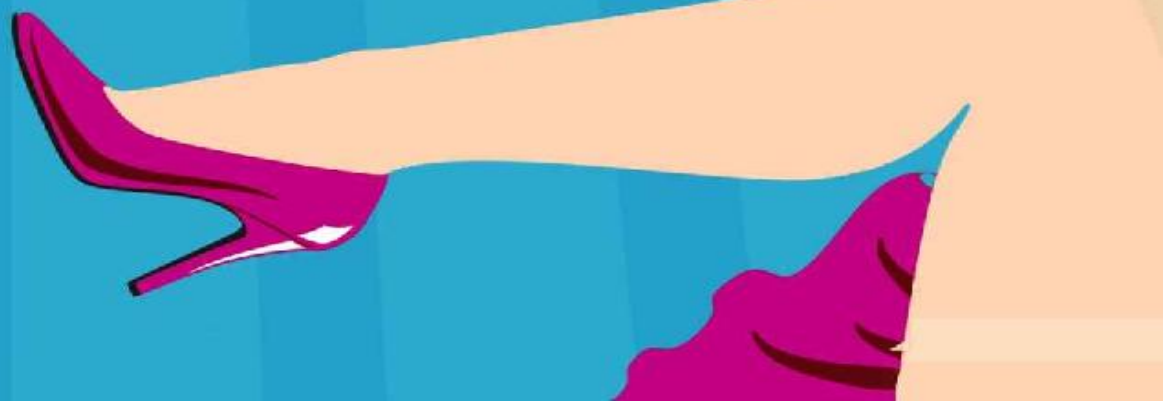


abigail drake

Park Avenue Princesses: Book One

A Royal
Princess

*Some little lies are
bigger than others.*



Praise for Abigail Drake

This is actually the first book I've read of Abigail's and I'm hooked! I NEEDED MORE!

SO MANY BOOKS, SO LITTLE TIME
BOOK BLOG

First Abigail Drake grabs you with her fresh writing, then she keeps you in the throes of her story with an incredible voice and a gifted talent for spinning tales that will amaze and delight. I am stunned.

NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DARYNDA JONES

This is one of those hidden gems that you long to come across. It has a little bit of everything in it; romance, paranormal, mystery and lots of action. There are so many twists and turns. A book that packs a punch you'll never see coming.

Absolute perfection!

DARK RAVEN REVIEWS

A Royal Pain

ABIGAIL DRAKE

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*To my friend, Sena.
Whether in Istanbul or NYC,
nothing is better than exploring cities with you.
You find magic around every corner,
and help me to see it too.*

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CHAPTER

One

SOCIALITE SAVES THE DAY

*Y*ou want me, Chloe Burke.

“Stop it, please,” I said, pressing my fingers against the display case window with a groan. “I’m going to be late.”

You can’t resist me.

“I know. Trust me, I know.”

Why fight it?

“Because I can’t afford you. Not anymore. You need to leave me alone.”

The Jimmy Choos sat behind a pane of glass in the shop, mocking me. Sparkling in the early morning sunlight, they almost blinded me with their glittery glory. I wished I could touch them, but although they sat only inches away physically, the chasm between my feet and those shoes felt immeasurable.

I could never have afforded them. I could barely afford my morning coffee, but I wanted them so badly it hurt. Those shoes weren’t merely an exquisite masterpiece of footwear design. They symbolized everything I’d once had, and everything I’d lost.

A few short years ago, my life had been nearly perfect. I’d led a dream-like existence, and my worries had revolved around nothing more pressing than parties, dresses, shopping, and shoes.

So many shoes.

Chic Gucci pumps. Sexy Louboutins. Louis Vuitton power shoes. Manolo Blahnik gladiator boots fit for a warrior goddess. And glittering, sparkly, spectacular heels by Jimmy Choo. Footwear from a fairy tale.

But on this miserable Monday morning, as the cold October wind ruffled my red hair and made me shiver in my old coat, I didn't feel chic, sexy, or powerful. No one would ever call me a warrior goddess, and my life had become the furthest thing possible from a fairy tale. I may have been almost famous once upon a time, but now I'd become a big fat nobody.

I straightened my spine and forced myself to step away. I needed to spend what money I had on other things. Important things. Things I would never have even considered in my previous life.

Food. Utilities. Lunches for my baby sister. A mountain of medical bills.

I snuck a peek at my watch and cringed. At this rate, I barely had time to grab coffee for my evil boss and make it to the office by nine. If I came in late again, I'd have to listen to Felicity Fuller, the meanest manager in the world, rant for an hour. Maybe even two. Then, she would have a bad attitude all day.

Felicity Fuller. The Queen of Baditude.

Stealing one last longing glance over my shoulder at the shoes, I took off at a trot to the coffee shop. The line seemed short, but I ended up behind a woman in an "I Love New York" T-shirt who questioned every item on the menu as she fiddled with her camera and adjusted her fanny pack.

"Can you tell me what's in a mocha?" asked Ms. Fanny Pack, squinting at the menu. "And what the heck is a mac-chi-a-to?"

Oh, no, I thought, as panic set in. *No, no, no, no*.

How had she never heard of a mocha? This was not good. Judging by appearances, and lots of time spent waiting in line at this very coffee shop, I concluded this particular woman

probably wouldn't even enjoy a mocha. I pegged her as a pumpkin spice latte kind of gal. Since that was hardly the kind of thing I could announce to a perfect stranger, I simply waited, tapping my foot impatiently as she went through the entire menu. At long last, she decided on—huge surprise—a pumpkin spice latte. But then, sadly, a whipped cream discussion ensued.

To whip or not to whip? That was the question. Simple, and yet also remarkably complicated.

My foot tapping nearly morphed into stomping as the clock ticked on and on. The transaction took about six minutes, and I didn't have a single moment to waste this morning.

When I finally got to the front of the line, the barista, a coffee-making angel named Gina, already had my order ready and waiting. She handed me two large cups in a cardboard carrier, a half-caf soy latte for my boss, and a small cappuccino with extra whip and a dusting of cinnamon for me.

I nearly wept with gratitude. "Gina, you're saving my life this morning."

"Don't mention it," said Gina, her voice full of sympathy. "Running late again, Chloe?"

"As always."

I paid for the coffee, giving Gina a generous tip. Although I had very little money, she was an excellent barista and the most patient person I'd ever met. Also, the poor girl made even less than me—an absolute travesty.

She watched me juggle my purse, cell phone, and the flimsy cardboard cup holder with a concerned expression on her kind face. "Be careful. You wouldn't want to spill coffee on your pretty coat."

I sent her a parting wave. "I'll be careful. Thank you."

My coat, a remnant from the days when I could afford cashmere and didn't worry about buying something white and frivolous, used to be an item I wore for the color contrast it provided with my red hair. Now I wore it for one reason alone

—to keep me warm on a cold October morning in New York City. Fashion no longer had anything to do with it.

I left the coffee shop, joining the swell of humanity as I dodged pedestrians with practiced ease and moved as quickly as I could in heels. My shoes, another item from the old days, were pink Manolo Blahniks. Scuffed from overuse and no longer in style, they were also the only decent shoes I had left.

I increased my pace in an effort to beat the light. Sadly, as soon as I reached the corner, it changed, and I skidded to a halt behind a large group of people waiting to cross. This would never work. I had to get to the front of the pack if I wanted to run for it once the light changed.

“Excuse me,” I said as I wiggled through the crowd. I earned dirty looks from my fellow pedestrians, but I kept moving. Someone swore when I bumped them with my purse. Another person huffed in annoyance when I elbowed them in the back.

“Pardon me,” I said. I gave them an apologetic look, but I kept moving.

I stepped around an older man with a newspaper tucked under his arm. He wobbled when I brushed against him, a bit unsteady on his feet, and glared at me from beneath bushy, gray eyebrows.

“Sorry,” I said, wincing. Knocking over an old man would be exactly what I needed to make this morning even more of a nightmare.

One step at a time, I eased my way to the curb. I’d nearly reached the front of the pack when a tall, smelly man in a black overcoat bumped into me. He reeked of body odor, sweat, and something oddly minty. Wrinkling my nose at the smell, I squeezed past him, trying to ignore his stench. If I hustled the last two blocks and didn’t get stuck at another light, I might still have a chance to get to work before Felicity began her tirade.

I hovered, toes hanging off the curb. How did these things always happen to me? I’d left my apartment on Park Avenue

extra early this morning, after sending my sister off to school and setting up my father by the window in his wheelchair. I'd said goodbye to him and kissed his gaunt cheek, but he didn't answer. He never answered. It had become our morning routine.

What should have been a quick subway ride followed by a short walk through the Flatiron District had taken an extra thirty minutes. Why? Because of those shoes. Because of the woman in the coffee shop. Because I needed better time management skills. Because I'd become a living, breathing example of Murphy's Law. Whatever could go wrong did go wrong. Always.

I braced myself, muscles tense, as the Madison Avenue traffic crawled past. When the light finally turned red, the crowd behind me surged with unexpected force, knocking me right off the curb. I moaned as hot coffee spilled all over my fingers and down the front of my coat.

"No, no, no."

Felicity would only get half of a half-caf soy latte this morning, and I didn't have time to buy her another. The entire office would pay the price. Arriving late and in a stained coat would be terrible enough. Coming to work without her coffee was a mortal sin.

Taking a tissue out of my pocket, I dabbed at the coffee on my jacket as I trotted across the busy street. Not my best idea. I didn't watch where I was going and somehow got my right shoe wedged in a narrow crack in the asphalt. My foot slipped out of my shoe, but I'd been moving so fast I couldn't control my momentum. I went flying, a redheaded missile wearing only one shoe in a badly stained white cashmere coat.

Things happened in slow motion as I fell. I still clutched the coffee holder, but it no longer contained any coffee. Both cups had struck the man crossing the street right in front of me. Tall, blond, and wearing an expensive-looking suit, he jolted in surprise when my coffee hit him squarely in the back. And, at that moment, I felt something sharp and painful hit me right in the bum.

I plowed into the poor guy with a loud screech, flattening him like a pancake. My butt hurt, and I was covered in coffee, but I hit him with the force of one of those WWE wrestlers as they bounced off the ropes and did some kind of move—like a screwdriver or a snow plower or something. He landed on the street beneath me, covered in coffee, with my boobs smashed into the back of his head. I straddled his torso in a weird, spread-eagle stance. I still held the empty coffee carrier in my hand for no reason. My red hair fell over my face, obscuring my vision, and my knee dug into his side.

“Sorry,” I said as I grunted, struggling to get off him. Everything ached, but my bottom hurt most of all. “Ow. What the heck was that?”

It felt like my butt was on fire. I wanted to inspect it and figure out exactly what had happened, but I couldn’t—mainly because another man, someone hard and muscular and very large, had landed on top of me with a thump and pinned me to the ground.

I couldn’t move. I could barely breathe. Coffee covered my hands and jacket, and something warm and wet was on the back of my leg. How had my coffee gotten onto the back of my thigh? That was just another sign of how my day was going. Also, my face felt tender and scraped from where it had hit the pavement, and my bottom hurt—a lot.

Today was the worst Monday in the history of all Mondays, and it was barely 9 o’clock. That may have been a new record.

A woman screamed, and I became aware of lots of activity around me. From my current angle, however, I couldn’t see anything except feet. Lots of feet. Feet enclosed in business shoes, tennis shoes, pumps, and loafers, all of them racing back and forth across the pavement in a panic.

I spotted a pair of Jimmy Choos as a woman sprinted past, and a surge of fear hit me. No one sprinted in Jimmy Choos, especially not in Jimmy’s black suede, perfectly balanced, *Love 100* style pumps with 3.9-inch heels. Something strange

had to be going on to make a woman risk shoes that magnificent. Something serious.

I wiggled, trying to extricate myself from this situation, and it caused the man beneath me to let out a soft grunt. He probably couldn't breathe because of all the weight on him—and because of my boobs. I'd always been a busty girl, and with my bosom squashed against his neck and head, I feared I may have cut off his air supply entirely.

The person on top of our small pile of humanity, the one with the rock-hard muscles, shifted back and forth as if searching for something, but he still hadn't gotten up. At this point, I'd had enough.

I cleared my throat. "Excuse me," I said in my haughtiest voice,

Hoping for some sort of reply, I tried in vain to lift my head, but the man on top of me shoved me right back to the ground. Small pebbles from the pavement dug into my cheek, and I found it hard to get comfortable with my butt in the air, one man on top of me, and my chest smashed into another man's head. I was like the squishy middle of a muscley man sandwich. A new thing for me, but I'd reached my breaking point. Done with being polite, I opened my mouth to scream. Fortunately, the person on top of me finally rose to his feet. Two strong arms lifted me, turning me gently onto my side and taking the empty coffee holder out of my hand. I glared at him, planning to give him a piece of my mind, but stopped when I saw his face.

Dark hair, dark eyes, an arrogant nose, a chiseled jaw. This man had to be the sexiest thing I'd seen in a long time, and I'd made a fantastic first impression. I'd never looked so horrible in my life—not even when I'd gone on spring break with my best friend, Georgiana, and slept in a barn. In the morning, I'd awoken covered in hay, reeking of horse poo, and very hungover, but even then, I'd still been in better shape than this.

I tried to get to my feet, but Mr. Dark and Sexy wouldn't let me. "Do not move. You're injured."

His voice rumbled, deep and husky, and his accent sounded upper-crust English but mixed with a hint of something else, traces of a language I didn't recognize.

“Injured? What are you talking about? I'm not injured.”

He removed his dark suit jacket, muscles flexing under his impeccably ironed white shirt, and put it under my head like a pillow. “Stay still.”

Two other men in dark suits helped the blond man I'd assaulted to his feet and rushed him off. He glanced back at me as they led him away, and I watched him go. I'd seen his face before. Another hottie and probably someone important, and I'd tackled him like a linebacker.

It took me a second to realize Mr. Dark and Sexy had one hand firmly placed on my bottom, right where it hurt most, as he continued to hold me down. People gathered around and stared at me with mouths agape, whispering and pointing.

“Did you see what happened?” one man asked, chewing on a piece of gum as he recorded a video with his phone. “She saved his life.”

“She's a hero,” said the old man with the newspaper. “If it hadn't hit her right in the tooshie, the guy in the fancy suit would have taken it in the heart.”

The woman from the coffee shop who'd held up the line snapped pictures of me with her fancy camera as she sipped her pumpkin spice latte. “I love New York,” she said, leaning closer. “May I have your autograph?”

This could only happen to me. Truly.

Mr. Dark and Sexy scowled at each person in the crowd. “Back off. Now.”

He had the voice of authority, and they listened to him, moving a few feet away. But they continued to stare at me, and he still had his hand on my bum.

I tried to pull my skirt back into place. I'd inadvertently flashed half of the Flatiron District with my lacey lilac-colored undies. Not a good thing. Now, I'd arrive at work not only

late, covered in coffee, and filthy, but I'd also be on YouTube. And I only had one shoe.

“What happened to my other shoe?”

Mr. Dark and Sexy didn't answer me. He spoke into his sleeve like a secret service agent. “The Chessman is safe. I repeat, he is safe. But the suspect has escaped, and I have a girl who has been hit. I need medical assistance. Immediately.”

He pushed even harder on my butt, and I glared at him. “Get your hands off my bottom. Now.”

He blinked, taken aback by my comment. “I'm applying pressure to the wound to stop the bleeding.”

“Wound?” I craned my neck, trying to see, but couldn't. “What wound?”

“You've been shot.”

“I've been what?” A wave of nausea crashed over me, and suddenly, I became aware of the pain. My butt burned and throbbed and ached at the same time. “Hold on a second. Is that blood running down my leg?”

“Yes. What did you think it was?”

“Coffee.”

“Coffee?” He raised a dark eyebrow at me. “Didn't you feel it when you got hit by the bullet?”

I pushed the hair out of my face so I could glare at him. “Yes, but I was too busy trying to breathe with you lying on top of me to realize it.”

“I was protecting you.” He pushed even harder.

“Ow. And now you're hurting me.”

“If I don't apply pressure, you could bleed to death. Please stop fighting. The ambulance will be here any minute.”

“Ambulance? I don't have money to pay for an ambulance. This is a nightmare. Why do these things always have to happen to me?”

As tears poured down my cheeks, Mr. Dark and Sexy gave me a reassuring pat. “There, there. Don’t worry. The ambulance will be taken care of, and the wound looks worse than it is. Redheads tend to be bleeders, but soon you’ll be right as rain. I promise.”

Another wave of nausea overcame me, and I did my best not to get sick. At least bystanders weren’t staring at my bottom anymore. Some of New York’s finest had formed a wall of blue around us, keeping the crowd at a more respectful distance.

I sniffed. “It’s not going to be okay. My boss is going to kill me. She’s the meanest boss in the world, and I spilled her c-c-c-coffee. And I’m late for work. Again. And I lost my shoe.”

“I’ll find your shoe and let your boss know what happened.”

“She won’t care. She’s awful. She hates me. And that was the last decent pair of shoes I owned. I’ll have to walk around barefoot. Or I’ll be reduced to wearing flats. I hate flats. I hate my job. I hate my boss. I hate my life.”

I full-out sobbed now. I couldn’t stop myself.

Mr. Dark and Sexy stayed with me, murmuring soothing words as I wept. When the ambulance arrived, he climbed in, his hand never leaving my bottom.

“We can take it from here, sir,” said the EMT.

“Oh. Right.”

He shifted in embarrassment as he took his hand off my bum, but insisted on staying in the ambulance with me, which came as a relief. I didn’t want to be alone. As we drove to the hospital, sirens blaring, he reached for me without saying a word and held my hand.

I found it strangely soothing and decided I owed him an apology. After all, he’d kind of saved my life.

“I’m sorry I was cranky. I shouldn’t have treated you that way. Thanks for taking care of me.”

His lips twitched. “You earned the right to be cranky. Someone shot you.”

“In the butt. It figures,” I said, getting woozy. “I’m always cranky without coffee, but that’s no excuse. You helped me, and I don’t even know your name.”

“Nicolai Mercia,” he said with a slight bow of his head. “But most people call me Nico.”

“Oh.” The name suited him, but he could have been a Maximilian or a Bastian as well. Something romantic and yet powerful and sexy at the same time.

The EMT gave me medication in an IV. It took the edge off the pain and made my attitude a whole lot better.

“I’m Chloe Burke. It’s nice to meet you,” I said, my tone formal, like we were meeting at a tea party and not in the back of an ambulance.

“Nice to meet you, too, Chloe Burke,” he said, his lips curving into a smile.

He was hot. Mega-hot. Everything in the ambulance spun as I tried to process his hotness. Although the sensation probably had more to do with whatever the EMT had put in my IV. It reminded me of the time I’d had too many glasses of Chardonnay at a friend’s wedding.

Spin, spin, spin.

It got so bad I could barely keep my eyes open, but I remained amazingly calm. I didn’t even feel concerned when the EMT lifted my skirt to get a better view of my wound.

Nico, however, averted his eyes. Like he hadn’t just seen every detail of my panties or had his hands all over my bum less than five minutes ago. It made me giggle.

“Now you’re too shy to look at my undies? You’re such a gentleman.” I squeezed his hand and then paused, confused. “Wait. Why did someone try to shoot me? It doesn’t make sense. I’m nothing. I’m nobody.”

He cleared his throat. “They weren’t shooting at you. They were shooting at the prince.”

“Prince? What prince?”

The words came out slurred, and if Nico answered, I was too out of it to understand his response. Today had barely started, and it had already become a disaster. I couldn't afford to get shot. I couldn't afford to miss work. Knowing Felicity, she'd fire me this time, and I would have to scrub toilets for a living to keep my sister, Ella, from starving.

“I hate my life,” I said. “I want a redo.”

As the sirens wailed and the ambulance carried me through the crowded streets of New York, I sank into blissful darkness. I'd been right about one thing. This had been the worst Monday morning ever.

CHAPTER

Two

HELPFUL HEROINE SURVIVES SURGERY

I woke to find Ella hovering beside my bed, her sweet face worried. She reached for my hand. “Chloe? Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I murmured, still groggy. “But I got shot in the butt. I guess I’ll have to skip the thong bikini when we go to St. Tropez this summer.”

We both knew we couldn’t afford a trip to the Jersey Shore, let alone St. Tropez. And I never would have worn a thong, not even on my best day. I’d said it to make her laugh, and my words had the desired effect. She gave me a shaky smile, but her cheeks were red, and her eyes puffy from crying.

“You were never much of a thong girl anyway,” she said. “No great loss.”

“Hey. Speak for yourself.” I glanced around the room. It was filled with giant bouquets of gorgeous flowers. “What’s with all the flowers? Did someone die?”

She laughed. “Thanks to you, no one died.”

“What do you mean?”

“You saved Prince Alexander of Latovia today. There was an assassination attempt. The flowers are from the prince. And the Mayor of New York. And the president. And a bunch of other people. You’re a hero, Chloe.”

“Hold on a second. The president of what?”

“Of the United States.” She pointed to a large bouquet in the corner of the room. “He called you a national treasure.”

The events of this morning rushed back to me. Shoes. Coffee. Mr. Sexy. Butt pain. Soy latte.

“Oh, God. What time is it? Felicity is going to fire me for real.”

I tried to get up from the bed, but Ella stopped me. “Stay still. You just had surgery.”

“I did?”

“Yes, and the doctor said you’re extremely lucky since the bullet didn’t hit anything vital.”

I glowered at her. “Excuse me. My butt is pretty vital. To me, at least.”

She rolled her eyes. “I meant it didn’t hit any bones or arteries. You lost quite a bit of blood, but thanks to the first aid you received at the scene, you didn’t need a transfusion.”

I remembered Nico and his big hand on my bottom. He honestly *had* been trying to help me. “Well, not needing a transfusion is good. Maybe today doesn’t totally suck.”

“It doesn’t suck at all. It’s a miracle. The doctor said it could not have lodged itself in a better place. He called it ‘fatty tissue.’ I knew you’d enjoy that.”

She snorted, and I gave her a dirty look. “Seriously, Ella?” I rolled my eyes. “The doctor said I have a big butt and you think it’s hilarious. Great. Any other good news?”

“Yes. The operation was a success. They said it’ll take you a few weeks to recover, but you’ll be back to normal in no time.”

“A few weeks?” My eyes widened. “Oh, no. I can’t miss work. Felicity will fire me.”

She squeezed my hand, being careful to avoid the IV. “No, she won’t. Trust me.”

“She is Satan’s mistress, Ella. She’s been hoping for a reason to get rid of me for ages. Did you call her to let her

know what happened?”

Ella bit her lip, unable to contain her grin. “I didn’t have to. It’s on the news. The whole world knows what happened this morning.”

She turned on the television that hung on the wall at the foot of my bed. As she flipped through the channels, I listened to the announcers in shock. On each channel, the lead story followed one topic: me.

On NBC, a perky, blonde reporter stood in front of the coffee shop I’d visited this morning. “Socialite Chloe Burke saved the life of Prince Alexander of Latovia today. In New York on a diplomatic mission, the crown prince was the target of an assassination attempt. The brave and beautiful Ms. Burke took the bullet for him.” The reporter’s eyes filled with tears. “It makes me proud to be a New Yorker.”

Brave and beautiful? Me? More like clumsy and chronically tardy.

“Oh, my,” I said.

“There’s more.” Ella switched to CBS. A photo of me in a red evening gown flashed on the screen. It had been taken at a charity event several years ago.

“Ugh. Why did they have to choose that one? I hate that picture and that dress. My butt looks enormous. It’s like a planet—Jupiter or something. It may even have its own gravitational pull.”

“Your big booty saved your life.” Ella snorted. “But it could explain why the bullet hit you there. Kind of hard to miss a target that size.”

I smacked her arm. “You aren’t funny.” I squinted at the screen. “I remember the day I bought that dress. The shopkeeper told me it reminded her of the dress from *Pretty Woman*, and I fell for it. Never trust a shopkeeper who says you resemble a prostitute.”

“Sage advice.”

We listened to another perky reporter, this time a brunette, talk about what had happened this morning. “Chloe Burke, of the Burke Books Publishing House, leaped into action earlier today to save the life of visiting royalty.”

“Burke Books?” I shot Ella a worried frown. “This is going from bad to worse. Did she have to mention the publishing house?”

Burke Books had been our family business for generations, but it no longer belonged to us. A few years ago, my father sold it, foolishly, for much less than its actual value. In doing so, he’d taken away our family legacy, but he’d always hated the publishing industry. For him, it had been a way to free himself from its clutches. For me, that decision was one of the greatest disappointments of my life.

Although hard for me to comprehend, the book gene had skipped his generation somehow, as did the financial responsibility gene. A pampered only child, he cared about two things: having fun and maintaining the same lifestyle he and my mother had always enjoyed. He never imagined a scenario in which he did not have the resources to buy whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it, and he never pictured a life without my mother. When he lost her in the same car accident that left him permanently disabled and financially destitute, he stopped caring about anything at all.

He wasn’t a bad father. Not exactly. He loved Ella and me, but not enough to be a responsible parent. Not enough to take care of us. He’d made poor choices, and as he sat in his wheelchair at home, staring off into space, mourning his loss, he left the burden of dealing with those choices directly on my shoulders.

The choice to sell Burke Books.

The choice to spend all the money he made from the sale without a care for the future.

The choice to drive home after drinking far too much on a snowy New Year’s Eve.

The choice to give up, shut down, and not even try to recover from the accident.

We'd been able to get by, but barely. Most people assumed we still owned at least a share in Burke Books, and the misconception had helped sustain us. It came in handy for me at work and for Ella at school. I got my job because of my "connections." Ella could continue to hang out with her old and very wealthy friends at school without facing the added stigma of being labeled as poor. We didn't exactly lie about our current situation, but we didn't publicize it either. We needed to keep our secret as long as possible, or at least until my trust fund kicked in. If the people reporting on me figured it out, we'd lose whatever prestige we still had left.

"Maybe they won't connect the dots. Maybe they won't realize what happened," said Ella. "To our family, I mean."

"It's possible."

I hoped that might be the case, but I doubted it. Our family was too well known for something so substantial to slip through the cracks, and people always loved to hear about how the mighty had fallen.

And we had definitely fallen.

I discovered the full extent of our troubles not long after my mother's death. In addition to being a spendthrift, my father had trusted the wrong people, invested in the wrong companies, and lost practically everything. We'd only kept the apartment, which my father refused to sell, and the money put aside by my grandfather to pay for Ella's education. The stipend covered the cost of the exclusive private school she attended and would pay for college as well, but it didn't meet the cost of other things, like her uniforms. Field trips. School projects. Food. Basic necessities.

I could have sent her to the public school down the street, but her trust fund rules were specific. The money could only be used to pay for a private school in the city, or we would have to give it to charity. It didn't matter that we'd practically become a charity ourselves.

And Ella had suffered enough loss already. Taking her away from her friends and the only school she'd ever known would have been even more traumatic.

Poor Ella. Being a teenager was difficult enough. Being different from other kids made it even worse. While the children at her school went to St. Barts or skiing over vacation, she made excuses and stayed home. She never complained, but it could not have been easy as the only impoverished kid in a school full of wealthy socialites and people who came from old money.

Thankfully, she only had one year left before college. And I had one year left until I turned 25 and could dip into my trust fund. Although not enough to solve all our problems, I'd be able to help Ella get through university and keep the heat on in our apartment—if we could only hold out that long.

Thinking about the apartment made my stomach tighten in knots. The only thing we still owned, it was a giant, drafty noose around my neck. We'd sold the cars, the artwork, my mother's furs, and almost all of the furniture, but I couldn't force my dad to get rid of the apartment. I tried, but he refused even to consider the idea, and everything was in his name. That apartment had become his world, the only thing he had left of my mother—an empty shell of a home for an empty shell of a man.

I let out a frustrated sigh. He needed therapy desperately, but we couldn't afford it. We couldn't afford much of anything. Thank goodness Ella didn't have a nut allergy because half of her meals now came from peanut butter and white bread.

I glanced at the television. The words *Chloe Burke, an American Hero*, flashed across the bottom of the screen.

“This is ridiculous ...” I began, but Ella shushed me, her expression rapt and eyes glued to the television.

“Joe McNulty of Queens saw it happen,” said the reporter as she handed the microphone to a dark-haired man with an impressive mustache.

“The redhead in the dirty white coat flew way up in the air to block the bullet,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “She saved his life, for sure. She deserves a medal or something. She’s a true hero in my book.”

I stared at the TV screen, stunned. “I’m now a ‘redhead in a dirty white coat’? Are you kidding me?”

“At least he didn’t mention seeing your undies. Another guy went on and on about them in an earlier interview. He called you ‘the purple panties lady.’ Hey, are you going to eat your lunch?” she asked, nodding toward the food provided to me by the hospital, an unappetizing assortment of dry toast, Jell-O, and ginger ale. I passed it over to her, and she munched on the bread enthusiastically. “But like Joe McNulty of Queens said, you’re a hero, Chloe,” she said between bites. “That’s the important part. You’re famous. And guess what? We’ve had ten calls already asking for interviews. Paid interviews. Someone is even talking about a potential book offer. People are willing to give us a whole lot of money for the chance to speak with you.”

“But” I wanted to tell her the truth. I wasn’t a hero. I hadn’t saved anyone’s life, not on purpose. Ella stopped the words in my throat when she regarded me, her eyes filling with tears.

“They’re offering you a lot—more than you could ever imagine. We’ll be able to pay off some of Dad’s medical bills, and we might even be able to get him into therapy. I’m sorry you got hurt, Sissy, but this could be the best thing to happen to us in a long time.”

Her words made me pause. Ella. My mini-me. Some people called her my clone. We had the same red hair, an inheritance from our mother, and the same green eyes, a gift from our father. We were both a bit on the tall side, and while Ella was still a skinny teenager, she’d soon have my curvy figure as well. But there the similarities ended. Ella had grown into a person a million times more sensible and mature than I’d been at her age, but she had to be. She didn’t have a choice.

My heart squeezed in my chest as I stared at her. She'd outgrown her school uniform again. The blouse stretched tight across her bosom, and the skirt hovered above the acceptable length on her thighs. She'd been sprouting like a weed, and I knew I'd get a call soon. The school administrators had insinuated she'd worn her skirt too short as an act of rebellion. They'd even given her detention once. They had no idea we couldn't afford to buy new uniforms, and we'd never tell them. We may have lost the Burke fortune, but we still had the Burke pride. It was the only thing keeping us going sometimes.

I sighed as I pondered what to do. I knew I should tell the truth. I hadn't intended to save anyone's life this morning. It had been a complete and utter accident. But when I saw the hope shining in Ella's eyes, something I hadn't seen there in such a long time, I made my decision.

“How much money are we talking about exactly?”

CHAPTER

Three

THE SHOT HEARD ROUND THE WORLD: A NATIVE NEW
YORKER'S DARING DEED

Later in the evening, after Ella had gone home to make Dad dinner, Nico showed up in my room. I'd been napping and woke with a start to find him hovering awkwardly in my doorway, like a six-and-a-half-foot tall, muscular puppy. He carried a bouquet of lilacs tied with a purple velvet ribbon. Simple, elegant, and perfect.

"Hey." I struggled to get myself in a seated position and winced at the twinge of pain that even such a small motion brought. Both the local anesthetic and the painkiller had worn off. I considered calling the nurse and asking for more but decided to tough it out. The last thing I needed at this point was an addiction to painkillers. It would be the icing on the cake of my messed-up life.

Nico moved toward me, his expression worried. "Shall I call for a nurse? You're very pale."

"It's my natural shade." I leaned back on the pillow as gingerly as I could. "Nothing to be concerned about."

"You lost a lot of blood."

"The doctors told me it would have been much worse if you hadn't stopped the bleeding. Thank you. You're good in an emergency."

He gave me the barest hint of a smile. "You are most welcome." He put the lilacs next to my bed and pulled out a gift from behind his back. "For you."

I took it from him, confused. The size and shape of it reminded me of one of my favorite things in the whole wide

world—a shoebox. But why would Nico be giving me a shoe box?

“What is this?” I tore open the wrapping paper and immediately recognized the deceptively simple white box with plain black lettering. Manolo Blahniks.

“They’re to replace the shoes you had on yesterday. The ones you lost.”

“You did not have to do this,” I said, unable to take my eyes off the shoes.

The shoes I’d been wearing were rejects from many seasons ago. These, however, were so beautiful. So perfect. And in the latest style. Also, rather than being hard-to-match bright pink, they were a neutral shade of beige that would go with just about anything.

“They didn’t have the same color. I’m sorry. The woman in the shop said this color is very popular, but you can exchange them for whatever you’d like.”

“They’re perfect. I love them.” I almost hugged them but decided it would have been weird. “What happened to my old shoes?”

Nico stuck his hand into his coat pocket and sheepishly pulled out the shoe I’d lost right before I’d gotten shot. Filthy and twisted, the heel jugged out at an odd angle. Kind of a pitiful metaphor for my life, if a person believed in that sort of thing, and I most certainly did.

Nico shook his head apologetically as he gazed at the bedraggled shoe in his hand. “I doubt anyone could repair this one, but I could ask if you’d like.”

“It’s okay. Honestly, those shoes weren’t in the best condition to start with, so please throw it away.”

He dropped it into the trash can. “The prince will also take care of your medical expenses.”

My cheeks burned with shame. I had insurance but knew the co-pays would kill me. I would need to take out a loan to

cover it, but even so, the idea of the prince paying for it seemed wrong.

“There is no need—”

He held up a hand. “He insists. There will be no further discussion on the matter.”

“Is that so?” I asked, lifting one eyebrow, annoyed at his autocratic tone.

“Yes,” he said, a little harshly, then softened his voice. “It is so, and there is good reason for it. You were hurt because of us. Please let us do this one small service for you.”

His sincerity won me over, so I grudgingly went along with it. “Fine. Thank you. And I appreciate the flowers too.” I lifted the lilacs and took a whiff. “Lilacs are my favorite.”

“I’m glad. I saw the color and it reminded me of you.”

His words made a funny warmth spread over me. Why would any flower remind him of me? He didn’t even know me. Then again, we’d met under terrible circumstances. It made me feel closer to him for some reason, and perhaps he felt the same.

The idea made a different kind of warmth spread over me. I sniffed the fragrant blossoms again to hide my embarrassment. “Where did you get them? They aren’t in season right now.”

“You can find anything in New York if you look hard enough.”

“I guess you’re right.”

He pulled a metal chair from the corner of my room closer to my bed. “Chloe, I need to talk with you about what happened,” he said, his dark eyes intense. “Can you give me a description of the man who shot at Prince Alexander?”

Although I’d decided to perpetuate this falsehood for financial gain, it never occurred to me I’d have to lie to someone’s face. I was the world’s worst liar. And I hadn’t worked out a story yet to explain what had occurred. I bit my lip, my mind racing as I tried to buy time.

“It happened so quickly.”

“Can you tell me anything about the shooter at all?”

“No, I can’t remember much about any of it, to be honest. Well, I remember you. Obviously.”

How could I not remember someone like Nico Mercia? Impossible. A person in a coma would remember him.

“And I remember the prince,” I continued, stumbling over my words. “I mean, I didn’t know he was a prince when I flattened him. I saw a gun and reacted.”

“You saw the gun? And yet you can’t remember anything about the shooter?”

To my chagrin, my hands shook. “No. I can’t. And no matter how many times you ask me, the answer will be the same.”

Nico eyed me closely. “I’m sorry,” he said, moving from his chair to perch on the side of my bed. “You’ve been through so much. I shouldn’t trouble you with this right now. Maybe it will come to you later.”

He took my shaking hand in his. He smelled faintly of cologne and something else. Something sexy. Eau de Nico. And even though he’d barely touched me, I experienced a zap of an odd sensation, almost like electricity, shoot across my skin.

Lust. Pure and simple. *Holy guacamole*. I lusted after Nico.

My eyes widened in surprise as I pulled my hand away. He cleared his throat, acting thrown off as well. Could he have been experiencing the same thing? How very strange. It seemed improbable a person as polished and sophisticated as Nicolai Mercia could have a lust-zap for someone as pathetic as poor, shot-in-the-butt Chloe Burke. But maybe he had felt it too.

Or maybe he was simply annoyed with me and wanted answers. I couldn’t say for sure.

He rose to his feet and paced back and forth across my hospital room like a caged panther at the zoo. When he came to a stop, he ran a hand through his dark hair.

“The thing that surprises me most about this is how you saw it happen and reacted so quickly. You must possess amazing reflexes. I know men who’ve trained for years but lack the same speed and instinct.”

I shrugged. “Right place, right time? Because the only athletic training I’ve ever had was tennis lessons at the club. But I was twelve and kept hitting myself with the racquet instead of the ball, so I don’t think it counts.”

He gave the impression of being less than convinced, but a commotion at the door drew his attention. My best friend, Georgiana Knowles, stood in the doorway, her arms filled with balloons, flowers, and what appeared to be the world’s most massive box of Godiva chocolate. She threw everything at Nico and pulled me into her arms.

“Chloe. You almost died. I can’t believe it.” She cupped my face in her hands. “God. You need blush. You’re as pale as a ghost.”

As she dug in her purse, I introduced her. “Georgie, this is Nico. He took care of me when I got shot this morning.” That sounded very odd. Normal people did not get shot crossing the street on their way to work. Then again, I’d never been normal. “Nico, this is Georgie, my co-worker and my oldest and dearest friend.”

Georgie and I had met on the first day of first grade, and we’d been inseparable ever since. Our mothers had been best friends too. I’d been there for her when her parents divorced, and her father returned to his home country of Jamaica. She’d been there for me when my life fell apart as well. We shared a special kind of friendship.

As Georgie and Nico shook hands, I noticed how he towered over my diminutive friend. She gave him a long perusal, taking in the silky dark hair, the sexy stubble on his chin, and his eyes so brown, they bordered on black.

“Well, hello there.”

She tucked one of her dark blond locks behind her ear and adjusted her tortoiseshell glasses. Naturally flirtatious, Georgie appreciated a fine-looking man, and Nico definitely fit the bill.

He shifted, as if uncomfortable with the attention, and moved toward the door. “Well, I shall leave you to spend time with your friend. I’ll be in touch soon, Ms. Burke. The prince would like to meet with you to thank you personally.”

He nodded and left the room. Georgie watched him go, staring at his butt. I stared at it too. I couldn’t help it. Nico had a perfect bottom.

“Uh, wow,” said Georgie. “You go, girl.”

I swatted her arm. “Shut up. It’s not like that. He works for the prince or something.” I’d never asked Nico about what he did exactly. “Maybe he’s a bodyguard?”

Georgie sighed. “He can guard my body anytime, but he’s not my type. Way too gloomy. And serious. And smart. I only date idiots. It’s kind of my thing.” She picked up the lilacs and searched for a vase to put them in. When she couldn’t find one, she considered using either the bedpan or the water pitcher. She decided on the pitcher and plunked them inside.

“Did Mr. Tall, Dark, and Dangerous bring you these? How did he know you liked lilacs? It’s your favorite flower.”

“And my favorite color too.” I frowned, puzzled, as a thought occurred to me. “Oh, gosh. I had on lilac-colored undies. Do you think ...?”

Georgie lifted one elegant eyebrow. “If so, it’s a message, but let’s back up. He saw your undies?”

“Yes. When I got shot, he applied pressure.”

“To your butt?” She stared at me in disbelief. “Oh, man. Some people have all the luck.”

“Yes, getting shot on my way to work was extremely lucky.” I wrinkled my nose at her. “Speaking of work, how did it go today? Did Felicity go crazy?”

Georgie snuggled next to me on my bed. I put my head on her shoulder, happy for the comfort and dreading what she might say about work. I'd been hired by *Haute NYC* magazine not long before my mother died. I'd gotten the job based on my name and my Ivy League education, and it was supposed to be nothing but a fun job for me. A way to bide the time until I either got married or found something better, like working in the fashion industry. It turned out that covering social events and weddings, although downright dull, happened to be a position I was oddly qualified to tackle. Thanks to my family and friends, I had connections, which gave me a pass into events I'd otherwise not be able to attend. Being Chloe Burke of Burke Books opened doors for me. Once the world discovered I was Chloe Burke of Nothing and No One, the same doors might be shut to me forever.

I sighed. I'd hoped to work my way into a position covering fashion or possibly move to an editorial job, but it seemed less and less likely every day. I had many ideas for the publication, but my boss, Felicity, resented me from the moment we met. I had to work twice as hard as the others on staff, basically to get nowhere. Even worse, she stole half my ideas and presented them as her own.

If it were up to her, I'd work in the mailroom. Felicity had clawed her way to the top and considered me undeserving. She presumed I worked at *Haute* for fun and thought I was stupid and privileged. She had no idea I needed this job and the full-time benefits it provided to survive.

Georgie patted my arm. "Well, let me say, it's a good thing you got shot in the butt today. Far more pleasant than dealing with Felicity."

"She went on a rampage?"

"Oh, yes. She made three secretaries cry. It got ugly. And she came within seconds of firing you, but she changed her tune when she found out what happened. Now, guess what? You're Felicity Fuller's new bestie. She loves you. She nearly organized a candlelight vigil in your honor. I had to remind her you weren't dead, which put a stop to the whole idea."

Georgie opened the box of chocolates. She picked one filled with strawberries and cream and shoved it into my mouth. Strawberries were my favorite, and Georgie knew it.

Also, since we'd been friends forever, we had no boundaries. Georgie shoving food in my mouth was a relatively common occurrence, as was Georgie bossing me around. That was just how we rolled.

She pulled a list from her purse. "Let's get started."

"What's on your list?" I asked, my mouth full of fruity, chocolate bliss.

She showed it to me. "These are all the people who've contacted Ella asking for interviews. I've listed them in order of importance and how much they'd be willing to pay for the chance to speak with you." She rattled off a list of names of the most prestigious news organizations in the country. "*Haute* wants an exclusive, and they will pay you for it. And Felicity also declared you're to have all the time you need to recover. She said it in front of the news crews that came to get some shots of the office. Generous of her, huh? Well, at least now she can't take it back. You could milk at least two or three weeks out of it. I've taken a week off myself. I told her I needed to help you deal with all of this, and it's true, but Felicity didn't like it. I wondered if her head might explode. Ultimately, she agreed you do need my help, so she had to grant my request. This is, after all, big stuff."

"What do you mean?" I blanched. "Because of what happened, or because so many people want to talk to me?"

"Both," said Georgie. She had a gleam in her eye that I recognized. While I'd been flitting around in college reading Jane Austen and dating men with beards, Georgie had been doing something useful. She'd pursued a degree in marketing, and she excelled at it. She planned to have her own publicity firm one day. "And the rumor on the street is Burke Books is pulling out the big guns. They're planning to offer a book contract, the significant kind. The kind you cannot refuse."

The idea did have some merit. I could write—even though Felicity would never admit it.

“Georgie, I didn’t do anything to deserve this. I feel like it’s wrong to take advantage.”

“Stop it right there.” Taking my chin in her hand, she stared straight into my eyes. “Don’t be modest, Chloe. Imagine what this could do for you and your family. Fate dropped this in your lap. Or rather, on your butt. Be grateful and accept it.”

“But—”

Waving away my protests, she continued. “Step one. We have to start with television and newspaper interviews. We’ll put those in order, respond to them individually, and prepare you ready for tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Your first public appearance. You’re getting discharged, and the cameras will be rolling. We have one chance to get it right, so that’s what we’re going to do. And I’m here to help.”

CHAPTER

Four

HEROINE HEADS HOME TO HEAL

Georgie knew her stuff. When it came time for my discharge, and my first appearance in my new role as America's most heroic sweetheart, Georgie and my sister made sure I was completely prepared for it.

My makeup was flawless, thanks to Ella, who was naturally gifted in the cosmetics department. She'd brought in her bag of tricks and fixed my face right before rushing off to school in the morning. But it was my outfit, hand-chosen by Georgie, that brought tears to my eyes.

"Mom's favorite, her Chanel suit."

The cream-colored vintage creation brought out my natural skin tones and complimented my red hair. It fit perfectly, and as a bonus, it matched the shoes Nico had given me. Thank goodness, because I would never have fit into my mother's shoes. She'd worn a six. The last time I'd squeezed into her shoes was in the fifth grade.

"And you should carry flowers. It shows people care enough about you to send them, and you value their friendship." Georgie perused the room, which resembled a flower shop at this point. "Which ones do you want?"

"The lilacs," I said, without hesitation.

"Good choice," said Georgie. "Simple. Elegant. And they'll go great with your suit. What about the rest of the flowers?"

"Keep the notes so I can send out thank you cards, but could you give the flowers to the other patients here? The ones

who might be all alone? This is where Dad stayed after the accident. They took such good care of him, but he had us. Some people don't have anyone." I smoothed my skirt. "How's he doing, by the way? Did you see him this morning?"

Georgie's eyes shuttered. "He's fine. The same."

"Does he know about what happened to me?"

"We told him."

I didn't ask what he said in response. I could tell from the way Georgie acted he probably hadn't said much at all. I shouldn't be surprised, but it caused a sharp stab of pain in my heart. Despite his faults, my father had always been there for me—handsome, fun, and larger than life. Since my mother died, it seemed like he'd shrunk mentally and physically, and his spirit, his joie de vivre, had died a cruel, miserable death when my mother's heart stopped beating.

Georgie handed me a mirror so I could see my reflection. "Here she is, ladies and gentlemen. America's daring, darling debutant, and our favorite superhero socialite, Ms. Chloe Burke."

I shook my head at her, but when I squinted into the mirror, I had to admit Georgie knew her stuff. I looked better than I had in ages.

Ella's skilled hand at makeup made my eyes look huge on my pale face. Part of the reason for my paleness was due to Georgie's strict instructions for Ella to go easy on the blush this morning. "She needs to seem fragile, but not like she's dying of consumption."

"Georgie," I said, "people don't die of consumption anymore."

"You know what I mean. We can't have you looking as glowy as normal. We need you to only semi-glow."

"The way you invent words is a kind of genius. I will try hard not to glow, and thanks for doing my hair. I love it."

Georgie had brushed it until it shone and pulled it over to one side. She insisted she wanted the bruises and scrapes on

my cheek to be partially covered, but not fully disguised. She demonstrated how to show them off to the camera at precisely the right moment with a slight motion of her hand.

“You need to be perfect, but not too perfect. They have to see what happened to you—the damage that marred your delicate, porcelain skin.”

I lifted one eyebrow. “My delicate, porcelain skin?”

She nodded, her face serious. “Trust me. Do it exactly as we practiced. The key today is not to say too much. We want them hungry for more, so we’ll reveal your story one delicious tidbit at a time.”

“You’re kind of scary. You realize that, don’t you?”

She shrugged. “At least I’m using my powers for good instead of evil, as you’ve always encouraged me to do.”

She made a valid point. In high school, Georgie always got into trouble. And I’d always tried to keep her out of it, with varying degrees of success. We’d been good for each other, the perfect balance in a friendship. I’d had a lot more fun thanks to her, and she’d had fewer detentions thanks to me.

She’d buckled down and gotten more serious in college, but only because the subjects interested her. In high school, she’d been bored, and for a person with a mind as sharp and quick as Georgie’s, boredom could be a dangerous thing.

A nurse came and wheeled me into the hallway. To my surprise, Nico stood there, waiting for me.

“Hello, handsome foreign man,” purred Georgie. “Do you wake up all tall, dark, and delectable, or do you have to work at it? I have a feeling it’s completely natural, which kind of makes me irritated.”

Nico blinked twice in quick succession, as if unsure about how to respond. Georgie did that a lot to people. She liked to keep everyone off balance.

“She has no filter,” I said. “You’ll get used to it.”

He nodded, his eyes taking in my suit, the heels, and the lilac blossoms clutched in my hands. “You’re looking well

today, Ms. Burke.”

Georgie snorted. “She looks better than well, and you know it, Nico. She’s perfect.”

I mouthed the words “shut up” to Georgie, and turned to Nico. “What are you doing here?”

Georgie answered for him. “He’s on a special mission from the prince. They still haven’t caught the evil dude who shot you, so Nico’s going to hang out with you and keep you safe.”

Images of Nico strolling through our vacant apartment and seeing my almost catatonic father in his wheelchair flashed through my mind. “There’s no need. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“His Royal Highness disagrees.”

I frowned. “If you’re protecting me, who will protect him?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “He has an entire team with him from Latovia, but his father sent an additional team after the incident occurred. He doesn’t require my services. You do.”

“But aren’t you his number one guy? How do you feel about this?”

“My feelings have nothing to do with it,” Nico responded curtly, his words clipped, and a hint of annoyance in his eyes. “It isn’t my decision. The prince commands it.”

“Oh.” For some reason, his words left me feeling deflated and oddly sad. And the idea of him witnessing how we lived, the pity I knew I’d see in his eyes, almost made me reconsider this whole venture.

Private things should be kept private, and the life Ella and I now shared was the most private thing of all—our dirty, little secret. No one needed to see it. I’d only let Georgie in on it because she insisted, and she’d practically threatened to knock down my door if I didn’t.

Georgie watched me carefully. “Hmmm. We’ll discuss the details later. It’s time to get Chloe home. She needs to be alone for a while so she can get some rest.”

I nodded at her, grateful she understood. “Thanks, Georgie.”

“That’s what friends are for, Red. Now let’s get this show on the road.”

She didn’t have to remind me to pose shyly for the cameras or answer the reporters’ questions in a soft and slightly unsure voice. We’d rehearsed it, and I’d always been a quick learner, but I didn’t have to fake it. Getting shot had taken as much an emotional toll on me as it had a physical toll, and I’d never lied to a bunch of strangers before. This was all new to me.

A nurse wheeled me to a large, open room for the press conference. Cameras clicked as soon as I entered. The hospital had provided a microphone and a large table. Georgie sat by my side, and Nico stood in the back of the room, watching us intently.

A dark-haired man in a suit raised his hand. “Ms. Burke. Can you tell us what occurred exactly?”

I widened my eyes to make them look larger. Georgie had insisted this would make me seem even more shaken and vulnerable. It wasn’t hard to pull off since I’d never been so nervous or uncomfortable in my life.

“I’m not sure. It happened very quickly, and I hit my head on the pavement.”

As instructed by Georgie, I chose that moment to adjust my hair. She insisted it had to be subtle, so I did it slowly. I tucked the shiny strands behind my ear and tilted my face just far enough to make the ugly purple and yellow marks on my cheek visible.

I bruised easily. Georgie and I both knew that. Even the slightest bump caused an angry purple mark to appear. Face planting on the asphalt had been a lot more than a bump, and my bruises were spectacular today. Even the seasoned newspaper journalists who stood in front of me gasped at the sight of them.

“You are so brave,” said the one who’d asked the question as he stared at me adoringly. I glanced at Nico in time to see him roll his eyes. I found his response irritating, which made me even more determined to play this out perfectly.

I lowered my lashes, trying to be as demure and modest as possible. “No, I’m not. Right place, right time. Lucky me.”

I lifted my hands, shrugged for emphasis, and noticed something strange pass over Nico’s eyes. It was gone before I could identify it, but it caused alarm bells to go off in my head. He didn’t buy any of this, but fortunately, the reporters ate it up. Camera bulbs flashed as they quickly jotted down what I’d said in their notebooks. Georgie had crafted the sentence, but I’d spontaneously added the “Lucky me” part at the end. Georgie gave me a nod of approval and then addressed the reporters.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Chloe is exhausted and still recovering from her ordeal. She needs to go home and rest.”

They shouted out additional questions, but I didn’t answer them. I waved to the reporters and camera operators as the nurse wheeled me out of the hospital and into the waiting limo. It had two small Latvian flags perched on either side of the hood, and a uniformed driver opened the door for me. I stood up slowly from the wheelchair, well aware that the crowd of reporters still filmed me. I gave them a final wave, placing a small yet courageous smile on my lips, as Georgie and I had practiced, before allowing Nico to help me gently slide into the car. I winced when my bottom hit the seat.

“Thank you,” I murmured. Although I’d been playing the part of the wounded heroine well, getting into the car hurt more than expected. Maybe I should have taken those nurses up on their offers of extra painkillers, but a Burke never admitted weakness of any kind, so I persevered despite the pain and tried not to let Nico see how much even that tiny movement hurt me. Nico, however, wasn’t easily fooled.

“We’ll have you home soon,” he said softly. “The reporter did not exaggerate. You are very brave.”

I let out a laugh. “Is there any other option? If so, I’d love to take it.”

I leaned back against the car’s leather interior and closed my eyes. Nico buckled me in, an oddly comforting gesture, and gave me a slightly awkward pat on the shoulder before shutting the limo door and moving to his spot in the front of the car. Georgie slid in beside me, and I immediately dozed off. The combination of stress, surgery, and a press conference had taken its toll. I woke about 20 minutes later when Nico hoisted me out of the limo and carried me into my apartment building.

He acted as if I weighed nothing, but I did not weigh nothing. Not even close. I’d always been a tall, curvy girl and not used to handsome men literally sweeping me off my feet, but I had to admit I liked having his strong arms wrapped around my body. He made me feel safe and protected, something I hadn’t experienced in years. But this was a dangerous game, and I couldn’t let myself get comfortable with it, or with him.

“Put me down, please,” I said, unable to meet his eyes. He obeyed but kept a hand on the small of my back for support—or maybe he feared I might keel over. When we reached my apartment, I didn’t invite him in. Instead, I said goodbye to him at the front door, giving him a polite handshake and a small nod. He handed me my bouquet of lilacs and shot me a quizzical glance, like he didn’t understand my strange behavior. Neither did I, to be honest.

“I’ll check in on you tomorrow.” He tilted his head to indicate the burly man in a suit standing a few feet away. “You’ll have guards posted outside your door and downstairs. You should be safe as long as you don’t venture out. Are you in agreement?”

“Yes.” Standing upright had become a challenge. I leaned heavily on Georgie, wanting to climb into bed and stay there for the rest of the day. Maybe even the rest of the week.

Nico finally understood I’d reached my breaking point. “I shall leave you to get some rest,” he said with an elegant bow.

As he walked away, I realized what I'd seen flash in Nico's eyes earlier while I'd spoken with the reporters. It had scared me because I knew it could make the carefully constructed sandcastle we'd made crumble to the ground.

Doubt.

Although the reporters had all lapped up my words like a cat lapped up cream, I could tell Nico didn't buy my story. He didn't believe me, and unless I could convince him otherwise, I might be in some big trouble indeed.

CHAPTER
Five

“Wake up, sleepyhead.”

Georgie barged into my room the following day, ranting about Felicity and about how much she hated working for her at *Haute*. Her rant, liberally sprinkled with profanity, was a typical outlet for Georgie whenever she got fired up about something.

“So, in conclusion, I stopped into the office today long enough to get an earful. Felicity is a witch, but she’s trying to play nice right now because you’re like America’s newest sweetheart. The cow.” She let out her breath in a huff. “But I’m not here to talk about Felicity and her evil ways. I’m here to talk about you.” She wore a black and white checkered wool skirt, a black turtleneck, and had her crazy, curly hair pulled into a bun. Her “business look” meant trouble. The calculating gleam in her eyes made it even worse.

I stretched, feeling the pull and twinge of the stitches on my bum, but it was not as bad as yesterday. The fogginess had also dissipated, but I still wasn’t quite ready to deal with Hurricane Georgie yet. Ella must have read my mind. She hurried into my room, wearing her school uniform, with a tray in her hands. It was piled high with pancakes, and she’d also included a steaming cup of coffee. Thank goodness.

“Bless you. Leaving for school already?” I asked, glancing at the clock on my wall.

“I have an early meeting before class,” she said, kissing my cheek. She smelled like a mix of lily of the valley and

pancake syrup.

“Freaking overachiever,” grumbled Georgie. “You sound like your sister.”

Ella kissed Georgie, too, and skipped out of the room. I heard her call out a goodbye to our father, but she got no response—not that we expected one at this point. A few minutes later, the apartment door opened and then closed behind her as she stepped outside.

“She’s a good kid,” said Georgie, eyeing my pancakes. I pushed them toward her. My stomach still felt iffy, and I decided to stick to coffee for the moment. Georgie grabbed the plate with glee, chewing happily on the pancakes. “And an awesome cook.”

“She had to learn,” I said. “I’m hopeless. If she didn’t, we’d all starve.” I paused, my eyes going to the door. “How is he today?”

Georgie shrugged. “The same. Silent. Staring. Sad. He did eat breakfast without any prodding, which is a good thing. More than I can say for you.”

I rubbed my belly. “I can’t help it. I’m still queasy. It’s from the anesthesia, I guess, and other things.”

Worry. Stress. Fear. All the usual stuff. Although exhausted, I’d had trouble falling asleep last night. I’d mulled things over and over in my mind, trying to figure out the right course of action. I hated lying and presenting myself as something I wasn’t, but, on the other hand, a beautiful gift had been placed in my lap the minute that bullet had penetrated my butt. I needed to get over the guilt and accept it, but my conscience’s inner voice would not be silenced. I let out a frustrated sigh, and Georgie’s brow knit into a frown.

“You’re doing the right thing, Chloe.”

She didn’t know I hadn’t saved the prince’s life on purpose, but she could read me like a book and knew the whole episode had upset me. She probably supposed my guilt stemmed from making the incident work to my full advantage. If she’d known the truth, her reaction would have been

precisely the same. Although she had a good heart, Georgie's moral compass was sometimes skewed.

"I know, but it seems tawdry."

She rolled her eyes. "Do you know what's tawdry? I caught poor Ella darning her socks this morning. She's turning into a character from *Oliver Twist*, for God's sake. What's next? Selling apples on the street corner? Before you know it, the kid will join a gang of orphan pickpockets, and then we'll all be sorry."

My lips twitched. Georgie always made things better. "Thanks, No-No."

She kissed the top of my head. "Don't mention it," she said. "And never call me No-No again. We've been over this. It's bad enough that my parents still use that stupid nickname. You need to stop."

Georgie said nothing for the first three years of her life except, "No-no." Born naughty, she had never been an easy child, and she likely heard those words more than anything else.

"Fine. Sorry. What did you bring with you?" I nodded toward the large canvas tote Georgie had dropped on the floor next to my bed. She lifted it with a mischievous chortle and showed me the contents. She'd filled it to the brim with newspapers and magazines, most of which featured the dreamy Prince Alexander of Latovia.

"I brought you some hot royal eye candy." She picked up a copy of a celebrity magazine with the prince on the cover. Golden hair, blue eyes, a sexy grin, and a perfectly placed dimple on one cheek. Of all the millions of people in New York I could have slammed into, I'd somehow slammed into this one—the embodiment of Prince Charming.

Maybe my luck had changed. Maybe it was a sign.

I studied his face. Although handsome, Prince Alexander looked nothing at all like Nico. They were complete opposites. Nico reminded me of a large, grumpy bear, but the prince seemed more like a sleek, majestic lion. From what I could

tell, due to our limited acquaintance, Nico rarely showed much emotion. Judging by his photos, the prince smiled and laughed with abandon. The two men were night and day. Dark and light. I had to wonder who might be more typical of the Latvian people. Were they blond and happy like the prince, or did they have Nico's brooding nature and silky black hair?

The idea of running my hands through that hair made my fingers curl into my palms. He might be sullen, crabby, and even hostile sometimes, but he was still too hot for his own good. He was probably too hot for my own good as well.

Georgie pulled out a photo of the prince sunbathing in Monaco. The man had the body of a god.

"Holy wow. He can't be real."

"My thoughts exactly," said Georgie. "But he is real, and you get to meet him in person. The day after tomorrow."

I nearly spilled my coffee. "What?"

"I've arranged it all. Don't worry. He wants to thank you for saving his life. I'll bring clothes in the morning and help you get ready. I have an adorable dress you can wear. I bought it ages ago but never used it. We'll make it an early Christmas gift."

Georgie always bought things for me and pretended they were cast-off items she didn't want. Usually, I'd yell at her, but today I focused on something else entirely.

"Wait ... he's coming here? To the *apartment*?"

She sat on the edge of my bed and squeezed my hand. "Calm down. Not here. No one will see the apartment or your father. I promise. I said we'd meet in a suite at the Belmont Hotel next door."

"And will our meeting be private or a media sideshow?" I asked, raising one eyebrow at her.

She gave me a cheeky grin. "A sideshow. We've given this exclusive to Dirk Deacon of NBC. He's your favorite."

I put a hand over my heart. "Dashing Dirk? He *is* my favorite." Dirk had a cleft in his chin as deep as the Grand

Canyon, and he rivaled the prince in the blond-god category. He was the star of local morning television. I woke early most days just to see him.

I nibbled on my lower lip as I considered Georgie's plan. She had it all sorted out, but was I doing the right thing? Each step I took felt like one I couldn't retrace, and once I started on this path, it would be impossible to turn back.

I heard a noise outside my bedroom, the sound of my father pushing his wheelchair down the hall. He only moved from his post by the window in the living room to use the bathroom or go to bed at night. He didn't speak. He barely ate. He hardly ever acknowledged us. Unless we got him help, and quickly, I doubted he'd live much longer. How could a person survive when each moment had become such pure agony?

I imagined him wasting away, like a dried-up, colorless leaf in the autumn, until one day, he simply blew away in the wind. The thought made me ill. His life had become a mockery of its former self. He used to be so strong, healthy, and fun. He had friends and traveled and played endless rounds of golf. I didn't miss the golfing, but it would be worth this deception if he could regain any semblance of his former self.

And my father's happiness wasn't the only consideration. I had to think about my sister too. It was terrible enough Ella had to grow up without a mother. I needed to do whatever I could to guarantee she had at least one parent around, even if it meant doing something morally ambiguous and a bit sneaky. Even if it meant hating myself afterward.

Resolved, I sat up straighter and gave Georgie a nod. "Where do we start?"

She plopped onto the chair next to my bed and crossed her legs, her gaze steady. "We're going to teach you how to be a better liar."

"What do you mean?" I asked, giving my earlobe a tiny tug.

She pointed at me. “What you did right now. It’s a tell. You only pull on your ear when you’re uncomfortable.”

I lifted my hand to do it again and stopped myself, crossing my arms over my chest instead. “Don’t be silly. Why would I be uncomfortable?”

She patted my leg. “Because you, my friend, are the world’s worst liar. You’re a good person with a heart of gold, but you’ve been put in an impossible situation through no fault of your own.” When I opened my mouth to protest, she interrupted me. “Don’t argue. I know your Burke pride won’t let you admit how bad things are, but I have eyes, Chloe. I’ve seen what’s going on. And I understand why you’re so upset right now too.”

“You do?” I asked, scared to hear her answer. Did Georgie know the depths of my deception? If she figured it out, perhaps someone else could as well. But, on the other hand, Georgie knew me better than anyone else in the world. If she hadn’t understood what was happening yet, if she didn’t realize I only pretended to be a hero, I might have a chance at getting away with this.

I saw no judgment in Georgie’s features. Her eyes were full of nothing but kindness.

“Of course I do. I know you, Chloe. You’re the queen of guilt, but you’re a hero, whether you like it or not. I realize you hate taking advantage of the situation, but you risked your own life to save the prince, and the bullet hit your butt for a reason. Of all the butts in New York, it chose yours. Accept it. It’s a gift.”

She didn’t know. She had no idea I’d lied about the whole thing, and if I could fool Georgie, I could fool anyone. I lifted one eyebrow. “Getting shot in the bum on the way to work is a gift?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes,” she said. “Well, in this case, at least. Now, we need to talk about how to help you look like you’re not consumed by shame every time you open your mouth.”

“Is that really how I come across?”

“It is. And the harder you try, the worse it gets. It’s only a matter of time before someone else notices, which is why I brought this with me today.” She pulled a book from her bag entitled *How to Be a Lying Liar and Get Away with It* and plopped it onto my bed. Ironically enough, Burke Books was the publisher. “This is for you to read at your leisure, but I can review the basics with you now. I have most of them memorized.”

“You memorized how to be an effective liar?”

“Dude, I want to be a publicist one day. Lying ... marketing—it’s all the same, right?”

“I guess,” I said, still not convinced.

She rolled her eyes. “Chloe, I’m not teaching you how to rob a bank. I’m teaching you how to present a certain face to the world. It’s like acting. You’re playing a role, and you’ll get paid for it with a few checks for doing appearances and a book contract.”

I imagined what I could do with an advance on a book contract, and how much any amount would help my family. Being noble was a luxury I couldn’t afford at this point.

“Okay. Fine. But let’s do this before I change my mind.”

It turned out my oldest, dearest friend knew a lot about lying, and she was also an excellent teacher.

“The first thing you need to know is always gesture with your dominant hand when trying to make a point. It gives the impression that you’re trustworthy.”

I tilted my head and stared at my right hand. “Really?”

She put both of her hands on my cheeks and straightened my head. “Yes, but don’t tilt your head when you speak.”

I let out a laugh. “Why?”

She answered me quite seriously. “It makes your body off-center. Being off-center is never good.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at her. “And is it truly that important?”

“Yes, because it’s about perception.” She tilted her head, overemphasizing the motion. “Asymmetry indicates you are out of balance. Things like tilting your head might not seem big, but they are, and those things can be important.”

“What else should I watch out for?”

“Smirking. Leaning too far to one side when you’re standing. Rocking back and forth. People pick up on these cues whether they understand them or not. And don’t get me started on shifty eyes, blinking, and nose scratching.”

I automatically scratched my nose and froze when Georgie narrowed her eyes at me. Lowering my hand, I also tried hard not to blink, since that, apparently, was bad too. I gave up with a groan. “I’m going to need more practice.”

“You will. This stuff obviously doesn’t come naturally to you, my friend.” She squinted at her watch. “I have to run. Practice what I told you and read whatever you can find on yummy Prince Alexander. The more you know about him, the better this will work.”

She did make a good point. “Go,” I said, waving her off. “I’ll do my research, and by the time I’m done, I’ll know more about Prince Alexander than anyone.”

“Good luck,” said Georgie with a snort. “The man has his own fan club. Those women are obsessed. They will always know more about him than you.”

I lifted my chin, accepting the challenge. “Don’t bet on it.”

CHAPTER

Six

A PRINCE'S PASSION: ALEXANDER OF LATOVIA'S BATTLE FOR
BETTER EDUCATION

If I excelled at anything, it was research. By the time Ella got home from school, I knew everything about Prince Alexander and his entire family. His mom seemed like a stick in the mud, but his dad didn't. A charming, balding, slightly paunchy version of Prince Alexander, he epitomized an aristocratic playboy.

Ella grabbed the magazine from my hands and stared at Prince Alexander's face. "He's not like his dad, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"He's a nice guy. A humanitarian. He came to New York to talk to the United Nations about providing better education to children in remote villages worldwide. He builds libraries."

"Ohhhh." I couldn't help the zing piercing my heart.

Ella beamed at me knowingly, aware of my weaknesses. "His platform is literacy, as well as education."

I put a hand over my heart. "I bet he has his own personal library, like in *Beauty and the Beast*."

"I'm sure he does," said Ella with a chortle. She climbed into my bed and curled up next to me like she had when she was small. I kissed her head. I'd wished for a long time I could do better for her. Now, I finally had my chance. Georgie had been right. I needed to grab this opportunity while I could for her.

Ella, deep in thought, stroked the soft cotton of my duvet cover with one finger. My mother had decorated my room in

shades of peach when I'd been around Ella's age. Although beautiful back then, it looked faded now, and old, and tired—sort of like everything else in our apartment. Ella's room, done in pink and white, was far too immature for a girl her age, but she didn't complain. Ella never complained.

“Do you remember what it was like before?” she asked,

I understood exactly what she meant. The accident divided our lives neatly divided into two categories: before and after. She referred to the days when our mom was still alive, and we'd been a fully functioning family.

“I do,” I said, tucking a curl behind her ear.

“I miss it.” She pressed her cheek against my arm. “I'm not talking about the parties, clothes, or trips. I mean the regular stuff. Like when Dad made us breakfast and Mom danced in the kitchen. Do you remember the dancing?”

Her words caused a sudden sharp pang of loss in my chest. Even after all this time, it still hurt to talk about our parents. “Yes.”

“I used to watch them and dream of being them someday. As beautiful as Mom. As funny as Dad. But I don't want that anymore.”

Her words surprised me. “What do you want, Ella-bean?”

She turned her face and kissed the side of my arm. “I want to be like you, Sissy.”

“Really? But why?” I asked, surprised by her confession.

“You don't give up, and you hold our lives together. You take care of me, and you take care of Dad, when you should be out having fun—going on dates. Getting tipsy. Buying nice shoes.”

I sighed. “I do miss the shoes. But what do you know about getting tipsy, my dear underage sister?”

She rolled her eyes. “I know life cheated you out of all those things and so much more, and I'm sorry for you.”

Tilting her chin, I forced her to look into my eyes. “I don’t care about any of that stuff. Not anymore. You and Dad are what matters most to me. I love you, kid.” I let out a dramatic sigh. “Even more than Jimmy Choos.”

Ella’s lips quirked in amusement. “*Which* Jimmy Choos exactly?”

“All of them.”

“Even the Cinderella shoes? The ones with the Swarovski crystal clusters on them shaped like a flower?”

I paused as if pretending to consider it, and she whacked me softly on the arm, making me laugh. “Yes. Even the Cinderella shoes, which is saying a lot. It means I love you more than crystal clusters.”

“I love you more than crystal clusters, too,” she said with a yawn. “I’ve got your back, and you’ve got mine. We’re stronger together. It’s the Burke family motto.”

Fortis solum simul fortior. Strong alone, stronger together.

Ella fell asleep, still wearing her too-tight school uniform. I stayed up much later, trying to figure out what to do. In the end, I knew I had few options open to me. To save Ella, I had to sacrifice part of myself. The part which had refused to be corrupted or bowed no matter what life threw at me. The part that enabled me to hold my head high, even through the worst of it.

“Stronger together,” I whispered against her hair.

I knew I could do this. I also knew I had no choice.

I heard a noise, and glancing out into the hallway, I saw my father sitting there in his wheelchair, an inscrutable expression on his face. Usually, he stared off into the distance, making me sometimes wonder if he even saw us at all, but not tonight. Tonight, his gaze met and held mine. For a moment, it felt like he was back again, but I stayed calm. I didn’t want to jinx it or push him back into his shell by overreacting.

“Are you okay, Dad?” I asked, keeping my voice soft so I wouldn’t wake Ella.

He didn't answer but gave me a nod before wheeling his way back to his room. It was the most response I'd had from my father in three years, but as I settled back onto the pillows, I wondered what the strange look on my dad's face signified. Had he been judging me? Was he disappointed in me?

Unsure if what I read in his expression had been real or merely a manifestation of my guilt, I had to admit my father wasn't the only person who stared at me that way, as if trying to figure me out. Nico did it too.

I fell asleep picturing Nico's handsome, judgmental face. I had no idea why his opinion of me even mattered, but I didn't have the luxury to indulge in my own needs and desires at the moment. And my father had no right to judge me after he deserted us for the last few years.

Nico could think what he liked. And so could my dad. I had one thing to take into account—the girl curled up next to me, fast asleep.

Ella was all that mattered. She was all that ever mattered. And I had to do right by her. Mainly because no one else ever had.



Two days later, Ella stood in front of my closet, gazing at the winter white dress Georgie had brought for me to wear for my appearance with Prince Alexander. After studying it carefully for a few minutes, her face lit up.

“I have an idea,” she said.

“What is it?” I asked as I took a long sip of coffee and nibbled on my toast. Ella had brought me breakfast in bed and fussed over me all morning. Dad had already taken up his post by the window, staring out at Central Park and waiting. For what? We didn't have a clue.

“Give me a second.” Ella had a mischievous gleam in her eye. “It's going to be perfect.”

She ran out of the room, her long, red braid hanging down her back. She wore her white uniform shirt and too-small skirt. The outfit also came with a blazer, but Ella could barely squeeze into it. It no longer buttoned, and the sleeves ended in the middle of her forearms. I needed to get her a new uniform quickly—before she burst out of this one. I had a week at most.

She came back holding a box. Sitting on the edge of my bed, she opened it slowly. What I saw there made tears come to my eyes.

“Mom’s pearl choker?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at the dress. “It’ll be perfect.”

Ella was right. With Nico’s shoes, the dress from Georgie, and the choker from my mom, I looked like the kind of person who might have an interview with a handsome prince in a luxurious hotel. Inside, however, I quivered with fear. Would the prince see through my ruse? Even worse, would Nico?

I said goodbye to my father, squeezing his hand. To my surprise, he squeezed back, his eyes on the pearl choker. “It belonged to Mom,” I said. “Do you remember?”

We hadn’t kept much of my mother’s jewelry, but the choker had been a wedding present from my grandmother to my mother. Ella and I had decided to hold onto it as long as possible.

His eyes lingered on the necklace, and for a second, I wondered if he might speak. He didn’t, however. He turned back to the window and continued his vigil. It just about broke my heart.

“Please snap out of it, Daddy,” I said, my voice soft. “We need you. *I* need you.”

If he heard me, he didn’t show it. Even though I knew it wasn’t his fault, it still made me sad and more than a bit frustrated. What could I do to help him? What could he do to help himself?

I kissed the top of his head and said goodbye as Georgie breezed into the apartment. Ella squeezed into her tight blazer, tossed on one of my old winter coats, and skipped out the door. Even on the worst days, Ella still managed to keep going, maintaining a happy attitude and a spring in her step. I needed to do the same.

“You are a vision,” said Georgie, studying my face. She made me turn around so she could see me from the back. “Are you wearing Spanx?”

I shook my head. “Should I?”

“Nope. You don’t need it. I’m completely jealous. The combination of a gunshot wound and guilt works for you, girl, but you should probably start eating again. Otherwise, I’ll look like a beached orca whenever I stand next to you. We can’t have that, can we?”

“No, we can’t.” I sent her a sideways glance. “Are you sure I’m doing the right thing?”

Georgie lifted her face skyward. “Darling, we’ve been over this already. You’ve done nothing wrong. You didn’t ask to get shot, did you?”

I shook my head. “But it still feels wrong to accept money —”

She interrupted me by lifting one well-manicured hand. “Enough, Chloe. Did you see Ella’s blazer? It no longer buttons. And I swear she’s grown three inches since yesterday. Take a deep breath, calm yourself, and remember who you’re doing this for—Ella and your father.”

“Okay. You’re right.”

Thanks to a deal orchestrated by Georgie, I’d receive a tidy sum from this. Not a lot, but enough to enable me to pay off a few of my father’s medical bills and to buy Ella a new uniform, hopefully before she burst out of her old one.

Georgie continued. “And it’s not like you made this up or anything.” She laughed, oblivious to the fear her words elicited from me. “I mean, who could fake a bullet in the booty, right?”

I bit my lip. “Right.”

She gave me one last look-over. “You can do this, my friend. Stop fretting. If what happened at the hospital’s press conference is any indication, you’re a natural. And even though you got shot a few days ago, your butt is perfect.”

Her words made me laugh, which is what she intended. “Thanks, Georgie. I appreciate what you’re doing for me.”

“Are you kidding? This is the best thing ever. I get to dress you up, and I also get to meet the world’s most eligible bachelor.” She peeked at her watch. “Speaking of which, it’s time. Let’s go. And if you ever have any doubt, remember you are a sexy, red-headed angel, and go with the flow.”

I wanted to tell her I was far from being an angel, and celestial beings weren’t ordinarily sexy, but I kept my mouth shut. I’d already chosen my path while still in my hospital bed. I understood how much this meant to my family. I wouldn’t diverge from the course I’d set, but I didn’t have to like it, and I certainly didn’t feel proud of the decision I’d been forced to make. This plan seemed dirty and wrong, but I could live with that. What I couldn’t live with was not doing whatever I could to help Ella.

CHAPTER

Seven

A SECRET RENDEZVOUS WITH ROYALTY

Georgie and I left my apartment and took the elevator to the first floor. She prepped me the entire time, reminding me to say as little as possible, and act shy and unsure. That would not be a problem. I was terrified.

The doors opened, and Nico stood there waiting for us, looking all hot, European, and so handsome I couldn't help but stare. I may have been momentarily stunned, because I promptly tripped as soon as he caught my eye. Fortunately, Georgie was there to grab my arm.

“Steady there, missy,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I kind of lost focus for a second.”

“Hmmm. I wonder why?” She smirked as her gaze went to Nico. “Hello there, tall, dark, and stormy. I'm still wondering ... do you wake up this pretty, or do you have to work at it?”

“I ...” he said, once again thrown off by Georgie being Georgie. “I'm here to escort you both to the hotel.”

“Lead the way,” she said, then leaned closer to me and spoke in a loud whisper. “I think he wakes up pretty. I doubt he has to work on it at all.”

“Georgie, stop it,” I hissed.

“You're right. Sorry. That was borderline sexual harassment.”

“Only borderline?”

Nico let out a laugh. He tried to disguise it as a cough, but I heard it, and for some reason, knowing I'd caused that laugh made me all warm and fuzzy inside.

Georgie carried a large bag slung over her shoulder and a clipboard in her hands. She had her glasses on, which meant she took this seriously. I put my arm through hers, more for emotional support than physical. I felt off-kilter, something I noticed frequently while in Nico Mercia's presence.

He opened the door for me, and I thanked him, trying to be more formal, but barely succeeded. This man had seen my panties and touched my bare bum. Touching bare bottoms knocked us right out of the nice-to-meet-you acquaintance zone and straight into the you-kind-of-saw-me-naked level.

Not that there had been anything romantic about the first time we'd met. Nico had been giving me first aid, after all. But when I imagined him putting those big, rough hands on my bare skin in a different way, a sensual way, I broke out in a sweat.

"Your face just became a very unnatural shade of pink," he said, scrutinizing me. "Are you alright?"

"That's my normal coloring. I'm either bright red or as white as a sheet. It's a thing with me," I said, my voice about two octaves higher than usual. "But I'm fine. How are you?"

"As well as can be expected."

"I'm sure you've been busy. I mean, with everything going on."

His expression grew immediately shuttered, like someone had turned off a switch. "Yes, I am quite busy. But I am doing this instead of searching for the man who wanted to kill our prince."

His words stung, even though I knew he made a good point. "You don't have to escort us to the hotel. Georgie and I can make it on our own." I smoothed the fabric of my white dress. My red hair, which fell down my back in soft waves, contrasted with it nicely. My makeup was once again flawless, thanks to Ella's magic touch. And I wore the most beautiful

shoes I'd had on in a long time. Granted, I'd earned them by getting shot, and they were a gift from Mr. Crabby Pants, but it didn't matter. They made me feel more in control and ready to take on the world. I didn't need Nico's negativity, but he offered it anyway.

"But I must. The prince commands it."

"It's next door. We can make it on our own." I couldn't keep the snarkiness out of my tone even if I tried, and I didn't try.

Nico lifted one dark eyebrow. "He disagrees. I shall accompany you, and it will be a short and yet ever so enjoyable journey." His voice positively dripped with sarcasm. Either Nico was not a morning person, or something had seriously annoyed him this morning.

"Okay, fine," I said. "Escort away."

As soon as we exited my building, a small girl ran up to me out of nowhere and asked for my autograph. Nico moved to intercept her, but I held out a hand to stop him, giving a shake of my head before turning my attention back to the child.

"You want my autograph? Are you serious?"

She nodded enthusiastically and held out a notebook and a pen to me. "My name is Alice. It's spelled A-L-I-C-E. Like the one who went to Wonderland in the story."

Alice wore a pink T-shirt and skirt, and her hairstyle was a series of tiny braids tied with pink ribbons. A tall woman, who must have been her mother, stood next to her.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, speaking softly over the girl's head. "I hope you don't mind. She's been obsessed ever since she saw the story about you on the news."

I gave her an understanding smile. "That's okay. Do you live nearby?"

"We're staying at the Ronald McDonald House right now." She pointed down the street to the hospital a few blocks away. "When she heard you lived nearby, she insisted we walk

around the area every chance we got. I mean, when her brother isn't getting treatments."

Treatments combined with where they were staying could only mean one thing. "Oh, I see." I turned back to Alice. "Can we sit here a minute and chat?" I lowered myself as gently as I could onto a wrought iron bench in front of the hotel, not wanting to pull my stitches. Alice hopped onto the bench next to me, edging over until she sat as close to me as possible. She had a gap in her front teeth like she'd recently lost a baby tooth.

"How old are you, Alice?"

She lifted her right hand and showed me all five fingers. "Five. And I want to be a hero like you when I grow up," she said.

The crowd gathering around us let out a collective sigh. "I have a feeling you're a hero already," I said, taking the notebook from her. It was pink as well. "And pink must be your favorite color."

"It is."

"It's my favorite color too. The best heroes always like pink."

She grinned at me. "They do?"

I nodded. "It's a fact." I wrote her a short note, signing my name. When I gave it back to her, she hugged the notebook to her chest.

"Can I tell you a secret?" she asked.

"Yes."

She moved closer to me, coming onto her knees so her face was even with mine. "I'm going to save my brother. He's been really sick, but I'm his match. We're going to fix him and make him all better."

"You are amazing," I said, trying hard not to cry. "You must be super brave."

She nodded very seriously. “I am. They had to take my blood, and I didn’t cry. Not even once.” She showed me the small pink bandage on her arm. “It hurt a lot.”

“I bet it did. Can I tell you a secret?” I asked, and she nodded excitedly. “The last time I had to have blood taken, I fainted.”

She covered her mouth as she giggled. “You fainted?”

I wrinkled my nose at her. “I did. My mom took me for ice cream afterward because she felt bad for me. Do you know the most embarrassing part? I wasn’t five like you. I was this many.” I flashed all ten of my fingers at her twice.

She counted in her head, a grin breaking across her face. “You were twenty?”

“Yes. So you’re way braver than me already.”

As she processed that information, her mother gently touched her shoulder. “We’d better go, Alice. Your brother is waiting.”

“Okay, Mama,” she said, then turned back to me and flung herself into my arms, squeezing me tightly around the neck. “Thank you, Chloe.”

I squeezed her back. “You’re welcome, Alice. We heroes have to stick together.”

I didn’t notice until I got to my feet that a crowd had gathered around us. Even the people who had on press passes acted visibly touched as they snapped photos.

“Could we get a few photos of you with the girl?” asked one of the photographers.

“I don’t know. What do you think, Alice?” When she nodded enthusiastically, I turned toward her mom. “Would you mind?”

“We’d be honored,” she said. “And I can’t tell you how much this means to us.”

I put a hand on her arm. “I’m the one who’s honored,” I said, my voice tight with emotion. “Thank you.”

Alice and I posed together in front of the hotel. Tears rolled down Georgie's cheeks as she asked Alice's mom to sign a waiver so we could use the photos in the future. The fact that Georgie carried around waivers impressed me, but there was something important I needed to clarify to the people photographing us.

"Thank you, everyone, but if you want to talk to a real hero, you need to speak with my new friend here," I said, nodding toward Alice. She beamed at me, and I gave her a wink. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen. I have a prince to meet."

When Nico opened the door for us, the reporters were interviewing Alice. He ushered me in with a twinkle in his dark eyes. "Well done, Ms. Burke."

"Thanks."

I liked his twinkle. I wished he would twinkle at me more often.

When we walked into the hotel, Nico took us to a different area of the building instead of going to the suite we'd originally been assigned. "The prince requests to see you in private before your televised appearance. Would you be amenable to this?"

"Sure." I held back a giggle as I watched Georgie's face, knowing her well enough to understand she found Nico's snootiness and formal vocabulary hilarious. She also wasn't sure what "amenable" meant.

I stopped laughing when the prince opened the door, and stood there like a beam of golden royal sunshine. The photos in the magazines Georgie brought me did not do him justice, and the last time I saw him in person, I'd only caught the briefest glimpse of his face. Most of the time we'd spent together had been with me lying on top of him, my boobs on his head.

The idea made me sick, but I managed not to puke as the prince approached me with his hand extended. "Ms. Burke. At

last. I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

As I shook his hand, I stared at his movie-star-perfect face. Holy moly. First, Nico had made my heart beat faster, and now the prince stunned me with his beauty. Although I didn't sense the same pull with him that I experienced with Nico, he was still so hot he probably should have come with a warning label.

"Hello," I said, trying to quell the butterflies in my chest.

The prince reminded me of the sort of person I'd always been attracted to in the past— handsome, friendly, and polite. No grumbling and snarling, or dark, moody glances, and the honesty in his bright blue eyes was steady and made me like him instantly. If I didn't feel the same surge of lust for him I did for Nico, did it matter? The prince was extremely appealing, although Nico acted like he might want to throttle him at the moment, and I had to wonder why.

"I'm happy to meet you again, too," I said, giving the prince my full attention. "Under better circumstances, this time."

"Indeed." He let go of my hand and turned to Georgie. "You must be Ms. Knowles."

Georgie extended her hand, wide-eyed and flustered. She had on a black mini-skirt, tights, and chunky heels, and her crazy hair danced in curls around her face. "Your Royal Hotness. I mean, Highness. Oops. Did I say that out loud?" She froze like a deer in the headlights.

He beamed at her, still holding her hand. "I like it. I think I shall make it a new title and require Nico to call me that every single day."

Nico muttered something under his breath, making the prince laugh. Although I didn't speak Latovian, I knew whatever he'd said hadn't been a compliment to Prince Alexander.

We walked into the elegant suite, and the prince indicated we should sit opposite him on a plush red velvet couch.

Georgie sat down and pulled out her notebook. Nico stood in the corner, near the window. I lowered myself gingerly, still mindful of the stitches in my bottom. They'd be out in a few days. I couldn't wait. But the last thing I wanted was to reopen the wound and get bloodstains on my pretty dress.

The prince noticed my discomfort. "I'm so sorry you were hurt."

"It was worth it," I said with a smile.

A muscle worked in his jaw. "The police tell me if you hadn't knocked me over at that precise moment, the bullet which pierced your ..." He shifted uncomfortably as he tried to find a nice way to phrase it. He went with the safest route. "... person could have hit me right in the heart. I owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude, Miss Burke."

"You're welcome, and sorry I flattened you like a pancake on the street. I normally don't do that to visiting royals."

"Good to know." He grinned. "And I suppose we have moved way beyond formalities. Please call me Alexander. Or, better yet, Alex. It's what Nico calls me when he isn't calling me something worse."

I laughed at his comment. "Yes, I'm sure he's probably called me a few things, too, but I'd prefer you call me Chloe."

Nico sent me the stink eye, and Alex gave me a long, appraising look. "I like you, Chloe. What a lovely surprise."

"I like you, too, Alex."

He poured tea from the silver set on the table in the center of the room and handed a cup to each of us. Nico didn't seem interested in having tea. He preferred to glower in the corner instead, like a large, grumpy bear. Alex's face grew serious.

"May I speak openly with you for a moment?"

I took a sip of the tea. "You may."

"I normally wouldn't agree to a televised interview, not like this, but I have ulterior motives. I'm in New York on a personal mission. I'm scheduled to speak at the United Nations in a few days about my foundation."

“The literacy initiative?” asked Georgie.

The prince’s eyes locked on her face, and Georgie, who’d never had a shy or awkward moment in her entire life, made an odd squeaking noise and dropped her pen. The prince’s ability to fluster women was remarkable. No wonder he had a fan club.

He picked up Georgie’s pen and handed it to her. “Exactly. You’ve done your research, haven’t you? I’m impressed.”

“It’s important work you’re doing. I’m the one who is impressed.” Georgie had managed to get control over herself once more, but she continued to fan her face with one hand, which confused me. It wasn’t warm in this room at all.

Alex didn’t seem to notice. “Thank you,” he said. “We’ve been reaching out to children living in remote villages all over the world, providing both internet access as well as building schools and libraries for them. It’s my passion, my calling if you will, and I’m close to implementing it globally. Any sort of positive media buzz I could create would be beneficial to my cause.”

Georgie had a calculating gleam in her eye. “Like the kind this whole incident has created?”

“Yes,” he said. “Although the assassination attempt was horrible, the outcome has not been completely negative. People responded warmly to the idea of a beautiful, young American woman saving my life. Word about my foundation has spread, and we’ve had a huge increase in donations and support pledges. It made me wonder”

He paused, acting a bit unsure. I was curious about where this was going exactly. “Wonder what?”

He leaned close. “Would you be willing to accompany me to a few social events over the next few weeks? Once you’re better, I mean. I know it’s a strange request, but it would benefit both of us. We aren’t certain who is behind the attack, and I worry about you becoming a possible target. If we spent some time together publicly, my foundation would remain in the news, and you would remain safely guarded.”

I shot Georgie a scowl, trying not to give away too much with my expression, and saw her stifle a giggle. Accompanying a handsome prince as he attended parties, galas, and other fun events? Uh, hello. Sign me up. But one thing concerned me.

“Do you have any idea who it was? The person who tried to kill you?”

He shook his head with a resigned set to his features. “There is always someone out there who wants to hurt me, and usually their reasons are either political, historical, or utterly insane. Most have nothing at all to do with me, but it’s hard not to take it personally.”

“I can imagine. Then why were you walking around New York? Wouldn’t it have been safer to drive?”

He ducked his head, embarrassed. “I used to live in New York while in college. I loved the anonymity I experienced here. I missed being able to walk around on my own. I insisted on going for a short walk. I assumed it would be perfectly safe. Nico disagreed, and he’d been right. Now he’s the one who looks bad, even though none of it was his fault.”

Nico glared at him. “Alex, do we have to discuss this?”

Curiosity got the best of me. “He looks bad? What do you mean?”

Alex took a sip of tea. “Well, it happened on his watch, unfortunately. My father, the king, is displeased. Eventually, he’ll calm down, but he’s not listening to reason right now.”

“But none of it was Nico’s fault.”

Nico’s jaw tightened. “On the contrary. I should never have allowed it. But that isn’t the only issue.”

“What do you mean?”

He took a few steps closer to me, his brown eyes intense. “People are also wondering how you stopped the assassination attempt when I could not. And they want to know how I let the perpetrator get away so easily.”

I blinked in surprise. I didn't like where this was going, but it seemed unfair for Nico to pile the blame on himself. "Because you were keeping me from bleeding to death at the time."

"Exactly," said Alex, nodding. "I said the same thing. And there is another benefit to being together as much as possible while I'm in New York. It might give Nico the opportunity he needs to catch the person who tried to kill me."

"And it would make things better for him? Nico could save face?" I asked.

"Yes."

Nico gave me a dark look. I could tell this whole idea greatly disturbed him, but I had to admit the prince made a good point. "So, by hanging out with you, I'd be helping Nico, too?"

"You would," said Alex.

I didn't have to look at Nico to know he was glaring at me. His scrutiny nearly became a physical force, but I ignored him.

"If it helps the two of you, I'll do it. Nico is a grump, but I owe him one."

"No, you don't," said Nico, returning to his post by the window.

"Yes, I do," I replied through tightly clenched teeth. Why did he have to be so difficult? I turned my attention back to Alex. "Let me know which events you'd like me to attend, and I promise I'll be there."

"That would be lovely," said Alex.

"But it's not enough," said Georgie as she chewed on the end of her pen. She leaned toward Alex, her grey eyes intense. "It's nice if you hang out together, and you'll generate a certain amount of media attention, but to get the kind of buzz you need for your foundation, you'll have to take it a step further."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

“You need to pretend you’re dating. Romantically involved. A couple. Who wouldn’t be interested in that story? You’ll have more media attention than you could ever imagine.”

Alex nodded. “It’s a brilliant idea, but I’d hate to put Chloe in the position of having to feign interest in me.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Georgie jumped in. “How hard could it be? You’re perfect. She won’t have to fake a thing.”

“I’m not sure—” I began, but Nico interrupted me by stomping back over to where we were sitting, his face a mask of fury.

“That has to be the most ludicrous, horrible idea I’ve ever heard.”

“Why?” asked Alex. “Georgie thinks it’s a good idea, and I agree.”

Nico’s face darkened. “You barely know them, yet you are willing to trust them? They could go to the media and sell this story. Profit from your stupidity. You cannot do this.”

I wasn’t so keen on the whole idea myself, but now Nico pissed me off, and I found myself arguing for it as well. “I would never do anything to betray Alex or anyone else,” I said, getting heated. “I’m not that kind of person.”

“What kind of person are you? A woman willing to lie about something like this is also willing to lie about other things.”

I stared at him, stunned, but he made a good point. Georgie stepped in and saved me. “What if we signed a contract? If Chloe breaks it, which she will not, you can toss her in one of your Latovian dungeons or something.”

“Georgie,” I said, shocked.

The prince laughed. “We do have quite a few dungeons. That would work.”

“It goes both ways,” said Georgie. “If you break the contract, we get to lock you up in the basement of Chloe’s

apartment building. It's super dusty. Lots of spiders."

"That sounds completely fair," said Alex. "I abhor spiders."

"None of you are taking this seriously," said Nico. "This could be a disaster. For all of us."

"It'll only be a rumor," I said. "Nothing more. Neither of us will substantiate it. We'll be purposefully vague. And, when you two return to Latovia, it will simply fade away."

"But once rumors start, it's hard to make them stop. And it would be easy to believe the prince could fall for you. You're so..." His voice trailed off when he realized we were all staring at him. He cleared his throat. "My question is, why would you agree to do this?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I have my reasons."

He gave me a disparaging look. "You want your fifteen minutes of fame. I see. Rather shallow of you, don't you think?"

My cheeks got hot. "You can believe anything you want, Mr. Mercia. My reasons are my own, and they are none of your business."

"She's right. Stop badgering her, Nico. It's annoying." Alex reached for my hand. "Will you do it, Chloe? Will you help me?"

"Yes," I said. "It would be my pleasure."

CHAPTER

Eight

CAN CHLOE CHARM PRINCE CHARMING?

As I walked into the suite reserved by the television station, Alex already waited there for me. Nico flanked him on one side, and the darling of the morning news team, Dirk Deacon, flanked him on the other.

The prince and I decided to arrive separately, to make it appear as if we were meeting for the first time in front of the cameras. It had been Georgie's idea, and now she hovered behind me, just out of view. We would get our photos taken by both local and national newspapers later, after the interview. For now, the prince and I were alone. Or as alone as we could be with a crew of cameramen, sound techs, and miscellaneous television people in the room. Despite the crowd, however, the setting gave the impression of being intimate.

Nervousness about our plan had my stomach in knots. The world was about to watch me lie, something I'd never been naturally good at, on live TV. I reached up to tug my ear and barely stopped myself in time.

Dirk Deacon beamed at the camera. "Good morning, New York. I'm here today with Prince Alexander of Latovia, who is visiting New York City to attend a special meeting at the United Nations. And our other guest is the woman of the hour, Chloe Burke."

Alex walked toward me, his eyes on my face. He played it perfectly and even surprised me by gallantly kissing the back of my hand.

I didn't have to fake the flutter of excitement in my chest. Part of it came from getting kissed on the hand by a real, live, handsome prince. The other part was probably caused by a combination of nerves and way too much caffeine.

When he lifted his eyes to meet mine, both of my hands firmly held in his grasp, the emotion I saw on his handsome face appeared to be real. "Ms. Burke. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

I stared deeply into his clear blue eyes and gave him the shy and slightly winsome smile I'd practiced earlier with Georgie. It came naturally, though. I honestly liked Alex.

"You're welcome, Your Highness. I'm glad I could help."

Giving my hands a squeeze, he studied me with a rapt expression on his face. "Please. Call me Alex."

The people watching our little display ate it up. Even the hardened reporter, Dirk Deacon, seemed charmed. Only one person remained unimpressed. Nico smirked at me, but I ignored him and focused on the prince.

"Only if you'll call me Chloe."

"Agreed." Alex grinned at me, the effect disarming because he was so ridiculously attractive.

He led me to my seat, a plush couch, holding my arm to ease me onto it gently, mindful of my wounded area. He didn't do it for the cameras. He did it because he was a gentleman, a true prince charming, and I knew the people watching the interview from home would love every minute of it.

I didn't have to fake the relief I experienced when I managed to sit without pulling my stitches. Hopefully, it meant I was on the mend and would be better soon.

Dirk waited until I settled into my seat, then he continued. "We're here to discuss the assassination attempt on Prince Alexander and Ms. Burke's heroic part in thwarting it, but first, I have to ask, how are you doing, Ms. Burke?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Much better."

I snuck a peek at Nico. He seemed more irritated than usual. Georgie stood next to him, taking notes on her clipboard. She would record what I said and also analyze what I could do differently. She should have been working for the president or something. She was that good, but a mind like hers needed constant stimulation. Every job Georgie had ever held bored her in days. Every man she ever dated bored her too. Sometimes I wondered if I'd been the only thing in her life that didn't bore her. She only took the job as the advice columnist at *Haute* to hang out with me on our lunch breaks. I had a feeling she wouldn't last long there. First of all, she gave comically horrible advice. Secondly, she did not play well with mean girls, and Felicity was a mean girl.

Dirk leaned toward me, his expression honest and intense. "Can you go over the events of Monday morning?"

I'd known he'd ask this question. I sat up straighter in my chair. "Well, it had been a typical Monday, and I was running late for work."

Dirk smiled, showing dimples in his cheeks nearly as deep and impressive as the cleft in his chin. "And where do you work?"

"At *Haute NYC* magazine. I've been there around three years now, since I graduated from college."

"I see. So, you were running late to work"

"Yes. I often am, I'm sorry to say." I cringed, meeting the eyes of a few reporters. They nodded in agreement, connecting with me on a subconscious level, just as Georgie the Mastermind had predicted. After giving them a shy nod in return, I continued speaking. "And as I sprinted across the street, in my heels, I bumped into someone and spilled coffee on my coat. It was a white coat, which meant the coffee would leave a stain. That annoyed me, so I spun around to give the person a piece of my mind, and that's when I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"The gun." I lowered my voice for dramatic effect. "The shooter pointed at the back of the man walking across the

street in front of me. The prince. Although I didn't know it was him at the time."

"What did you do?"

I shook my head in disbelief, as if unable to comprehend it myself. "I knocked the prince over. I wasn't thinking straight. I saw the gun and just reacted." I turned to face Alex. "Sorry about getting coffee all over you. And for flattening you."

"You're forgiven," said Alex, placing a hand over his heart. "And I believe I owe you a soy latte. I got a taste of it when you threw it at me. It was quite good."

I raised a finger. "No, I bought the soy latte for my boss. I drink cappuccino with extra whip. You owe me one of those."

"I owe you a great deal more than coffee, Chloe," he said, his eyes on my face.

We stared at each other for a long moment before Dirk cleared his throat. "So tell me, Ms. Burke, how did it feel to save this man's life?"

I contemplated Alex, sitting on the couch right next to me. "I didn't know the prince's identity when it happened, but now that I do, it makes me even happier that I could help him. The prince is someone special, and not only because of his title. He helps people all over the world. He builds libraries and schools for children. He's a remarkable human being." I'd gone off script, but I hadn't known when Georgie and I practiced that I'd be plugging for the prince's foundation.

Dirk stared at me intently, the cleft on his chin even more impressive in person. "As you said, you didn't know the man on the street was Prince Alexander. To you, he was just another random man in a suit crossing the street on a busy Monday morning. Why did you do it, Ms. Burke? I'm dying to know."

I gave Alex another shy peek from under my lashes. "What is this world coming to if people stop helping each other?" I focused my attention on the camera, my gaze steady and my voice firm. "I did it because I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't."

Dirk sat back in his chair, obviously taken aback by my response. Even I felt taken aback. Still standing in the wings, Nico stared at me, his expression inscrutable. Alex was easier to read. He shook his head, obviously affected by my words.

“Ms. Burke. What can I ever do to repay you?”

“Nothing,” I said, enjoying the rush I got at the expression of honest admiration and respect I saw in his eyes. “Buy me a coffee, and we’ll call it even.”

He and Dirk laughed, as did several people working behind the cameras. Georgie beamed, so I knew I’d done well. Only Nico continued to eye me suspiciously, his brows drawn together in a frown.

Deceiving the entire country? Easy. Deceiving Nico Mercia? Mission impossible.

As we walked outside to greet the newspaper reporters already assembled, Alex offered me his arm. “Well done, Chloe,” he said softly. “You’re a natural.”

We smiled at the cameras and answered a few brief questions from the reporters. Alex insisted we keep it short, saying I had to rest. It was a good thing he did. I barely made it back to the lobby of my building before I felt ready to collapse. After several security guards carted Alex away in a limo, the flag of Latovia fluttering in the breeze, I headed home. Nico stayed with me, insisting he accompany me to my apartment. Georgie came as well. I’d been too tired to protest. As he took my arm and guided me to the elevator, he asked me more questions.

“Tell me again, Ms. Burke, how exactly did you see the gun?”

I blinked at him in surprise. “You heard me explain it to Dirk Deacon five minutes ago. The entire country knows the story by now.”

“I would like to hear it again. From the moment you left your house in the morning.”

“Are you serious?” I asked, and he nodded. Georgie gave me a quizzical look, probably wondering why he needed to ask

me these questions again. I wondered the same myself. I let out a long sigh. “Well, I actually left the house on time that day—a small miracle.”

“You said you were running late.”

“Only because I got distracted by a pair of shoes in a shop window. I paused to admire them, just for a second. Sadly, it meant I was running late by the time I reached the coffee shop.”

“Why didn’t you skip it?”

“It’s a mandatory thing. I need caffeine to function, and if I don’t get my boss coffee, she’s impossible to deal with for the rest of the day. Trust me.”

His lips twitched. “You mentioned something about her right after you’d been shot. The meanest boss in the world?”

“Oh, yes. Ask Georgie. She knows.”

“She’s Satan’s mistress,” chimed in Georgie. “Pure evil. She makes Chloe’s life a living nightmare. On top of everything else that’s happened to poor Chloe, it’s the last thing she needs.”

I sent her a silencing look, but Nico caught Georgie’s comment. “Everything else?”

I twisted my hands together, wishing the elevator would come faster. “My parents were in a car accident a few years ago—my mother ...” To my surprise, a huge lump formed in my throat. I hadn’t cried over her since the funeral, and I refused to do it in front of Nico. “She died.”

“I’m sorry.”

He sounded sincere, dang it, and tears flooded my eyes again. I took a deep breath through my nose, calming myself. “So, I was late, rushing to work, saw the gun, jumped on the prince, and got shot. End of story.”

“He stood directly behind you. How did you see the gun?”

“Excuse me?”

“Judging by the police report after they recreated the crime scene, the gunman stood at least ten feet behind you. How is it even possible you saw his gun? Do you have eyes in the back of your head or a magical power we know nothing about?”

I stared at him, not sure how to answer. Georgie jumped to my rescue. “Hey, Mr. Mercia. Hold on a second. I do not like your tone.”

“It’s okay, Georgie.” I patted her arm before I returned my attention back to Nico. He wouldn’t give up until he had his answers. I had to tell him something, so I decided to stick as close to the truth as possible. “Someone jostled me from behind as I stepped onto the street. They made me spill coffee onto my coat—white cashmere, not easy to clean—and I didn’t have time to go home and change it. I turned, planning to give the person who bumped into me a piece of my mind, and that’s when I saw it.”

“What type of gun did the shooter use?” He snuck a quick look at Georgie. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Sorry, Nico,” I said. “I can’t tell you. It was black, and it was a gun. I don’t know anything else.”

He rubbed an impatient hand over his jaw. “But you didn’t see the face of the person who carried it?”

I blew out a breath. “It happened so fast.”

“Are you serious? That’s all you can give me?”

“Yes,” I said, as the elevator finally arrived at the ground floor with a gasp and a groan.

“But I don’t understand” began Nico.

“Enough with the interrogation,” said Georgie as she continued to dig through her bag. “It’s getting old. Dang it. I left one of my notebooks back at the hotel. Take Chloe upstairs and stop badgering her, Nico. Can’t you see she’s exhausted? For goodness sake, she can barely stand.”

It was true. I did seem vertically challenged at the moment. Nico watched as I wobbled slightly on my feet, ready to collapse. He muttered something under his breath, and without

any warning at all, lifted me into his strong arms and carried me into the elevator.

I didn't protest. Instead, I leaned against his shoulder and wrapped my arms around his neck. Once again, I found his strength and his presence oddly comforting. With a sigh, I watched Georgie walk back across the lobby as the doors closed.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, as soon as we were completely alone. "You've had a taxing day. I shouldn't have pressed you."

"You need to stop doing that, but thanks for picking me up. Again."

"I do carry you around quite often," he said, but he didn't sound annoyed about it. Well, not as annoyed as usual. "But I thought you might swoon."

"I'm not usually the swooning type. You don't have to stand around, waiting to catch me."

He scanned my face, his expression unreadable. "I'm not complaining."

My eyes widened in surprise. "You're not?"

"No, I'm not. But we will have to talk about the incident eventually. I have questions, and I need answers."

I yawned. "I'm looking forward to it. It'll be a blast. Make sure you bring thumb screws and handcuffs. No good torture session is complete without them."

Nico snorted but gave no reply. He carried me to the door of my apartment and set me gently onto my feet. To my surprise, he didn't ask to come in. He stared at me for a long moment, his hands on my arms, and his face close to mine.

"I am not going to torture you." His voice sounded deeper than usual and had a raspy huskiness that made my toes curl. "Yet."

His words, along with his proximity, sent a shiver of pleasure over me. He smelled heavenly, a combination of the expensive wool from his suit, the subtle hint of his cologne,

and a scent purely his own—something mysterious and manly that made my knees go weak. I wanted to move closer and inhale him deeply but held myself back.

“But you plan to eventually?” I asked, feeling breathless.

His eyes darkened, growing even more alluring in the dim light of the hallway. Maybe he wasn’t completely unaffected by me either. Could there be a touch of attraction in the depths of his brown eyes, or did I imagine it? Exhaustion, combined with pain, could make a person delusional.

“What do you think, Chloe?”

“I don’t know.”

He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear as the elevator bell dinged, and Georgie emerged, waving a notebook in her hand. “It was in my bag all along. Silly me.” As soon as she saw us, she paused, eyeing us curiously. “Did I miss something?”

“Not at all,” he said, lowering his hand.

“Oh. Okay.”

As Georgie shoved the notebook back into her bag, Nico leaned closer and whispered in my ear, “And, to be clear, I only bring out the handcuffs for very special occasions.”

Before I could figure out what he meant, Nico walked away. Georgie and I both watched him go.

“Excuse me. I have excellent hearing, but I’m confused. Did he just suggest handcuffing you, or am I imagining things again?”

“No, you aren’t imagining things,” I said, wondering what had happened. “He did suggest handcuffing me, but I’m pretty sure he meant it as a joke.”

“People don’t joke about handcuffs. What was that about?”

“I told him to bring handcuffs the next time he wanted to interrogate me. I didn’t intend to sound kinky, but I guess it came out all wrong.” My brow puckered as I considered it, realization dawning. “Oh, no. I kinky flirted with Nico Mercia, didn’t I?”

“Yep. And he kinky flirted right back. I’m going to call him fifty shades of yummy from now on.”

Everything about this confused me. “Did his response have a vaguely sexual undertone? I can’t tell.”

“It most certainly did have a sexual undertone. I saw nothing vague about it. Maybe you should have chosen something other than handcuffs to make your point, Chloe. The rack. The pillory. Impalement. Although, impalement sounds kind of sexual as well.”

It certainly did. As I stepped into my apartment with Georgie and shut the door firmly behind us, I wondered again if I’d gotten myself in over my head. My strong visceral reaction to Nico was unexpected and unwelcome—a difficulty I didn’t need. Even if I found him incredibly delectable and perfect and sexy, Nico Mercia was something else as well.

A complication I wasn’t at all prepared to handle.

CHAPTER

Nine

The next few days progressed with a series of television interviews and guest appearances. One newspaper featured a photo of Alice and her mother. The article stated I'd inspired her to donate bone marrow to save her brother's life. It wasn't true at all. I called the paper to clarify, and the next day, the same newspaper printed an article about how humble and modest I acted. I called again to tell them I wasn't modest. I'd simply told the truth. And the headline the next day?

Chloe Burke Changes Lives: Thanks to Her Efforts, the National Bone Marrow Registry Announces a Record Number of New Donors.

I gave up. Calling the paper again would result in me being named the next Mother Teresa. But with better footwear.

My body healed, I got my stitches out, and I felt more like myself, although different. I kept a smile plastered on my face, and blushed when someone called me a hero or praised my actions, but the redness in my cheeks did not come from modesty or shyness. It came from shame—and deep, gut-wrenching guilt. No matter how good or honorable my reasons might be, it was still wrong. Absolutely and incredibly wrong.

The prince bought the cup of cappuccino with extra whip for me as promised, grinning at the cameras as he handed it to me. “And here it is,” he said gallantly. “Is there anything else you require? A scone, perhaps?”

“Nope. We’re even,” I said, lifting my cup, and the crowd assembled outside the coffee shop cheered.

Gina, the barista who’d served me the day of the shooting, clapped louder than anyone, tears in her eyes. She touched my arm as we were about to get into the car. “I haven’t told anyone yet, but I’m pregnant. If it’s a girl, I’m naming her after you.”

I mumbled my congratulations and wished her well, but then I slipped into the waiting limo, stunned. She planned to name her child after me? A wave of panic came over me, so strong I had to close my eyes. What if the truth came out, and she discovered I wasn’t a hero at all? How could I let her name her baby after a liar? It seemed very wrong.

Nico climbed into the seat next to me. The prince had a meeting to attend, and it seemed Nico was once again charged with getting me home safely. Lucky me. He gave me an odd look as we pulled into traffic.

“Another successful appearance by the media sensation, Chloe Burke, and yet you’re once again distraught. Care to explain?”

I shook my head. “It brought up memories of the day it happened. Seeing the shop, the girl who served me coffee” The girl who planned to name her first-born child after the biggest liar in New York City. I let out a shaky breath. “It’s disconcerting.”

“It must be hard for you.” His dark eyes held something in them, which may have been compassion, but I could have been mistaken. His next question threw me off guard. “What color coat did they have on?”

I frowned at him in surprise. “Who?”

“The person who shot the prince.”

I hugged my arms around my body tightly, my attention going to the window. “I told you. I can’t remember.”

He shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough. The police have video taken by street cameras on the day of the shooting. I plan to retrieve them right after I drop you off.”

My nausea got worse. As soon as the limo pulled up in front of my building, I jumped out of the car. I didn't wait for Nico or the driver to open the door for me. Instead, I rushed straight into the lobby. Nico followed close at my heels.

“What's the matter?” he asked, grabbing my arm.

“Nothing,” I said, trying to control my heaving stomach as I jammed my finger into the elevator button. I needed to get into my apartment now. I did not want to puke in the lobby.

“Pushing the button over and over again will not make the elevator go any faster.”

Nico leaned against the wall near the elevator door, looking both incredibly sexy and incredibly lethal at the same time. Maybe the lethal part made him even sexier. I couldn't be sure. But he was definitely hot. Even in my about-to-puke state, I could appreciate his hotness, and it made me even more determined not to be ill in front of him.

“Sarcasm. Not appreciated.”

I could no longer form complete sentences. It was that bad.

He continued, oblivious to my distress. “Sarcasm? I consider it a factual statement. Do you know what else is a factual statement?” He paused, studying my face, his brow furrowed. “Your story doesn't add up. It doesn't make sense.”

“What part of it doesn't make sense? The part where I saved the prince or the part where I got shot? Because both of those are pretty factual statements too.”

“Maybe things are not what they seem.”

“Maybe you're hoping to blame someone else because you didn't do your job.”

As soon as I said the words, I regretted them. His eyes grew cold and hard, like two pieces of black onyx. Oh, brother. What had I done? The last thing I needed was to make an enemy of this man. I turned away from him, willing the elevator to move faster. He leaned closer, so close the warmth of his breath tickled my ear as he spoke.

“I’ll figure this out. I swear it. And when I do, the whole world will know the truth. About what happened, and about you.”

The doors of the elevator opened, but it came too late. Before I could stop myself, I threw up all over Nico’s leather shoes. Fortunately, I hadn’t eaten much that morning, but vomiting coffee was not an experience I cared to repeat.

I gaped at him, mortified. “Oh, gosh. I am so sorry.”

Nico, to his credit, didn’t flinch. He didn’t even step away. Instead, he took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed my face. At some point, I’d begun crying as well, but he handled it like a boss.

“There, there,” he said. “No need to cry. You’re alright now.”

The nicer he acted, the harder I cried. “Enough,” I said. “You’re making it worse.”

He held up his hands, bewildered. “How am I making it worse?”

“You’re being kind. I can handle it when you’re crabby. I can handle it when you growl at me. I can’t handle it when you’re sweet. It’s ... too ... much.”

I now had the hiccups, on top of everything else. *Great.*

Nico’s lips twitched. “I shall endeavor not to be sweet ever again. I’ve never been called ‘sweet’ before, so it shouldn’t be difficult.”

He was trying not to laugh, the jerk. He contacted the building supervisor and asked him to clean the mess. Then he led me into the elevator and pressed the button for my floor. As I struggled to compose myself, I eyed his shoes and winced. They were a complete mess.

“I can’t believe I threw up on your shoes.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “They’ve been through worse. Trust me. You should have told me you were unwell. I wouldn’t have pressed you like I did if I’d known, but you must understand, Chloe. I need to figure this out.”

“I know.” I took a deep breath. “I’m also sorry about what I said. I didn’t mean it. You’re great at your job.”

He raised one dark eyebrow at me. “And how would you know?”

“I’ve watched you. Alex trusts you completely. That kind of trust isn’t given out to anyone. You have to earn it.” The doors opened to my floor, and I stepped out. I didn’t expect Nico to follow me to my apartment. “What are you doing?”

“Doing exactly what you said—earning your trust. You have refused to let me come into your apartment and meet your family. I presumed you were a society snob, too precious to allow a servant into your private quarters, but as I’ve gotten to know you better, I’ve begun to suspect it’s something quite different.”

My fingers rested on the doorknob, but I didn’t know if I was ready to open it yet or not. “And what do you suspect exactly?”

His voice grew soft. “You have a secret. Please share it with me. I want you to trust me—more than I’ve wanted anything in a long time. Also, I want to clean my shoes. They aren’t in the best of shape. So what do you think? Will you let me come in?”

The man guarding our apartment stood off to the side, giving us privacy. Nico folded his arms over his chest, his black hair falling across his forehead, looking desirable and perfect in spite of his nasty shoes.

I knew I might be making yet another terrible mistake, but I couldn’t help it. Taking a deep breath, I came to a decision. I opened the door and let Nico into our home—the first stranger to do so in three long years.

Viewing the empty, vast darkness from someone else’s perspective proved difficult for me. It was late afternoon, but all the doors to the apartment’s inner rooms were closed. The overhead light in the spacious foyer didn’t work. I switched on a lamp we kept off to the side and waited for his reaction.

What did Nico see, exactly? Did he notice the bare spots where expensive artwork once hung on the walls? Could he tell the remaining bits of furniture consisted of only things too broken or rickety to sell or pawn? Would he be able to understand this had once been a home, a place filled with light, laughter, and love?

Probably not. I expected to find pity in Nico's eyes and knew it might be my undoing. I didn't have much of anything left, so I needed to hold onto whatever dignity remained. But even though I dreaded his reaction, I couldn't stop myself from meeting his gaze.

"What happened?" he asked. He didn't make sympathetic noises or treat me like a charity case. I wouldn't have been able to handle it if he had. Instead, he acted very matter-of-fact about it, like he always visited the remnants of luxury apartments on Park Avenue.

"Let me wash up first, and then I'll explain." I pointed to his feet. "And give me your shoes. I want to clean those too."

"There is no need. I can take care of it."

I shook my head. "My puke, my rules." I held out my hand for his black leather oxfords.

"Fine." He removed his shoes and gave them to me. "But when you come back, Chloe—"

I waved his words away. "I know, I know. You want me to tell you all my secrets. Unfortunately, you're going to be disappointed. I'm the most boring person ever." I showed him to the living room, the only place that still had decent furniture and the nicest view of Central Park, relieved my dad wasn't there. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back."

He stood by the window, gazing out at the green trees of the park. In his stocking feet, he seemed younger somehow, and not quite as mean. I had no idea why.

I went back to my room, brushed my teeth, and changed into a pair of yoga pants and a soft gray sweater. My bottom hurt, and I wanted to be comfortable. After brushing my hair, I

pulled it into a ponytail to get to work on Nico's shoes, but as soon as I saw the label inside, I was surprised.

"Custom-made John Lobb's?" I asked, muttering to myself. "The man has more expensive shoes than I do."

He had good taste too. The shoes were almost as beautiful as a pair of Jimmy Choos.

I proceeded with caution, carefully cleaning the soft black leather. Fortunately, the damage wasn't as bad as I had first feared. It only took me a few moments to get the shoes cleaned.

After I dried them with a towel, I held them for a few minutes, wanting to admire them. I'd never seen such lovely men's shoes, but that wasn't the only reason I found them fascinating. Nico wore these shoes. They were designed especially for him, to fit his foot exactly, and performing even this tiny service made me feel closer to him. And I wanted to feel closer to him. I didn't know if it was only because we'd met under such intense circumstances, or if it was the draw of Nico himself, but somehow, he'd become an important person in my life. Since I hadn't let many people into my world in the last few years, it felt significant. And scary. And a bit overwhelming too.

I couldn't explain the connection I had with him. I'd read once that if someone saved your life, you would be eternally bound to them in some way. Was that why I felt so strongly about Nico? Is that why even cleaning his shoes made me strangely happy?

I hugged his shoes to my chest and immediately experienced a pang of embarrassment for doing so. I'd become completely ridiculous. I needed to get a grip on myself and my emotions before I humiliated myself even further.

I set the shoes by the front door, opened a bottle of wine, and grabbed two glasses before joining Nico in the living room. The wine, a nice red, had been a gift from Georgie. She pretended she'd accidentally bought too many and didn't have room to store them all. She had to be the sweetest friend in the world.

I placed a pillow strategically under my bottom and arranged myself on our old velvet couch. Nico sat in the opposite chair, a high-back we'd inherited from my grandfather. Although faded and threadbare, it was still a nice chair. Maybe someday I'd be able to afford to get it reupholstered.

"Where should I start?" I asked, taking a sip of wine as my gaze went to the window. It was getting dark, which explained why my dad no longer occupied his spot in this room. He preferred to stare vacantly outside only during daylight hours. I had no idea why.

"Wherever you want," he said, his voice soft. "It's your story to tell."

I must have needed to talk, because, before I knew it, the words came tumbling out of my mouth. I told him about the accident, my parents, and the situation we were in right now. I spoke openly but kept my words as unemotional as possible, simply telling him the facts. It felt good to open up, like a dam had burst inside me, and he listened, nodding, until I finished.

"I've seen this happen before, in Europe," he said. "Many castles look exactly like this, often for similar reasons. But explain one thing to me. Why live here when it's so expensive to maintain? Why not move somewhere else?"

"Well, my father refuses to sell it. That's one reason." My voice quivered with a sudden rush of unexpected melancholy. "That isn't all of it, though. I could force him to move, but I'm not sure what would happen to him if I did. He can't handle any change or disruption to his schedule. He gets agitated. It's gotten to the point where he refuses to leave the house." I paused, remembering the last time we tried to take him for a doctor's visit. It had been a nightmare. I cleared my throat. "And it has to do with my sister, Ella, as well."

"Your sister?"

"Ella is an amazing kid. Happy. Bright. Kind. But she's already lost so much. Her mother. Her father. Yes, he's still alive, but he can't parent her, not even a little. Many of her

friends disappeared as soon as our fortune did. This is the only home she's ever known. How can I take it away from her?"

"Even if it means putting yourself into a hopelessly difficult situation?"

"It's not hopeless anymore," I said, giving him a shaky smile. "I could not have been shot saving a prince at a better time. Because of the money I got from the interview with Dirk, I was able to pay for a therapist to come here once a week and work with my dad."

"Have you seen any positive results yet?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I hope it ends up helping. I'm not sure what else to do." Pausing a moment, I studied Nico's face, trying to read his feelings, but I honestly couldn't tell. "Mystery solved? Am I as boring as I promised?"

To my surprise, Nico shook his head. "Not boring at all, I'm afraid, and you grow more mysterious with each passing day." He rubbed his jaw with one hand, his expression thoughtful. "I'd like to meet your father and Ella. If you wouldn't mind, I mean."

"Why would I mind? You already know about the situation we're in. I have to warn you about my dad, though."

"Is he difficult?"

"No. He's an absolute joy. Very easy to talk to. The only problem is he won't answer you back. Minor detail, right? He's been living like this for the last three years. At first, he was nearly catatonic, so I'm grateful that's over, but he's still not right. He hasn't spoken more than a few words since my mother died."

"And your sister?"

I stole a glance at my watch. "She should be here soon. You can meet her, I guess, but I'll have to feed her first. I hope you don't mind. She's always starving when she gets home. I'll make her a sandwich right now."

I moved to go toward the kitchen, but he stopped me. "I have a better idea. Why don't we order some food, my treat,

and have dinner together?”

I let out a laugh with no humor in it at all. “That’s sweet of you, but my father will likely make things awkward.”

“I don’t mind,” he said. “I can handle awkwardness, and I’d enjoy sharing a meal with someone. I rarely have time to do things like this.”

I blew out a breath. “I don’t want your pity, Nico, or your charity. You don’t have to pay for our dinner, and you don’t have to be nice to me because you found out I’m poor.”

“I’m not nice. I’m nosy. I’m trying to understand you, and every time I think I do, you throw me for a loop. I’d like to have dinner with you and your family, and you owe me one. You got sick on my shoes.”

“They’re clean now,” I said, indicating where I’d placed them by the door. “The Burkes always clean up their messes.”

He gave me a solemn nod. “Good to know.”

CHAPTER

Ten

INSIDE CHLOE BURKE'S LUXURIOUS LAIR: WHAT LIFE IS
REALLY LIKE FOR A PARK AVENUE PRINCESS

Ella burst through the door right after the Chinese food arrived. We ordered from her favorite place, Chen's, and she bounced up and down excitedly as soon as she smelled the delicious aroma of garlic beef, green curry shrimp, and sesame chicken.

She shook Nico's hand, perfectly comfortable with the fact he was in our apartment and about to have dinner with us. My father seemed okay with it too. When I introduced him to Nico, he nodded and said, "It's a pleasure," before his attention returned to the window.

"You said he didn't talk," said Nico.

"He doesn't." I had to hold back my emotions as hope sprang to life in my chest for the first time in a long time. "Can the therapy be working this quickly?"

Nico put a comforting hand on my shoulder. "I have no idea, but it's a good sign, isn't it?"

I nodded and rushed off to the kitchen to get plates and silverware. I bypassed the daily use stuff and went instead for the most elegant dishes we owned, the Waterford china, with an intricate gold lace pattern around the edges. They'd been a wedding gift from Grandma and Grandpa Burke for my parents and had a golden "B" in the middle of each plate. Father smiled when he saw them, tracing the "B" with his finger, and even managed to converse with Nico during dinner. Nico did most of the talking, telling us about Latovia and his childhood spent in England.

“Have you ever been to England, Mr. Burke?”

For a second, we thought he might not answer, and when he replied, “Yes. Many times,” Ella and I stared at him in shock.

The six words he’d said tonight were more than we’d heard come out of his mouth in months. I lowered my gaze, not wanting to ruin the moment, and terrified I might burst into tears. Sitting next to me, Nico reached under the table and gently squeezed my hand. I peeked at him from beneath my lashes, unable to contain my gratitude.

“*Thank you.*” I mouthed the words to him.

“*You’re welcome,*” he said back but didn’t let go of my hand immediately. Instead, he caressed it with his thumb and stared deeply into my eyes before finally letting it go. Ella asked a question about Corossa, the capital city of Latovia, and broke the spell, but it took a solid five minutes for my heart rate to return to normal.

Holy cow. If Nico could do that to me with a simple touch of his hand, how would it feel to kiss him? To hold his big body in my arms and be enveloped in his warmth? I’d experienced a hint of it the times he’d gallantly picked me up and hauled my heavy butt home, and I had to admit I’d secretly loved every minute of it, but what would it be like in better circumstances? Like naked circumstances? The idea gave me a zing right in my lady parts.

Not good. Not good at all.

After we finished dinner, my dad wheeled himself back to his room. Nico stayed and helped us clean the dishes, and then he joined us for a cup of herbal tea. We hadn’t had guests in such a long time, and both Ella and I missed it. Also, it was an excellent opportunity for my sister and Nico to tease me.

“Did you see Chloe’s newest headlines?” she asked, taking out her phone. “I’m collecting them. They are hilarious.”

“They’re embarrassing,” I said. “I’m sure Nico doesn’t want—”

“Oh, yes. I do. Please share, Ella,” he said, giving me a wink.

Who was this guy, and what had he done with grumpy Nico Mercia?

Ella cleared her throat. “*Chloe’s Coffee Consumption Creates Chaos.*” She lifted an eyebrow. “My sister drinks a cup of coffee and worldwide sales increase by two percent. What. The. Heck.”

Nico lifted a finger, pulling out his phone. “Wait. I have one. *Socialite Saves Stranger in Soho.*” He showed it to me. “Would you care to explain, Chloe?”

“What?” When I saw the photo, I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t save anyone. A dude choked on a bite of meatball, and I whacked him on the back. Once. That happened months ago.”

“Wait,” said Ella with a giggle as she scrolled through her phone. “*Heroine Helps the Homeless.* How about that one, Chloe?”

She flashed her phone at me, and I groaned. “Oh, no. I tripped over the poor man. I didn’t see him on the sidewalk. I bought him a sandwich to apologize because I didn’t want him to beat me up. Not a selfless act at all.”

“But this one was,” said Nico. “*Chloe Climbs Tree to Save Cat.*”

I scowled at him. “It never happened.”

“According to this, it did,” he said. He showed me a photo of myself standing next to a tree, staring up at the branches with a grimace on my face.

“A bird pooped on my head that day. I never saw a cat. I didn’t climb a tree.”

Ella giggled. “If they’d realized a bird had pooped on you, I know what the headline would have read. *Park Avenue Princess Gets Pooped On.*”

Nico joined in her laughter. “Then everyone in New York would be standing under trees hoping to get pooped on too.”

“You two are ridiculous,” I said, trying to sound stern.

“No,” said Ella. “What’s ridiculous is that no matter what you do, it’s now somehow heroic, wonderful, or trendsetting. You have fan groups on Facebook and Twitter, like with millions of members. And do you know how many hashtags there are related to you? Thousands.” She scrolled through her phone. “#ChloeIsAHero. #ChloeBurkeShoes. #ChloeBurkeStyle. #ChloeBurkeHair.”

“Hair?”

She nodded. “People are changing their hair color to match yours.” She showed me a Pinterest page full of women with my exact color, cut, and style.

“But how? Why?”

“You’ve touched a chord,” said Nico. “A hero they can relate to and understand. You seem familiar to them, like a friend.”

“You can do no wrong, Sissy.”

“Not true.”

“Yes, it is,” said Nico. “You’re media magic, Chloe. A woman who looks like a fairytale princess saved a real-life prince. Even better, people can see you’re as beautiful on the inside as you are on the outside. Do you know how rare that is? How special?”

The room grew silent. I stared at Nico. He stared back at me with an expression so hot I nearly had to fan myself. But Ella was oblivious to the heat index in the room as she giggled about something on her phone.

“Oh, no,” I said. “What now?”

She shook her head. “You’re not going to like it.”

I put my face in my hands. “Tell me. Go ahead. How bad can it be?”

“Oh, it’s bad,” she said, holding out her phone to me. “Look, Sissy. Your butt is trending.”

Nico and Ella shared a laugh, entirely at my expense, but she wasn't joking. My bottom was indeed trending. Pictures of it had popped up all over social media.

"Not my best feature," I said. "What the heck?"

Ella stood and kissed the top of my head. "Hey, you can't help it. Even your butt is famous."

Still giggling, Ella excused herself, saying she had to do homework. I watched her go, unable to stop smiling. It pleased me to see her this happy.

"I should take my leave as well," said Nico, after Ella skipped off to her room. "We have a busy day tomorrow, and you need your rest."

"So do you," I said with a grin. "Keeping up with me must be exhausting."

"You have no idea."

The teasing note in his voice made me go all warm and fuzzy. The whole evening made me all warm and fuzzy. He'd said such nice things about me, saying I looked like a fairytale princess, and even calling me beautiful. Had he truly meant what he said, or was he merely being kind?

I kept thinking about his words as we said our goodbyes in the dimly lit foyer. I could handle a snarky, abrasive Nico, but this new Nico threw me off my game. Unfortunately, the change only made him more attractive, like he hadn't been hot enough to begin with. It also made me act oddly nervous around him. I shifted back and forth from foot to foot and may have started to sweat. Crap.

"Thank you for dinner," I said, tugging on a lock of hair. "And sorry again about your shoes."

"Warn me the next time you get car sick, okay?" I peeked at his face, wondering if he meant that seriously or not. He gave me a sexy half-smile, which meant it had been a joke, but the effect it had on me was impressive. I experienced a full-body reaction. He rarely smiled, so it felt like a gift when he did. It also made me feel like even more of a liar.

“Yeah. Carsick.” I stared at my toes. My feet were bare. I’d exposed a lot more to Nico tonight than my feet, though. Would I regret it?

We stood next to the door, but I didn’t open it. Instead, I waited there, wringing my hands—a new thing for me. I’d never been much of a hand wringer before. I was a nervous mess, but I liked having him here. I’d enjoyed spending time with him, and I didn’t want him to leave.

“What is it, Chloe?”

Did his voice sound huskier, his accent thicker than usual? I couldn’t tell, but I needed to say things to him, and, for once, I didn’t want to hold back.

“Thank you, Nico. For tonight. It meant more than I can ever express—”

He cut off my words when his lips met mine in the sweetest and softest kiss I’d ever imagined. How could someone as big, strong, and hard as Nico kiss like this? He made me feel as delicate as the china from my grandparents, and even more valuable.

His large hands cupped my face as the kiss deepened. I covered his hands with mine, holding onto him. We broke apart when Ella closed a door somewhere inside the apartment and called out my name.

“Sissy, you’re on TV again. Some coffee shop lady is naming her baby after you. Do you know where my school socks are?”

I’d finally gotten her a new uniform, socks and all. “I’ll be right there,” I called out.

Nico lifted a dark eyebrow at me. “A woman is naming her baby after you?”

“Yeah, we’re kind of friends. She’s my favorite barista. I’m a functioning member of society, thanks to her.”

“She must think highly of you too.”

“I guess so.”

He stroked my face with his fingers, his eyes on mine, and my breath caught in my throat. The man was positively hypnotic. He should come with a warning label, *Don't drive or operate heavy machinery after kissing Nicolai Mercia*. It could be dangerous.

“I think highly of you too. Good night, Chloe,” he said, giving me one last brief kiss. “Sleep well.”

After he left, I closed the door and leaned against it with a happy sigh. The post-kiss bliss lasted about ten seconds until I remembered two important things. First of all, Nico hadn't been able to pick up the police department's recordings today, but he would probably do so first thing tomorrow. When he did, when he saw exactly what happened that morning, he would hate me. He'd never buy takeout for my family, chat with my father, or charm my sister ever again. And he definitely wouldn't kiss me. Not once he knew the truth. He didn't seem like the type to kiss people who were big, fat liars. He was far too noble and way too honorable.

Another thing bothered me as well. I still had to pretend to be dating the prince, his boss. How would it make Nico feel to watch as I went out with another man? How could I pretend to be interested in Alex when Nico had kissed me senseless? We were supposed to go out to dinner at Restaurant Daniel tomorrow night, one of the nicest restaurants in the city, and I had to flirt with Alex. In front of Nico.

I covered my face with my hands. Gah.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave, I thought to myself, and it was true. One lie had led to another and another. Now I'd gotten perilously trapped in a mess of my own making.

Even if I wanted to tell Nico the whole truth at this point, I couldn't. He would hate me. And I could handle a lot, but not his hate—anything but that.

Sadly, I could see no way out. I was well and truly stuck.

CHAPTER

Eleven

ROMANCE IN A RESTAURANT: SPARKS FLY BETWEEN CHLOE
AND HER PRINCE

It was unexpected, this thing with Nico. It had come at me out of nowhere, and I had no idea what would happen in the future, or even how to deal with him in the present. He unsettled me, but also made me happy to be alive and excited about the future, things I hadn't experienced in a long time.

I sat in my room and trailed a finger over the skirt of my green dress. The color matched my eyes, and the dress fit my body's curves as if it had been made for me. Georgie found it for me, and she'd come to help me get ready before my date with Prince Alex. We were going to Restaurant Daniel, one of the nicest places in town, but I had to admit I would have traded it to have Chinese takeout with Nico again.

I had it bad. And I had no idea what to do about it.

Georgie studied my outfit with a critical eye as Ella worked on my makeup. "You're perfect," she said, giving me a thumbs up.

"Thanks."

She must have heard something in my voice because she frowned at me. "Are you okay?"

Georgie could read me like a book, but I didn't feel comfortable telling anyone, even her, about Nico. First of all, there was nothing to tell. Secondly, Georgie would make a big deal out of it and embarrass me. I couldn't deal with that right now.

“I’m more than fine. I’m going to dinner with one of the world’s most eligible bachelors. What could be better?”

She paused in adjusting my hair, her expression inscrutable. “So, what do you think of the prince?”

“He’s nice. Extremely sweet and thoughtful. And I admire the work of his foundation. It’s pretty amazing.”

“You aren’t interested in him?”

“No. