

## An Excerpt from Lavish Loving

By Zuri Day

*After dazzling the fashion capitals of the world, London Drake comes home to Southern California for a well-earned rest at her family's resort spa. But a chance sighting of her former lover, international playboy and trending fashion designer Ace Montgomery, sends the headline-making supermodel into seductress mode. Only this time London wants more than a hot fling.*

*Eight years, and Ace still isn't over the sensual London. Reconnecting with her in West Coast wine country is fraught with risk, and not only to Ace's heart. She is the ideal candidate to be the face of his upcoming women's clothing line. As New York Fashion Week draws near and a rekindled passion leads to an intimate affair, is London finally ready to commit to Ace? Or will a dangerously obsessed stalker sabotage their precious second chance?*

### Chapter 1

Was that...? No. Couldn't be. Not here in Temecula, California, a place London Drake only knew about because that's where her cousins lived. Nothing against the town. It was quaint, cozy and home to dozens of Southern California's celebrated vineyards as well as Drake Wines Resort and Spa, where she was now. But there was no way former celebrity model, current fashion mogul and any woman's favorite fantasy Ace Montgomery could be here. Was there?

These rapid-fire thoughts collided with one another as London quickly shifted her body for a second glimpse. That she was on an escalator was totally forgotten. She grabbed the rail to keep her balance. The unconscious step backward she attempted to get a better view almost created a domino effect that would have felled the women behind her. The group reached their destination unscathed, but the stumble hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Diamond. Just thought I saw someone I knew, that's all."

Diamond Drake Wright, London's first cousin and a company executive, took the lead as the ladies entered Wine, a trendy new bar on the second floor of the resort's boutique hotel. She greeted the hostess, waved away the offer to be escorted to their reserved booth and led the ladies to a roped-off area that featured artfully arranged seating—velvet love seats, matching chairs, fabric-tufted benches and an array of unique-looking tables to hold food and drink. The area was positioned on the small side of the L-shaped room, tucked behind the hostess station, and offered a modicum of privacy in this popular public place.

London sat on a champagne-colored love seat. Her sister-in-law Quinn plopped down beside her. "Sure you need a drink? Your clumsiness gives the impression that you've knocked back a couple behind our backs already."

London gave Quinn the kind of look that required no words but conveyed *shut the hell up* quite nicely.

"She saw a cute guy," Diamond offered as she too sat on the love seat.

"Oh." Quinn drew out the word meaningfully. "That makes sense. It wouldn't be the first time London has fallen head over heels for a man."

"Oh, be quiet." London swatted Quinn's arm as the women around her laughed. "I saw someone I thought I knew. Not just some cute guy." The ladies shared dubious looks between them. "Did y'all forget the industry I work in?" London huffed. "And that I've modeled with some of the best-looking men on the planet? If I fell over every time I saw one, I'd live on the floor."

True statement. London's supermodel-turned-celebrity lifestyle had allowed her to not only work with but to date the types of men most women only saw on glossy magazine pages, a computer screen or TV. Like her ex

Maxwell Tata, the handsome, successful A-list director. Like the man who'd almost made her fall head over heels tonight...for a second time.

But he wasn't there. Couldn't be. He was busy running a fashion empire in San Francisco. It had been years since they'd talked, but that's what she'd heard. And that he'd gotten engaged. She hadn't heard or read about a wedding, though. Was that why he was here? To marry his fiancée? Wouldn't that be the irony of ironies, if he was here for a wedding and she for a funeral?

A couple more minutes, another sip of wine and London had successfully convinced herself that she hadn't seen Ace, but seeing a man who could be his twin took her back to the magical night they'd met. And made love. And spent the next two days in a fantasy world before reality took them in different directions.

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It was her eighteenth birthday weekend, and London, who'd been discovered by a modeling scout the year before, couldn't have imagined a more perfect celebration. She'd just finished her first hectic, whirlwind week in the city that had inspired her name. Her family had flown to England to watch her walk the runway. After enjoying a private dinner prepared by a world-renowned chef, she'd said goodbye to the Drakes and been whisked away to an exclusive party held just for her. Incomparable, the number-one modeling agency in the world, had pulled out all of the stops to make the night memorable. They'd rented a castle for the grand affair, a testament to the fact she was the agency's queen bee. The guest list read like a who's who of fashion, entertainment and sports. One of the guests was Ace Montgomery, a runway veteran at the ripe old age of twenty-one, whose sexy underwear ads had made him one of the most recognizable, bankable and sought-after models on the globe. London had not been immune to his charm, had salivated over his pictures like any red-blooded woman would. His eyes had seared her from across the room, caused a shiver down her spine and a flutter in other places. Throughout the evening she caught him looking. Or vice versa. But he didn't approach. She guessed him to be arrogant and aloof, so when chance brought them together in the long hallway of one of the castle's quieter wings, his shy, somewhat corny nature had thrown her off guard.

"Hi." His voice was softer than she'd imagined it would be, and raspy.

"Hey, what's up?"

He stopped. She didn't.

