his homework, and he knew Daphne McFad-

den's book was a big deal. It'd already gotten very enthusiastic early reviews and been moved forward to a spring release.

Then he'd read what Daphne said about her alter ego. Zane Remington was a man's man, one of those Hemingwayesque types who lived deep in the wilderness and stocked his freezer with moose while composing works of creative genius.

Who would best portray a guy like that? An actor who thought he *was* a guy like that. A Chris Hemsworth wannabe who cruised through life on a wink and a grin. Since "Chris" was already his name, he'd stick with that, though he'd tap into the Hemsworth association by using his mother's maiden name: Ainsworth.

To play the part, Chris had costumed himself in a designer flannel shirt, faux worn blue jeans and unlaced work boots that hadn't seen a split second of actual work. He'd rented a pickup—an obnoxiously oversized one that looked completely out of place in gas-conscious Vancouver.

His stylist had practically exploded in excitement when he asked if she could do something fashionable with his hair, after years of fairly weeping each time Chris said, "Just trim it up, please."

At least he'd made someone happy. The problem was that the person he had to make happy was Daphne McFadden.

As he drew close to the restaurant where they'd agreed to meet, he spotted the author at a patio table. According to Nia, Daphne McFadden was a "hot curvy brunette who can swing an axe with one hand while penning a smart, kick-ass zombie novel with the other." In other words, Daphne *was* Zane Remington. So why the gender-swap? He didn't quite understand it, but he trusted Daphne knew her business better than he did.

The woman he saw looked perfectly pleasant and sturdy. He eyed her as he slowed to find parking.

That's when she looked straight at his pickup . . . and also when he saw a little compact car preparing to reverse into the only parking spot left. Chris took a deep breath, sent up a silent apology to the car's driver, channeled "I'm an MFA grad with a half-million-

dollar book deal” and stole the spot. From the patio, Daphne nodded her approval, and he exhaled.

Dick move, but it’s what Zane would do.

Chris hopped out of his truck just as a spot across the road cleared and the compact car zipped into it. The door opened and out stepped the kind of woman whose heels made her taller than half the men around her. Wavy mahogany hair with red highlights that caught the midday sun, a generous figure in a hip-hugging dress, revealing arms and legs and glutes that said someone knew her way around a gym.

Damn . . .

That was when he realized the woman’s shades were pointing straight at him. His first impulse was to check his fly. Then he remembered that he’d just stolen her parking spot.

Damn . . .

Chris glanced around for an escape and noticed Daphne still watching him from her bistro table. This was his audition, and if he fled from this magnificently pissed-off Amazon, he could never be Zane Remington. Daphne’s book required a salesman who was one-hundred percent confident in the masterpiece he’d penned. Chris really needed this job, which meant he needed to be that salesman.

“Hey,” he said as the woman drew close enough to hear. “Sorry about that. If I’d known *you* wanted that spot . . .” He emphasized the *you*, while giving her an appreciative onceover.

Distaste oozed from her every pore. Were those freckles across her aquiline nose? He was a sucker for freckles.

“You mean if I were an elderly woman with a cane, it would have been all right?” she said, not even pausing as she strode past him.

“Depends on how good she looked for her age,” he said, falling in stride with her.

He had a grin and a wink ready for when she glanced his way. She only picked up speed. He cast an anxious look at Daphne, but the author watched him with continued interest.

"Looks like we're going to the same place," he called to the Amazon.

The woman didn't respond, just strode onto the patio and took the table beside Daphne's before pushing her shades onto her forehead.

Chris leaned onto the woman's table, letting his shoulders square and muscles ripple beneath the plaid designer shirt. He lowered his voice. "I really do feel bad about stealing your spot. How about you let me buy you dessert later." His gaze tripped down her. "You do eat dessert, right?"

Her golden-brown eyes flashed in outrage, and he replayed what he said and inwardly winced. Paired with his onceover, she'd taken it as a pointed comment on her full figure. Shit. This is why Chris didn't flirt.

He opened his mouth to backtrack. Backtracking, however, was Chris. It wasn't Zane. And Daphne was still watching from the next table.

"That's a yes, then?" He smiled. "Excellent. Dessert, on me." His smile sparked, wicked. "Take that any way you like."

"You're blocking my view." She flicked her fingers, shooing him off.

He resisted the urge to slink away and tossed her a smirk as he straightened. Then he sauntered over to Daphne, who looked *very* pleased with his audition so far.

Chris slid into the seat across from the author and extended his hand. "Chris Ainsworth." He grinned, hoping it extended to a twinkle in his eyes. "But you can call me Zane Remington."

Her gaze crawled over him as she shut her tablet. "I'll call you anything you like."

"And I can call you . . . Daphne? If I'm not being too presumptuous."

"My name's actually Nora."

"Ah, a pen name within a pen name. Clever. So you prefer Nora?"

"No," said a husky voice behind him. "I prefer Daphne."

Chris turned, slowly, to see the woman whose parking spot he'd stolen.

"Daphne McFadden," she said. "And I believe"—she inhaled sharply, as if the next words pained her—"that you are at the wrong table."

## THREE

### DAPHNE

AS CHRIS AINSWORTH regaled her with stories of his acting career, Daphne's fingers itched to pick up her phone and text Nia.

*What did I ever do to you?*

What secret grudge had her best friend been nursing that compelled her to inflict Chris Ainsworth on Daphne? It was a prank. It had to be. She'd finish lunch with this boor, and when she texted the inevitable WTF to Nia, her friend would reply with instructions to a coffee shop for a latte with the real actor she'd selected to play Zane. Compared to Lumberjack-Hipster here, whoever Nia had really chosen would seem perfect.

