

Chapter 1

Parking her Mercury Mountaineer beside the mailbox at 134 Alaca Drive in Altadena, Brenna Lanigan pensively studied the cream-colored brick home trimmed in earthy dark brown. Nothing special indicated that one of television's most popular stars lived there. Set on a large corner lot, it was typical of the surrounding homes. Six-foot-high privacy fencing enclosed the back yard. The red and white "Beware of Dog" sign nailed to the fencing gave her pause. Tidy beds of annuals lined the stepping stone walk to the front stoop. Somebody in the house obviously gardened. Brenna thought of her own gardens. She could be pulling the weeds on her dahlias.

She realigned her hands on the driving wheel and considered leaving. She could forget about putting herself in this awkward situation entirely. It was Saturday afternoon. She should be grocery shopping. She could be visiting Kevin in Michigan.

She wished her sons had not had dates last night.

She wished...for an excuse.

There was none. One by one, her castmates had accepted their invitations to this party for the son of another member of their ensemble. As the "lead" on the television series *Time Trails*, she could not be the only absent figure.

She sighed and checked her appearance once more in the rear-view mirror, not sure what to expect of a party at the home of Cassidy Hyland. She had only appeared with the woman at official Pinnacle public relations events, and even then, she interacted with her as little as possible. She tugged nervously at the short blue ribbon holding her auburn hair away from her face, her frown deepening. *What if I took "Dress: casual" wrong?* She looked critically over her short-sleeved jersey, dark blue jeans, and cross-trainers.

Looking again at the handwritten script on the party invitation, Brenna recalled her frustration at learning the woman had a son, much less one turning five on this early autumn day. She could not picture Cassidy Hyland tending a bloody knee or wiping a child's runny nose. The image did not fit with her first impression. Since Cassidy's arrival, Brenna had tried to learn as little about the woman as possible. Clearly she had succeeded.

She had been furious when the producers at Pinnacle Pictures decided the series could use an injection of pure sex appeal, thereby implying she herself had none. Hyland was thirty years old, long-legged, thin and blond, the epitome of the Hollywood starlet. She was in demand for high-value movie scripts and celebrity appearances, while Brenna was five foot five, forty-one years old, and hadn't had a big-budget movie project offered to her in two years. Following a supposed one-time appearance in a double-episode arc in April of 1999, Hyland joined the *Time Trails* cast full time. The costumers and the directors made the most of her "assets" by giving the younger actress a figure-hugging uniform that was slightly different from that of the rest of the cast, explaining she had come from a different branch of the new military structure.

From her first set call, Hyland had displayed almost inhuman poise. Incisive ice-blue eyes pinned Brenna in the scenes they shared. She stood regally tall, stalked with the sleek grace of a panther, and looked unaffected by the hours and hours under the stage lights. Flawless honey-blond hair framed her cream complexioned face. By the end of a twelve- or fourteen-hour shooting day, Brenna was tired and worn, disarrayed in body as well as mind. She felt like a wrinkled old woman next to the golden glory of Hyland, a veritable angel...

Brought to earth to make my life a living hell. Brenna sighed. The writing staff loved the sparks of tension as the two characters set out in very different ways to get things done, and they constantly staged them in close, tense exchanges.

Resolutely, Brenna gave the blonde bombshell who had exploded into her life as cold a shoulder as possible. However, ignoring that statuesque frame standing less than an arm's length away in most of their scenes was impossible. She found herself tongue-tied or abruptly turning away to avoid her. Early morning one month ago, Brenna found the party invitation tucked in the edge of her makeup mirror. She was not over her feelings of resentment toward the producers, but she suddenly realized she was being unfair to the woman when she overheard the rest of the cast cheerfully accepting their invitations.

So why am I here, almost an hour late, just staring at the house? Her hesitation smacked of fear, and Brenna despised being afraid of anything. She gripped the door handle and shoved it open, stepping out onto the grass easement. *So what if it's the first non-production-related event where you're going to be in the same room with her? Suck it up.* Hurrying up the walk, she rang the bell before she could change her mind.

She remembered leaving the child's gift on her front seat at the same instant the door opened.

Cassidy Hyland's small home buzzed with the joyful laughter of children; adult voices filled her living room. She smiled with pleasure at her success. Her castmates did not seem put off by the number of her neighbors, parents of Ryan's playmates, also attending the party. Though, she sighed, one important face was still missing. She had tried several times to break through the ice that existed even off camera between herself and Brenna Lanigan, nominal leader of the *Time Trails* actors. She had understood from the beginning that Brenna's opinion mattered to most of the other actors and that they were only following her lead in leaving Cassidy mostly shut out of whatever socializing they did

away from the set. She'd hoped that a birthday party for a child would be something so non-studio that everyone would see her as just another person.

Rachelle Cheron had been the first to arrive, with her daughter and husband, then Rich Paulson, along with Sean Durham with his son, followed quickly by Terry Brown and his daughter. Each had accepted enthusiastically while between takes at various times in the past month. With everyone else here, Cassidy hoped that she could be an accepted member of the troupe now. It had been more than a year, after all.

There was a light tap on the window separating the kitchen from the screen porch. Cassidy looked up to see her neighbor, Gwen Talbot, mouthing the word, "Cake?"

Realizing she was holding up things over a clearly false hope, Cassidy put down the tray of juice cups and turned to a nearby drawer to withdraw the cake knife.

"Can I carry something?"

Startled by the warm, rich voice that reminded her of smoky jazz clubs, Cassidy spun, knife still in hand. "Brenna?"

"Um, hi. Rich let me in." Brenna backed up and gestured toward Paulson, just closing the refrigerator door, beer in hand. "I hope I'm not too late."

With a tap of the bottle's neck to his receding hairline, a twinkle in his brown eyes, and a grin in salute, Rich was gone. Cassidy took the opportunity to watch him go and spend the few seconds collecting herself. Lowering the knife, she took a step back and slowly turned to Brenna.

Brenna Lanigan, swirls of gray in otherwise midnight blue eyes, was a beautiful, petite woman. She had brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail, but if Cassidy wasn't mistaken, the red highlighting was from the woman's Irish-American heritage, natural, rather than from a bottle. She had always appreciated genetics over Hollywood facade.

Taking in the other woman's attire, she was pleased Brenna had understood this was an informal party. She wore a sweatshirt with cropped sleeves bearing a New York University logo. One smooth, slender hand rested against the kitchen's island countertop. The fingertips of Brenna's other hand were tucked into the front pocket of figure-hugging, navy blue jeans. "You look like you had a good night's sleep."

"I...yes, I did. Thank you."

The woman displayed a slow, surprised smile that Cassidy appreciated after being served up a year of cold shoulder. Perhaps this could be the start of a change between them. "You're just in time for cake," she said genially. She recalled the woman's two teenage sons. "Did Thomas and James come with you?"

"I had to start them cleaning the gutters," Brenna replied.

"Is that a normal chore?"

Brenna shook her head. "Punishment. They missed curfew last night."

Cassidy absorbed the information with surprise. "That's pretty rough. Didn't you miss any curfews as a teen?" Brenna frowned at her. *Oops, too familiar*, Cassidy thought. In an attempt to recover the situation, she pointed to the kitchen doorway. "Um, cake?"

Brenna gestured for Cassidy to go first, then picked up the tray of juice cups and followed.

"Bren!" Rachelle Cheron came to her feet from the couch. A woman of exotic almond coloring and angular features framed with ebony, short-styled loose curls, Chelle smiled widely and easily. "So you didn't go to Michigan this weekend?"

Brenna shook her head. "The boys had dates last night." She accepted a one-armed hug and inhaled the scent of baby powder from Rose, the eight-month-old in Chelle's arms.

"I don't envy you. Girls today can be predatory," Rachelle said. "After all, your boys are related to a *star*."

At the emphasis on the label, Brenna shook her head with chagrin. "I don't remind them." Studying Rachelle and Rose, Brenna wondered how the little girl would grow up to view her mother's job. Thomas and James certainly were not shy about sharing their negative views.

Brenna pinched a smile on her features and turned away, taking in the whole of the living room space as she looked for a place to sit. There was the brown stuffed leather couch where Rachelle sat with Rose. Behind her were two stuffed chairs in matching brown leather, one occupied by another woman — a brunette unfamiliar to Brenna — holding a cup of punch.

She caught the soft sound of music and noticed the entertainment center set off to the side behind the couch. A shadowbox on the wall held several figurines — some Disney characters and others clearly Hummel or similar. Brenna reached up toward a beautiful figurine of dancing children wearing homespun overalls. The effect of bare feet and heads tipped back in open laughter was enchanting. A hand brushed Brenna's shoulder. Startled, she looked back into Cassidy's pale blue eyes capturing her with curiosity.

"Cake?" Cassidy asked.

Brenna looked around to realize they were alone. Everyone else had already left the living room for the porch. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I don't have time for a proper tour, but perhaps another time?"

Tongue-tied, Brenna could only silently follow her hostess out to the porch, stepping through the sliding glass door. Out in the fenced yard, Brenna spotted Terry Brown following Rich Paulson toward the porch.

The dark-skinned Terry was another actor from *Time Trails*. He played Creighton, Susan Jakes' hatchet man. He was an expert at killing people — not in the traditional sense, though he could do that in a pinch — but as a computer expert who could wipe away records, making someone disappear from history before they took him or her out physically as well. He was also their “cover” man, inserting their impersonations into databases so that their presence would not upset the timeline while they were trying to restore it.

Paulson's character, Dr. Pryor, handled the team's medical needs. Both men were as level-headed and personable as their characters, with lengthy résumés as character actors.

Jacques Cheron, Rachele's husband, brought up the rear, along with a man Brenna did not recognize. She was surprised to realize that it was probably someone from the neighborhood. All talked easily and looked comfortable, dressed in jeans and pullover shirts or sweatshirts. The atmosphere reminded Brenna of her own large family gatherings as a child. Again she marveled at the simplicity. She had never expected to find Cassidy like this.

Looking at her hostess, she noted the woman's soft, grass-green, scoop-neck cotton blouse as she talked quietly with a portly woman standing beside her. What Brenna had thought were slacks were actually dark green jeans. Knife in hand, Cassidy stepped up to the other end of a wooden picnic table covered in drawing paper where some of the children were drawing with crayons on the space in front of them. The half-sheet cake in front of her on the table was decorated with colorful handmade whorls and a stick-figure boy and dog. A boy with blond hair climbed onto the bench at the end and leaned on thin arms over the cake.

“Time for cake?” he asked.

“Yes.” Cassidy tucked his shirt in where the tail of it was dangerously close to the icing. Brenna was surprised to realize that he was Cassidy's son. He looked small for five years old.

A dark-haired boy built considerably thicker than Ryan climbed up next to him and yelled, “Sing!”

Brenna smiled and joined in a discordant, yet joyful rendition of “Happy Birthday” to Ryan.

Cassidy cut the cake, occasionally nudging her son's hands away from the blade as he reached to move pieces by hand. Paper plates began to circulate.

Ryan scooped ice cream rather messily, though Cassidy did not appear to mind. She handed Ryan his plate, then another to the boy next to him. The two jumped off the bench and pushed their way out into the yard to sit on the grass and eat. After being served, many of the other children followed.

Brenna stepped up for her piece of cake and overheard the portly woman speaking to Cassidy. “The cake's a hit. That recipe I gave you turned out really well. And I love the decorations.”

“Thanks, Gwen.” With a warm smile that crinkled the skin at the corner of her eyes and lips, Cassidy leaned forward and pressed her lips briefly to Gwen's cheek. Brenna wondered who this neighbor was to be treated with such casual intimacy.

“Brenna?” Cassidy's voice brought her eyes back up. “Do you want ice cream?”

Jerking her head up as she tried to formulate a response, the first thought Brenna had was that Cassidy's eyes looked different in the sunlight. *Softer*, Brenna thought. She was more used to the defiant expressions she encountered when they were in character. She reminded herself, *Cassidy is not Chris Hanssen, and I'm not Susan Jakes*. Brenna tried to remember that she was here because Cassidy had invited her. It was time she related to the woman on a personal level. She cleared her throat. “Yes, thank you.”

Passing a paper plate of cake and ice cream, Cassidy made introductions. “Brenna, this is my neighbor, Gwen Talbot. Gwen, this is Brenna Lanigan, from *Time Trails*.”

“Hello. My son, Chance, is Ryan's shadow there.” Gwen pointed out the boy next to Ryan where they sat in the grass. The bigger boy was swiping a finger of icing from the top of Ryan's slice. Beside them, Sean had his son, Kieran, sitting next to him and was supervising the messy consumption of cake and ice cream by the two-year-old.

“It's very nice to meet you, Gwen.” Brenna stepped back, looking around for a place to sit.

“Sit here,” Cassidy suggested, pointing to the bench opposite Rachele, Jacques, and Rose. “The kids seem to prefer the grass.”

“I can see that,” she said with a half smile. Clearing aside a few crayons, she settled onto the bench, looking up to see Rachele sharing small bits of cake and the occasional smear of ice cream with Rose.

Brenna moved aside as Gwen settled to her right, then was unsure where to go when Cassidy settled to her left, having at last served herself a piece of cake. Cassidy's thigh was firm and warm against hers. She resolutely ducked her head to her food.

Always to be counted on for livening up a social occasion, Rachele started small talk about the L.A. County park system. Cassidy joined in as she described the new installation of fitness stations at her own neighborhood park. Feeling the body moving against her own, Brenna considered getting up, but she became entranced by the voice and the long fingered hands with which Cassidy was illustrating her points.

“You don't work out at a gym?” Rachele sounded as surprised as Brenna felt.

“Ryan and I can go through the park together. At a gym I have to leave him with the sitting service. I try to limit that.”

Brenna asked, “What do you do with him while you're at work?”

“Ryan's in preschool at Gwen's elementary school, so she keeps him with her until I get home.”

Quite neighborly, Brenna thought, aware she'd had no such offers from her neighbors. Then again, she tried to keep to herself, and her neighbors in Pacific Palisades, many of them in the business like she was, did the same.

Cassidy, it seemed, lived in a more working-class neighborhood. She studied Gwen again and watched the woman respond, "Chance gets time to play with Ryan, so it works out for everyone." The dark-haired woman shrugged as her voice trailed off.

Glancing over her shoulder back to Cassidy, Brenna ducked away from the intense smile Cassidy beamed at her neighbor. "I couldn't have done this without her," Cassidy said.

A small clock on the fireplace mantle chimed the hour, drawing everyone's attention. "Time to send the children home," Cassidy murmured as she extracted herself from the picnic table bench. At the sound of the doorbell, Cassidy went to let in the first of the other children's parents. For a while the house filled with the commotion of greetings and farewells tossed among the adults and eager children showing off their prizes from the party.

Terry straightened from dusting grass cuttings off his daughter's jeans. "Great party, Cass. I had a good time."

"Glad you could come," Cassidy said with a smile. "Nice to meet you, Becca." She offered her hand to the young girl.

Becca's brown eyes widened, and she blinked, hiding her face before turning to grin up at her. "Can I come back?" The girl's eyes followed when Cassidy raised her face to Terry's.

Cassidy directed her question to him. "Perhaps we can all get together sometime?"

Terry nodded as he warmly held both Cassidy's hands in his dark ones and then turned to Brenna. "It was good to see you, Bren." She nodded. Terry prodded his daughter out, though she tried to cling to Ryan. Cassidy, Brenna, Rachelle, and Jacques, holding Rose, remained in the foyer.

"Thanks for a great party," Rachelle said, adjusting the shoulder strap of her baby bag. "I'll see you both Monday morning." She looked first at Cassidy, then Brenna, and nodded at some personal thought before she stepped out, followed by her husband.

Brenna stood alone with Cassidy on the front step. Ryan hugged his mother's hip and waved goodbye to the guests.

The sound of a car door opening and slamming shut caught Cassidy off guard. She had been trying to think of something to say, something that would convey how much she appreciated Brenna's attendance at the party. The other woman, also startled by the sound, spun around, turning her back toward Cassidy to assess the new arrival.

Stepping out of the house to stand behind Cassidy, Gwen grasped her arm, tense and alarmed, but Cassidy patted the hand and Gwen withdrew. She frowned at the tall man with conservatively trimmed blond hair. "Mitch," Cassidy said, "what are you doing here?"

He nodded curtly to Brenna as she passed him going to her car, then snapped his attention back to his ex-wife. "I came to see my *son*."

Cassidy saw Brenna hesitate, look back, then resume her walk to the curb. She said quietly but forcefully, "You're supposed to call first."

"You're not alone." Crouching, Mitch pulled his left hand from behind his back, revealing the wrapped present he had been concealing. Ryan let go of his mother's leg and sprinted to his father's open arms.

Damn, she thought with heartfelt disappointment, both for Brenna's departure and her ex-husband's arrival. Familiar wariness rose like bile in her throat as Mitch pulled Ryan to him in a tight hug. Then Mitch's green eyes fixed on her.