"London, right?"

Already steps away from him, she paused, turned and answered while walking back to where he stood. "Yeah."

"Last name Bridges?"

She gave him an eye roll.

"Fog?"

A hint of a smile, just barely.

"London lightbulb? On account of how bright you're shining?" The comment combined with the doofus-looking expression on his face made London laugh out loud.

"You're stupid!"

"Sometimes." He held out his hand. "Ace Montgomery."

Her eyes slid from his eyes to the extended hand and back. They were the only things that moved. "Like I don't know who you are."

"No, like I'm just being courteous and greeting you formally." His arm remained outstretched.

She placed her small hand in his extralarge one. An electrical shock ran through them.

"Whoa!" Ace snatched back his hand. "Did you feel that?"

"That's what happens you when you touch a lightbulb," London deadpanned. "Nice talking to you."

London walked away without looking back. He was exquisite to look at, but the shine faded when he opened his mouth.

That was her first impression. Later that night her publicist yielded her seat in the crowded room so that London and Ace could sit and "get to know each other." No coincidence, London knew. Her publicist was strategizing. Always on the hunt for a story that would keep her client in the public eye. The flashbulbs that went off shortly afterward confirmed this belief. The conversation that followed led to a better second impression.

In the next half hour Ace came out of his shy, quiet shell and became quite engaging. He flawlessly handled the stream of admirers that came his way but continued to make London his central focus. Impressive. Not easy to do.

Photo ops and interviews pulled them away from each other. When London saw him an hour and two glasses of wine later, she asked the question that had tickled the tip of her tongue all night.

“I have a question for you?”

“Sure.”

“Is the bulge beneath those sexy black boxers you made famous real or concocted?”

“*Concocted*—good word.”

“You know, like from a sock or a certain vegetable or something.”

A bit of the cockiness London expected oozed through Ace’s megawatt smile. “No, baby. What you see in those pictures is grade-Ace beef.”

London’s look was dubious.

“Don’t believe me?”

“Nope.”

“Want to see for yourself?”

A slight lick of his lips brought moisture to a set of hers.

“Sure, why not?”

He took her hand, led her to an empty bedroom and locked the door. They didn’t come out for two days.

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“London...” Quinn softly nudged her.

“Hmm?”

“Stop thinking about the cute guy and pick up your glass. Diamond wants to propose a toast.”

“Oh. Okay.” London lifted her champagne flute, unaware of when it was placed there or filled.

Quinn and Diamond shared a glance, but she said nothing more.

While others shared a glass from a bottle of the vineyard’s premiere champagne, Diamond, its namesake, lifted a glass of sparkling white grape juice. “To our dearest Papa Dee. May he have half as good a life in heaven as he had here on Earth.”

“All of those young beautiful angels in heaven? Papa won’t be resting at all!”

“Right!” London chuckled at Katrina’s comment. They’d crossed paths at their large biannual family reunions but this was her first time really hanging out with this funny, feisty and fearless cousin from North Carolina. For equally carefree London, it was love at first hug.

Katrina’s statement brought much-needed levity to what had been a sad and exhausting day. More than five hundred people, including over one hundred members of the Drake clan, had gathered at the resort to pay last respects to the family patriarch, David “Papa Dee” Drake, who at the blessed age of 104 had earned his angel wings. Three of London’s cousins and two of her in-laws had decided to separate from the throng of friends and relatives still at the resort for some quieter, more intimate bonding before tomorrow, when everyone would start going their separate ways. For a while, funny stories of Papa Dee and recollections from the past two days dominated conversation. But eventually it came back around to London and the cute guy, courtesy of Katrina.

“So, London, who’d you see earlier that had you falling on the stairs?”

“Hopefully not another stalker,” Quinn offered.

“No stalker, thank God.”

And never again, she hoped. London still got chills when she thought of the man who’d followed her from Paris to Milan, all the way to a hotel room in New York. He’d been arrested, deported and jailed, so it couldn’t be him. And again, London thought, thank God.

Burying the thought, she turned to her cousin. “And I didn’t fall, Katrina, not even close. Not even when I climbed the tourist-unfriendly mountain to Papa Dee’s final resting place in my five-inch Choos.”

“Which is why I strongly suggested you choose a different, more appropriate shoe.” The mere implication of a resort imperfection caused Marketing and PR Director Diamond Drake Wright to bristle, though the discomfort of being eight months pregnant might have contributed, too. “And while only you could have turned that earlier stumble into a graceful, even sexy, curtsy type of thing, you’re avoiding Katrina’s question. So spill the tea. Who was it, and don’t say just some guy, because we’re not buying that at all.”

London shrugged. “Wish I had something juicy to bring to this obviously bored table, but whoever the person was reminded me of a casual friend who lived in Europe. No one you guys would know.”

“Oh, good,” Diamond said, looking around to ensure her next words would be as discreet as she intended. “Because Ace Montgomery is here but wants his stay to remain private.”

“Ace Mon—” Katrina began to exclaim.

“Shh!” Diamond interrupted.

“The model?” Diamond’s sister-in-law Marissa was the quiet one in this group, but even her whisper held excitement.

“The one in the sexy underwear ads!” Katrina whispered. “Oh, my goodness, what’s his room number? It’s about to go down!”

Katrina began to rise.

“No, you’re about to sit down.” Diamond caught Katrina’s arm and gave her the don’t-mess-with-the-pregnant-lady eye. Katrina dutifully sat down. “That’s confidential information only shared with family.” She looked at Katrina. “Something that on second thought may not have been the best idea. This baby obviously has my brain as cramped as my organs feel right now.”

She leaned back to relieve the pressure from her expanded girth. Finding none, she stood.

So did London. “Are you okay?”

“Just too uncomfortable to keep sitting.” She rubbed her stomach. “I think little Jackson is ready for bed.”

London reached for Diamond’s purse. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“That’s okay, cousin. Stay here and enjoy yourself.”

“I was headed to the bathroom anyway.”

“There’s one right behind you.”

“I’d rather use the one in the lobby.” Diamond grunted. “Stop being so independent. I’m going to walk you down.”

Two steps out of Wine and the conversation continued. “No.”

“What?” London asked Diamond, her face a study in innocence.

“What?” Diamond parroted. “I’m not stupid. Earlier, it was Ace you saw, and by your reaction whatever happened in Europe with this *friend*—” she made air quotes with her fingers “—wasn’t as casual as you claimed. Now try and deny it.”

“Dang, was I that transparent?”

“No, I’m that good at reading people. Especially those on the prowl in hotels.”

“I am hardly on the prowl.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really. I don’t look for men. They look for me.”

“Then you wouldn’t be interested in any information I’d have about him. His room number, for instance? Or that he checked in alone?”

They reached the hotel entrance and stepped outside.

“Okay, what is it?”

“No, you’re probably right. No need to share information you won’t even use.”

“I might use it. Make a phone call. Have a chat.”

“Just a phone call, huh? You can do that through the front desk. Just dial zero and ask for him.”

“I don’t want the hotel staff in my business.”

Diamond raised a brow. “Or your relatives?”

“What’s the room number?” London huffed.

“Oh, darn. Look at our observant and efficient valet staff. Already here with my car.” Diamond spoke to the young man who held the car door open and got inside.

“Diamond!”

Diamond laughed, blew a kiss. “Sweet dreams, London. See you tomorrow at brunch!”

London hid her exasperation behind a smile and waved goodbye. Her frustration was gone before Diamond’s car left the hotel driveway. It had been a few months since she’d broken things off with Maxwell and London was more than ready for some horizontal aerobics. Nothing serious, though. A friend with several inches’ worth of benefits. Or someone like the hotel guest who reminded her of the bad boy blond Max had recently made famous. Yesterday, he’d seen through her thin wig-and-shades disguise and requested a selfie. Someone like him would be fun. Not someone for whom she’d once had feelings and who was engaged—even married, as far as she knew.

*Even though he checked in alone?*

Yes, even though.

*No Ace. Keep it moving. Got it.*

She crossed the lobby to the ladies' room. The marble and brass appointments made even a simple trip to the loo a luxury. London entered one of six stalls and handled her business. She was just about to exit when she heard more women enter, whispering and giggling. London didn't want to take a chance on being recognized, and at a towering six feet plus in her ever-present five-inch heels, she was hard to miss. That and the fact that over the past five years her oval face, big brown eyes and naturally plump lips had graced the cover of every major magazine in the world. Throughout the Papa Dee celebrations, most had respected her privacy and the situation and left her alone. Not sure that would happen now. She didn't feel like socializing with strangers but didn't want to be rude. So she muted her phone and silently scrolled through a social media site, waiting for them to be gone.

"Oh, my gosh! He's even better looking in person!"

London's ears perked up. Her head raised, too.

"I know, right? I got a selfie!"

A rustling sound followed as London assumed the speaker was digging through her bag.

"Mr. Hotness in the hot flesh."

She must have found it.

"Darn it! I'm jealous! You should have asked for one in his undies."

"I know, right!"

A high five sounded. London scowled.

"Ooh, I'd do anything to be Ellen right now. Fine man like that on vacation all alone."

"Alone? I thought I read that he was married."

"Engaged, but they broke up."

London's brow raised. *Oh, really now.* Bathroom breaking news had just gotten more interesting.

"He scheduled a massage?"

"Yes. She gets to massage that fine mass of muscle for a whole hour!"

"Shut up! Why was she the lucky choice?"

"She's one of the best in the business. It probably doesn't hurt that she's married, a grandmother and twice his age. The hotel wouldn't want any scandal."

London heard a sigh.

"Guess I'll have to content myself with changing his sheets and inhaling the cologne lingering on them."

"Is he in the Champagne bungalow?"

"No, the Pinot Noir. His massage is at noon. I'd love to be a fly on the wall."

All that talk about Ace's sexiness made London replace thoughts about boundaries with memories of Ace's hard body. In that moment she determined that she was going to be that fly.