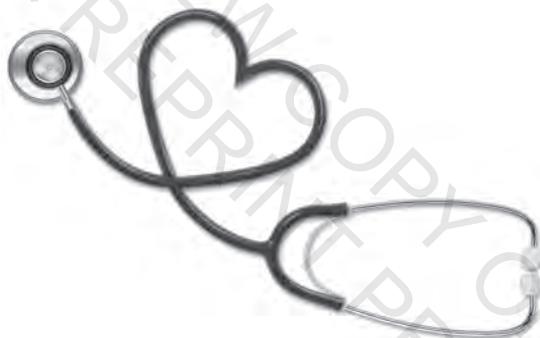


The Tempting Alaskan Doctor



DENISE GWEN

TRYST
A CAYËLLE IMPRINT

The Tempting Alaskan Doctor

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*The Tempting
Alaskan Doctor*





Prologue

THE CONOVER AGENCY,
CENTURY CITY, LOS ANGELES
DECEMBER

*“A*lfred, this is a terrible idea.” Helena Parker gripped the armrests of the plush chair as she gazed imploringly at her agent, Alfred Conover, from across the vast expanse of his glass desk.

“What’s not to love? The money’s great, and you can keep that penthouse condo of yours.”

Helena gazed out through the plate-glass window behind her agent’s head and sipped her herbal tea. “I’m in no position to argue—”

“Hon, you sure got that right.” Alfred chortled as he thrust a packet of papers across his desk toward her. She picked them up with trembling hands. “Your last two specials have bombed, and Channel Twelve is re-visiting your contract. They may fire you.”

“I know.” She studied the copy in her hands and shuddered. *A Year with the Hot Alaskan Doc*. “Al, this sounds so ... salacious.”

“Helena, it’s a good offer. One that you can’t afford to turn down. You only have to work there one week out of every month, at a terrific salary. And if this show does well, they may offer you a second season.”

She opened the pack, and leafed through it. She recognized the names of celebrity spokeswomen who’d been enlisted to work on different continents. One was with a veterinary practice in Iceland and another was with a nurse practitioner in Australia. The producer represented a new streaming service. They wanted to build-up content, and they wanted it fast.

Why did she get the job offer with a doctor, of all people? She hated medicine. Hospitals and doctors and blood frightened her.

She studied the name of the remote village in Alaska where she’d be based, “Hoonah? Did I pronounce that properly?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Clearly, Al couldn’t care less how she pronounced the name of the village. His only concern was that she’d get some terrific footage. Oh, and burnish her fading star. That would be nice.

“You’ll be working with this doctor who’s running a small, hardscrabble practice in a remote part of Alaska.”

“I thought all parts of Alaska were remote.”

She studied the offer page and swooned. Yes, they were offering her a pile of money, and if she were careful, she could live off this money for years. And oh yeah, she could also resurrect her failing career.

Eight years earlier, her prospects had shone as golden as the California sunshine. Her first documentary was on the plight of Eastern European women, who emigrated to the United States with the promise of employment—only to find their passports seized, their identities and their bodies held hostage as they were forced into prostitution. It had turned her into a media star overnight. She was pretty, smart, and as Alfred put it, she had *it*, a beguiling quality, that was part of her conservative, midwestern upbringing, which made viewers want to identify with her.

She immediately landed a contract filming documentaries. The first show she produced under this lucrative contract did not inspire, nor did the second, and the third was canceled before filming finished. Her hopes of becoming a renowned international newswoman faded.

Alfred had remained positive throughout, “That’s just showbusiness, kid.”

“Al, some of the reviews were awful.”

“Just wait. You’re getting your film producing chops. Your next show will be a blockbuster.”

The once-adoring media, the fat, shiny goldfish in the koi pond of her life, smelled the blood in the water and transformed into sharks:

“Has Parker’s Paradise turned Pariah?”

“What will Parker do now that her career is over?”

“Did Parker peak too soon? And will she crash and burn?”

These headlines and more screamed at her from every streaming channel, every news outlet, every Twitter feed, and every Instagram share. There was even a group on Facebook formed for the sole purpose of criticizing her every move.

Her fall from grace couldn’t have been handled with more glee ... or delight from others. And her thirtieth birthday was in June. The two events were kind of related.

As much as she hated to admit it, she had to take this job.