Yet the more Daphne thought about it, the more she was convinced that—to Nia—Chris Ainsworth *was* perfect for this job.

Nia and Daphne both hated to complain about men getting the edge in business. The obvious comeback was “maybe it's not them, maybe it's you.” How did you insist that you knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you were just as good? Women weren't conditioned for that kind of confidence.

Daphne remembered going to the signing of a very famous male author who wrote romance, despite his insistence otherwise. While waiting to hear him talk, she'd overheard him telling the store staff

how he lifted weights in the hotel gym pre-signing because “the ladies” loved firm biceps.

Then there was the online forum where librarians had been complaining about how some of their colleagues fawned over a “gorgeous” male author, and how they couldn’t get a popular female writer in for a visit, because everyone wanted the guy, who charged twice as much. Daphne had looked up the “gorgeous” author and declared him merely attractive.

Did Daphne really blame Nia for selecting Chris Ainsworth? This was a business decision, and if “arrogant and attractive white guy” would sell more books, then Nia would find her exactly that. Which she had.

Except Chris was more than merely attractive. He had a classically handsome face, with chiseled and perfectly proportioned features. Summer-green eyes and dark blonde hair that curled slightly in the breeze. Even his body was that classic Y shape with narrow hips, strong shoulders and biceps that strained at his shirt as he leaned on his arms.

Daphne’s catnip was fit guys with wholesome good looks, charming smiles and a twinkle that said “don’t be fooled by my wildcat exterior, I’m a kitten inside.” Chris fulfilled the first part just fine. But the last one? This guy was neither wildcat nor kitten. He was a feral tom, strutting around and pissing on everything in sight.

Still, in Nia’s defense, filling this role had been such a Herculean task that Daphne had been two days from giving up the charade and coming clean. Nia had found a way for her to sign the contract with a bunch of legal cartwheels that Daphne still didn’t quite understand. Basically, she was legally doing business as Zane Remington, whose name she’d registered as a corporation, with the copyright held by that. If everyone presumed the actual author was male, well, she’d never actually claimed that.

So she hadn’t needed an actor for the legal part or even for the early publicity. Then the publisher decided to move her release forward—by five months—which made the situation desperate. Then, at the last minute, Nia called to say she had “the guy.”

This guy.

"After that," Chris said, "I did a series of ads for a high-end vehicles. Nothing you'd be familiar with." He waved toward her car with a chuckle.

She bit back the urge to say it was a rental. Do not feed the trolls.

"Most recently," he continued, "I played a bit role in—"

"You've established your acting credentials, Mr. Ainsworth. I want to talk about this particular job. It might not be your thing."

Chris lounged in his chair, long legs so far into the aisle that the poor server had to go another way to get past. "I'm an actor. I play roles."

"This one is primarily modeling. You would be the face of Zane Remington."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pair of glasses and put them on. "Alakazam. I *am* Zane Remington."

He steepled his fingers, and maybe he was supposed to look intelligent, but his expression suggested he should order the prune smoothie.

Daphne continued. "There might also be situations where you are required to give very short, very simple interviews, which I would coach you to answer through an earpiece. In the event of technical issues, you'd have scripted answers. Most questions will be about the book, which Nia sent to you."

"She did."

"Will you be comfortable representing it?"

He leaned back again, forcing the man behind him to tug in his chair. "Oh, I didn't *read* it."

"Not the whole thing, but I'm presuming you skimmed a few chapters."

"Is that necessary?"

Daphne opened her mouth. Shut it.

Chris continued. "I'm an actor. I emote the lines I am given. You tell me what you want me to say about your book, and I say it. I'm sure it's wonderful, but . . ." He shrugged. "I'm not much of a reader."

There it was, dangling before her. The excuse to say no. Hell, no. This whole idea was absurd. Better for her to come clean to the publisher and—

Her phone buzzed. A text from her newly assigned publicist.

Melody: Haven't gotten that pic I asked for.

Melody: Don't be shy. It's not your jacket photo. I know you don't want that, and we are honoring your wishes.

Melody: We just want to get to know you. Put a face to your incredible book.

It was dangerously close to pub time, and Melody had to know what they had to work with. Could they send Zane's official author pic out with release promo? Or was it best only displayed on the website after clicking through three links and watching an ad for a celebrity bio?

Daphne glanced at Chris, with his ridiculous good looks. She surreptitiously snapped a shot as he launched into a story about the time he'd been mistaken for Captain America while walking past Vancouver's Fan Expo.

She hit Send. No message. Just the photo. Then she waited for her excuse to end this lunch from hell. Waited for Melody to LOL and tell her to send a real photo, because no way in hell did this man pen a dark zombie thriller with a teen girl protagonist.

Melody: Holy shit.

Daphne smiled and prepared her "ha-ha" response. *Hey, you said you wanted a photo . . . Didn't say it had to be me.*

Melody: Please tell me that's you.

Melody: I just showed it to the publicity director, and I think she's hyperventilating.

Melody: Please, please, please, tell me that's you.

Daphne: You'd prefer someone a little more author-ly, right? Older?

Melody: Are you kidding????!!!

Melody: I need the professional shots ASAP. We'll recommend a photographer if you need it. I'll let you go. I can see you're having lunch. Thank you!!!

Daphne lowered the phone and looked at Chris, who was still talking, as if unaware she'd been on her phone.

Now what?

Did she have a choice?

If Nia recommended him, he couldn't be as bad as he seemed, right?

"When can you start?" she asked.