

The Perfect Role

By Clare Solomon



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Chapter One

HE COULDN'T do this. Peter stood helplessly watching the bustle as, at one side of the set, a cameraman and boom operator set up their equipment for the next scene and, at another, the director for the first episode talked to a couple of actors. Around them, cast and crew milled about, working and chatting. He didn't want to be here.

"Are you okay?"

The voice made Peter jump and he told himself to get a grip. He fixed a smile on his face as he looked round and took in Shane's familiar narrow face, glasses and quirked eyebrow. They had known each other for over thirteen years, since after Emma's birth and before that of Charlie. Each knew the other's dumbest mistakes and constantly teased that person about them. And last year, when everything had fallen apart, Shane had kept Peter sane, from giving him use of his spare bedroom for several months to listening to all the drunk monologues of despair. "I'm fine," he lied. "It's just been a while since I did this." He'd been doing theatre roles and directing jobs for the last five or six years; at first he couldn't get TV and film work and then it was easier to just concentrate on other things and avoid being told he was wrong for every role he auditioned for.

"You've been acting for nearly two decades and you're probably better at it than anyone else here." Shane made a gesture that encompassed all the actors in the room. "Stop panicking about nothing."

"Nothing? Have you seen the other actors? It's like an attack of the Beautiful People. I have a scene this afternoon with a guy called Alex, the one who's playing my onscreen son's boyfriend, and I'll never be able to look at him and remember my lines at the same time because he's so distractingly handsome."

There was a sound of laughter behind them and, with a sense of doom, Peter turned round to find the actor he'd been talking about nearby, certainly close enough to have overheard him. Alex was standing grinning at him, blond and sun-kissed and achingly beautiful, dressed in the designer-casual clothes of his character, and looking like a young prince. He walked unhurriedly up to Peter and patted him on the chest, the warm touch making Peter's entire body tingle. "You're not bad yourself," he said and sauntered away.

"Well, that wasn't at all embarrassing," Shane said, laughter in his voice.

Peter groaned and, unable to stop himself, glanced again at Alex just as the younger actor looked in his direction. Peter hastily turned away. From the moment he'd first seen Alex it had felt as if he were literally under a magical spell, unable to take his eyes off him and he was unpleasantly aware that he was making a fool of himself: a worn-out, middle aged man spell-bound by someone more than a decade younger. Alex was near the start of his adult life and career, with every possibility laid out before him like glittering jewels, while Peter felt as if everything good was behind him. "If you have a knife handy then just kill me now."

"Yes, of course. I always carry a knife these days. I've joined a gang too – did I mention that?"

"Wasn't your sarcasm the reason your last girlfriend broke up with you?"

"Ouch! Touché," Shane said, unruffled. "Actually that was only one of about a hundred reasons."

"At least she didn't cheat on you for two years behind your back," Peter said, then wished

he hadn't. A year later and the betrayal was still an open wound.

Shane's green eyes were sympathetic as he avoided the painful subject and said mildly, "We only dated for four months so that would've been difficult. How are your kids doing?"

"They still don't like Frank." The man who was now living in Peter's house with Helen and the children, while Peter struggled to pay a large mortgage and only got to see his kids every other weekend and one evening per week. The last part was the worst: the whole time he was away from them he missed them; every morning when he should have been telling them to get out of bed every five minutes, every evening when he got back from work and they should have been there to make his house a home, and every night when he should have been able to hug them and check they were asleep before he turned in. He didn't know what to do with himself without them there with him.

"Obviously!" Shane said and Peter tried to focus on the conversation. "I doubt his own mother likes Frank."

Peter smiled at this, reassured that the man would never take his place with them. The smile faded as he thought about what the children had suffered during the divorce and now they were stuck living with a man they couldn't stand, one who made no effort to even get to know them. "I don't know how to help them with all of this. Emma in particular gets so angry."

"Of course she's angry. Helen couldn't have treated you more cruelly if she tried. Emma's old enough to have understood what you went through and want to protect you." He sounded bitter. Shane used to think of Helen as a friend, so her actions had been a blow to him as well, probably making him more cynical than ever about relationships.

"I don't need protection."

"Maybe not now but last year..." Shane tailed off and Peter winced internally, remembering the wreck he had been after that night. He had returned home, looking forward to seeing his family, with no idea what was awaiting him, only to be told about the affair and have his entire life taken away from him. *'I'm sorry but I just don't love you anymore.'* Shane continued speaking, shaking Peter from the memory. "You should start dating again. You're almost the perfect age for a mid-life crisis, so you could go after the blond. Alex. Wouldn't Helen be shocked if she thought she'd turned you gay?"

The unintentional blow made Peter wince again. After knowing Shane for so long, how the hell could he suddenly announce that he was actually bisexual, but hadn't bothered mentioning it as he'd thought he would be married for the rest of his life? No, that wasn't the full story. It had been nice and safe to confine his romantic feelings to Helen and ignore the sexual minefield below the surface. Of course, he couldn't have acted on that side of his sexuality while he was married, but he could have at least got comfortable with the word *bisexual* and, when he was feeling daring, have tried it out on a few of his nearest and dearest.

Peter found that his eyes had sought out Alex again and he sighed. The other actor was in his twenties and more attractive than Peter had ever been, with a warm friendliness that drew people to him. Alex would never be interested in him even if Peter wanted something to happen and Peter didn't even know him. It was crazy. Alex glanced back at him and the shock as their eyes met was like electricity.

"I suppose I should go and do some work," Shane said with reluctance, oblivious to the exchange of looks and turmoil of Peter's feelings. "The Beautiful People must have their script or how will they know who they're supposed to be sleeping with next?"

"I'll see you at lunchtime," Peter said, smiling despite everything because the comment wasn't far from the truth: the show was full of glamour and sex. It wasn't like the gritty, down-to-earth roles he used to get and he wouldn't normally have auditioned for it since his was just a minor role as the angry, confused dad to a gay son, but he needed the money.

Between the divorce, child support and the mortgage payments for a house big enough for his three children to stay in, he was already in debt. He hadn't cared last year – about anything – but he needed to start getting control of his life. It was an added bonus that he had Shane here for moral support.

Shane headed to his office and Peter found himself scanning the room for a certain blond. *Idiot*, he berated himself and left to find a quieter place to go over his lines.

* * *

At 2.30p.m. Peter was wearing one of his character's expensive dark suits as he waited to begin filming his first scene on the show. Jean, the director, a woman of about thirty wearing a batman T-shirt and jeans, was talking to a tattooed camera operator and Peter was getting increasingly nervous. It didn't help to remind himself that he'd been acting since he was a teenager, not when he'd been taken aside last year by the director of a West End play and told to pull himself together or be replaced. It had been one of the most humiliating moments of his life, even if it did rank below everything Helen had put him through, including making him beg to see his own children.

"Hey," a voice said in greeting and he looked round into eyes as bright as the ocean on a sunny day. "Do you remember your lines?"

He mentally cringed at the teasing words. "Sorry about that..."

"Don't be." Alex touched his arm and smiled, no hint of discomfort or anything but friendliness in his expression. "I was flattered. Want to do another read-through?"

Relieved to have the awkward moment over, Peter said, "Good idea."

The scene was only short, although it was meant to be full of emotion, highlighting the tensions between their characters. They got almost to the end before the director was ready to begin filming and approached them.

"Are you clear about your emotions in this scene?" she checked in her Liverpudlian accent and, before they could answer, she went over the responses needed. "Peter, you basically think Alex has turned your son gay and hate him for messing up his life. Alex, you love Findlay's character and hate Peter for trying to destroy your relationship. Okay?"

They both confirmed this and the AD shouted for quiet, checked with the cameraman and sound engineer and told them to roll. The director then called, "Action!", and the Second AD snapped the clapperboard shut. The camera and boom followed Alex as he marched into the office and yelled at Peter about controlling his son's life. Following his instincts about how to give the scene more intensity, Peter slammed his hand down on his desk as he shouted his response. Alex's eyes widened in genuine shock, the argument suddenly filled with real emotion.

Peter advanced on the younger man. After the divorce he had hundreds of negative feelings he could channel into the row, enjoying the chance to let some of them out as he backed Alex almost against the wall, accusing him of messing with his son's head. They were glaring at each other, Alex's eyes full of anger and fear, as Peter heard, "Cut!"

He stepped backwards, the tension leaving his body, and Alex's natural good humour reappeared as he laughed, saying, "You scared the life out of me when you punched the table."

"Sorry."

"No, it was great," Alex insisted. "It made the argument feel real."

"I liked the way you did the scene too. We made a good team."

They were smiling at each other as the director came forward saying, "Really good work, guys. The two of you have great chemistry. Have you worked together before?"

“No, I’ve never been to England until now,” Alex said to her. “I’ve only filmed in LA before this.” Even without the accent, it was clear that he was one of the Americans hired for the show: no one in England could get a tan like that.

“Keep up that energy for the close-ups, okay?”

They repeated the scene for the two close-ups, then the wide shot and then it was over. Peter was still feeling buoyed up on adrenaline as he and Alex headed in different directions, Alex to rehearse his next scene and Peter, his one scene of the day over, to hang in the background and watch what was filmed next. He hadn’t screwed up, he thought, filled with relief. It had gone well. He glanced backwards and, as if they’d been thinking the same thing, he and Alex grinned jubilantly at each other.

Chapter 2

IT WAS his second day filming “*Intrigue*” and Alex was already beginning to feel at home. Between the excitement of coming to live in a new country and that of his first big acting role, he was permanently buzzed. He was sharing a house with two other actors from the show, so they had already bonded over English beer and take-out pizza, which was a good start. The others seemed nice, although Findlay, the guy playing his lover, was a bit full of himself. Attractive though, which was a good thing, as their first scene on the show yesterday had been a sex scene.

He looked up from his script and caught sight of Peter talking with one of the writers, the same man he’d been speaking to when Alex had overheard him. Remembering the comments, Alex smiled. There was something about Peter that intrigued him. Peter was part old-fashioned English gentleman, always polite and courteous, mixed with an awkwardness that clashed with dark-haired good looks. He was perfect to be one of the villains of the show with that aristocratic accent and those intense eyes, all dressed up in an expensive suit that made him look far more dangerous than the rumpled jeans and sweater Alex had seen him arrive in at 8.30am.

Alex had another scripted shouting match with him lined up for today, so he walked over to the two men and smiled at Peter, who looked at him with a warm friendliness as he introduced him to his friend, Shane.

“We’ve known each other forever,” Shane commented, “so, if you want all the embarrassing stories about him, you know where to come.”

“No, no, you can’t tell those,” Peter responded in the same bantering tone. “The stuff I know about you is far worse. Remember the fountain? The humiliating details of your sex life?”

“Oh, yeah, well, I talk far too much when I’m drunk.” Shane added to Alex, “I don’t know a thing. Ask me nothing.”

Another crew member called Shane over, so he left them alone and Peter’s body language immediately became more guarded and uncertain, as he put his hands in his pockets, then took them out again. The thought that this sophisticated-looking man might actually be nervous around Alex of all people gave him a thrill. He took a step closer and widened his smile and Peter’s gaze fell to his mouth then back to his eyes, with a definite look of interest.

“Do you want to rehearse our scene together,” he asked, “or do you have other things to do at the moment?”

“No, that sounds good. I’m all...” *Yours* hung in the air between them. Peter looked away first. “Shall we go outside? It might be a bit quieter.”

“Sure.”

They wended their way through the actors and crew to the doors that led out onto a small grass area, the parking lot ahead of them. It was quieter but also bitterly cold. The studio was permanently cool but this was ridiculous: he was going to start shivering if he stayed out here for long. “Isn’t April supposed to be spring time in England?”

Peter looked blankly at him. “Yes.”

“Then why is it so freezing?”

Peter laughed. “Oh, dear. This is actually mild. If you’re still in England over the winter

you're going to need a very different set of clothes. In fact you should go looking for a warmer coat as soon as possible."

"Damn." He inched closer to Peter who, obligingly, put an arm round his shoulders, body warm and smelling of soap rather than cologne. Alex opened his script and they both peered down at it then, sadly, Peter moved to stand opposite him so they could play out the scene, Alex immediately missing his touch.

* * *

"We're only on the second day of filming. We can't be behind schedule already," Peter exclaimed, frustrated as, at 5.30p.m., the camera crew began setting up to shoot another of his scenes, this one in his character's living room, aka a section of studio D.

"Welcome to the glamorous world of acting," Shane said, putting on his woollen coat, then he added insult to injury by commenting, "I'm off home. Good luck."

Alex joined him as Shane left, the two men exchanging goodbyes as they passed each other, then Alex came to stand beside Peter. "Are you all right? You look annoyed."

Even the sight of the younger actor couldn't improve his mood tonight, not given who Peter would be letting down because of the delay. "It just doesn't bode well if we're already staying late on set."

Alex shrugged his indifference. "It's part of the job."

"Some of us have better things to do." Peter realised he'd snapped when Alex looked at him with an almost nervous expression. "Sorry," he said quickly. "It's just bad timing. This is my one night of the week for seeing my kids and, if I'm not home in time, my ex-wife won't let me spend time with them again until next week."

"You have children?"

Peter realised Alex didn't know about that part of his life. It was funny how quickly it felt as if he'd known him for years. "Three. Emma is the oldest; she's thirteen. Charlie is twelve and Rick is nine."

"Have you got a photo?"

Peter got out his mobile and brought up a series of pictures of them, smiling as he looked over Alex's shoulder at the images. Emma was the responsible one but also the child who seemed to have been most hurt by the divorce. Charlie and Rick were football fans. Charlie was talkative but generally easy-going and Rick was quiet and affectionate. Neither of them knew how to stay still.

"Wait." Alex studied his face and then looked back at one of the photos. "They've inherited your dimples. That's so cute."

Peter laughed, bad mood melting away.

"These are my two nieces," Alex said, getting out his own phone to show Peter a picture of a couple holding a baby, a toddler beside them. The man looked enough like Alex to clearly be his brother and the girls shared his blond hair and blue eyes. "They're all in LA so I really miss them."

"Yes," Peter agreed, thinking of all the time alone in his house without his family around him. "That can be tough."

"When did you get divorced?"

"The beginning of last year. My wife met someone else."

"That must have been horrible."

"It still is. I wanted joint custody of the children but Helen refused and, since I worked full-time and she was the one who'd stayed at home to raise them, the courts gave her full custody. It's difficult on my kids and I always feel as if I'm saying goodbye to them." At

first he'd been almost overwhelmed with grief every time he watched them leave, but he'd pushed down the feeling, knowing they needed him to show them how to handle the change in all their lives.

"Perhaps your ex will change her mind and let you see more of them."

"Helen never changes her mind about anything." He used to like her strong will but it had been turned against him where the children were concerned. She let him see them for only the minimum time possible, even when they got upset. "Sorry, I'm being maudlin."

"No, you're not. At least, I don't think so, since I've no clue what *maudlin* actually means."

Peter laughed, once more shaken out of his sadness by the other actor.

Alex smiled at him as he said, "You can tell me anything you like. I want to know about your life."

And Peter wanted to tell him everything, share every detail, but his life was complicated enough and the intensity of his attraction to Alex terrified him. He had been married to Helen for seventeen years; it had never even occurred to him not to trust her, and she had betrayed him, lying for not just weeks or months, but for two years. How could he believe in anyone else after that?

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