Alfred removed his bifocals and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know I don’t need to rub your face in it, Helena, but your last three shows tanked.”

“Al, I’ll take the job.”

Al didn’t register a moment’s surprise, “Great, that’s great,” and pushed a second pack across the desk, “Sign on the dotted line, kid, and you’ll be on your way,” he grinned at her. “By the way, will you get some tweaking done before you start?”

“Um, no?”

“And getting the gap between your front teeth fixed?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay, I guess the producer will still give you the contract.”

A shock of understanding flooded her senses. “So, I’m not the producer’s first pick?”

“Nope, afraid not, Helena.”

She could always count on her agent to give her the unvarnished truth. She reached for the pack and started leafing through it. “Oh, I almost forgot...”

“What’s that?”

“Who’s my cameraman?”

“Paul Merriweather.”

“Didn’t he have a heart attack? I thought he’d retired.”

“He’s the only one who wanted this gig.”

“Oh, my goodness,” she groaned, “This is getting worse and worse.”

“Just remember, when this is over, you’ll be able to write your own ticket.”

“To Purgatory,” she joked, but inwardly she didn’t feel so sanguine.



Chapter One

HOONAH, ALASKA

JANUARY

*A*s the ferry chugged toward the mainland, Helena leaned over the railing and threw up. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“You okay there, kid?” Paul Merriweather gazed at her with concern.

She stared down into the water and marveled at the way the foam churned and frothed as it cut a swath through the icy sea. “That helped a bit,” she gasped, then let loose with a most unladylike burp.

Paul chuckled. “Okay, now you sound better.”

“Here’s hoping.”

Nothing had prepared her for the mind-numbing cold of Alaska. She might not be visiting the mainland, but perhaps the inner rim was colder, considering how Canada bounded it from the East. It sure seemed that way.

She'd flown out of LAX and arrived at the Juneau airport, then jumped on the ferry to the remote village of Hoonah. Every moment she spent on the ferry, the icy cold had seeped oh-so-slowly into her bones, until she was one big shiver.

She'd never felt so cold in her life. "I thought I'd packed everything I needed," she said, dabbing her mouth with a handkerchief, "but I forgot to bring my anti-nausea pills."

"Eh, you'll be so accustomed to this ferry by the time you get back, you won't even need them."

"Says you."

"Come on." He took her lightly by the elbow. "We're nearly at the harbor. Let's get into the rental."

She followed him down the steps, slid into the front passenger seat of the sedan, and sat back as Paul started the engine. "I've got to admit, Paul, I feel as if I'm in a foreign country right now, even though my brain is telling me it's still the United States." She glanced out the window as Paul drove onto the ramp and through the ferry parking lot, heading onto the main road of the mainland. "I mean, we're driving on the right side of the road and all, but nothing else feels familiar."

"Well, a lot of folks weren't happy with Secretary of State William H. Seward when he purchased Alaska from Russia back in 1867. 'Seward's Folly' they called it."

“What on earth?”

“Yep. But when they discovered oil, well, then a lot of folks’ opinions changed.”

“You know quite a bit about this state.”

“I sure do. I spent some time here when Roxanne and I first got married.” He glanced over at her in the dusky light. “As a matter of fact, that’s why I opted to come out of retirement when I did, on account of this job.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, oh yes. I’m planning to bring Roxanne up here with me next time. After we finish filming, I’m going to drive her around the entire inner passage, head on into Canada, and then visit Denali State Park.”

“Wow, Paul, that sounds lovely.” A twinge of envy pulled at her heart. She wished she had someone back home she could bring with her to Alaska. She’d always heard that the Northern Lights were a phenomenal thing to behold, and she wanted to travel up north to see them at their brightest, but had nobody to go with her.

“How are you doing over there, kid?”

“I’m okay,” she said in a subdued voice.

“You cold?”

“A bit.”

“I’ll turn on the heated seats.”

“That’s great.”

“You’ll get used to the weather, eventually.”

“I s-s-sure h-h-hope s-s-so,” she said, her teeth chattering.

“Oh, by the way. I don’t know if I told you this, but the next time we come up here, I’m bringing my wife. I’m gonna take

some vacation time, go visit my family in the inner rim.” He grinned. “When my wife and I first married, we lived there for a few years, and she’s got family she wants to visit, cousins she hasn’t seen since.”

A moment’s dissonance rippled through her. She considered reminding him that he’d just said this to her not five minutes earlier, but then she pushed the worry aside. She didn’t want to embarrass him by bringing it to his attention. She smiled encouragingly. “That sounds just fine.”



“Um, hey, Mark?”

“Yeah, what’s up, Agatha?”

His senior nurse, who’d worked alongside his father for twenty years, before he passed away and left the surgery to him, called him on his cell as he jogged through Hoonah Park. He much preferred exercising with hikes in the woods, but considering how busy he was, he’d had to content himself with the gravel path.

“Your first patient of the day, Mrs. Arbogast, is ready for you, and you did remember, didn’t you?”

“I did remember what?” He kept on running. Agatha tended to call him when he least wanted interruption. As stressed out as he was getting—

“Today’s the day.”

“Today’s what day?”

“Oh, no. You forgot.”

The Tempting Alaskan Doctor

He pushed back his growing irritation. She was a godsend, she really was, but there were times . . .

“What’d I forget, Agatha?”

“The film crew?”

What on earth was she talking about? He slowed to a jog, while thinking back over the past several months. A film crew . . . something about a film crew. Then it hit him. He threw his hand to his forehead and groaned. “Oh, wait, that’s right. The film crew.”

“Oh, my goodness, Mark, I can’t believe you forgot.”

“I can’t believe it either, dang.” He slowed down to a walk. On top of everything else, running the clinic without the assistance of a second doctor, staying on top of appointments, medications, prescriptions . . . it was getting to be too much for him. He didn’t know how much more strain he could take. “When are they coming?”

“This morning, Doctor Mark. They’re filming this *morning*.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m not ready.”

“Doctor Mark, you signed the contract and everything.”

“I know, Aggie, I know. I know.”

“Don’t you remember?”

“I do, I do. Oh, man ...”

“I’ll tell them you’re on the way.”

He slowed to a stop and ran his hands through his mop of unruly black hair and looked around him, as if half-expecting a film crew to materialize in front of him, a reporter with a microphone in hand, a cameraman shining his lens upon him, and a tech person holding a boom,

recording his every gesture, his every quirk, his every snarl. *You promised Doctor Chandra you'd cooperate, remember?*

At first, when Doctor Lakshmi Chandra told him that a film producer wanted to make a documentary of their medical practice, he'd thought she was joking when she said, "The amount of money they're offering is no joke. It'll pay for the new x-ray machine. Remember how we wanted to add a mammogram machine? Not to mention, it can fund a new maternity wing at the hospital. It'll make our patients' lives so much easier. They won't have to take the ferry to Juneau every time they need a diagnostic test."

The amount of money they were offering would pay for *all* the new items Lakshmi had mentioned, plus all kinds of other things that they'd never been able to afford. They talked it over, and he'd said *yes*.

The only problem was, they'd expected Doctor Chandra to be the face of the documentary. One day, she'd done her usual rounds, gone over to the tiny hospital on the main-land, and delivered yet another healthy baby to the Tlingit tribe, but then—"Doctor Roethlisberger?"

"Yes, yes, hold on a sec." Feeling cornered, trapped.

"Do you need a minute, Doctor?"

"Ah, yeah, can you tell Mrs. Arbogast that I'll be right there?"

"Sure, sure, but the film crew's on—"

"I'm almost done with my run. I'll be back in a bit."

He headed out on his fifth and final lap, turned a corner, and kept on enjoying the fresh, cold, clear air. Only now his head was filled with stressful thoughts and worries.

More and more lately, Mark felt as if his world were collapsing in around him. Ever since Lakshmi's diagnosis, he'd felt overwhelmed with the responsibility of taking care of a large population of people who depended on him. That's when he'd started his morning runs. Hoonah Park, located on the edge of the breakaway, boasted an unparalleled view of the sea, and the cold, brittle air invigorated him.

As he ran this lap, he considered the film crew. Six months ago, after they'd agreed to participate in the documentary, Lakshmi had sent the contract to their lawyer after she'd reviewed it, and given her approval. Once the lawyer put his stamp of approval on it, Mark and Lakshmi signed it, making it official.

Six months ago, he'd been living an entirely different life.

A life where his medical partner was a happily married mother of twin girls and enjoying the best of health, a life where he hiked the mountains every weekend, a life where his life had *balance*. Granted, his life hadn't been perfect ... he was unhappily single, yet he continued to hold out hope that he'd eventually find the right person ... it had yet to happen, but he was managing.

Thinking of his marital state, and running towards the copse of trees, brought up old, painful memories, even as the peace and tranquility of the woods stilled the rage in his heart. He emerged back into the clearing and ran past the wooden bench. He recalled the day when his now former wife had sat down with him on that very bench to tell him she was leaving. The cruelty of Miranda's timing couldn't have been worse.

After his father died, Mark felt compelled to return to his hometown and provide medical care for the people of Hoonah. Many of the villagers had known him as a child. It was his way of paying back the community. Miranda had insisted on staying in Anchorage, a city she vastly preferred. She stayed put while he relocated to Hoonah. He'd promised her it'd last only until he found a doctor to replace him.

No longer than a month, he'd promised her.

But he'd underestimated the workload, and even after Lakshmi arrived, the practice kept growing. The two doctors worked twenty-four-seven.

His promise of only one month turned into two, then three. Then, little by little, into a year.

Then one day Miranda called to say she was coming for a visit, and when she asked him to meet her at the bench at Hoonah Park, he'd believed they were going to enjoy a loving reunion. But instead, she'd handed him divorce papers, stood, and walked away.

At the time, he'd thought it was the worst day of his life. But it wasn't. Not even close.

As he launched into the last four-hundred yards, his cell phone chirped, and he checked the screen.

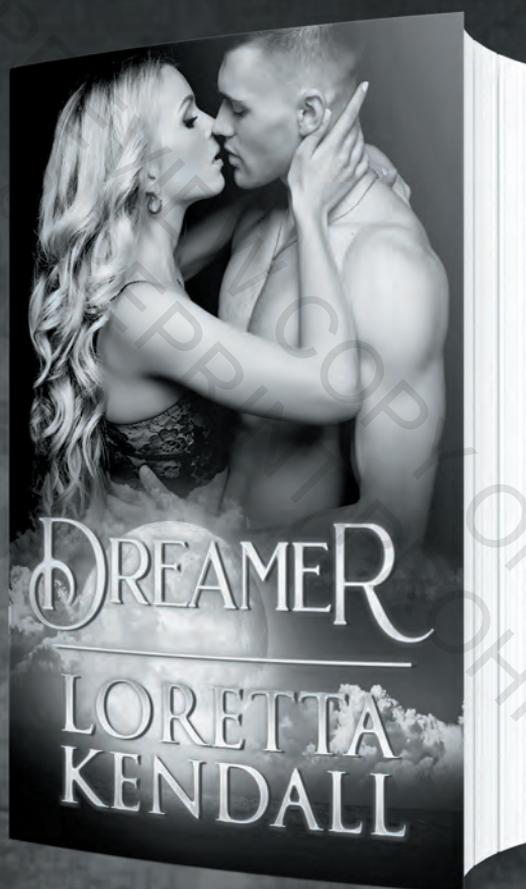
He thought it might be Agatha, wondering why he wasn't back, but it wasn't. It was someone even more important.

His medical partner, Lakshmi Chandra.



COMING SOON

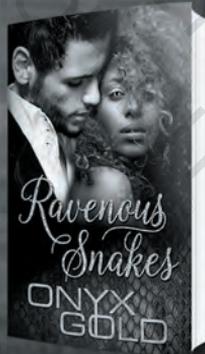
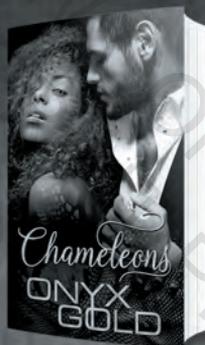
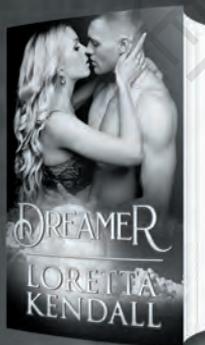
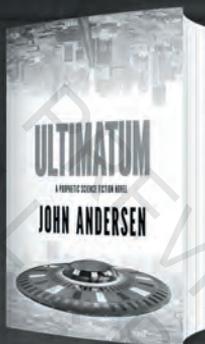
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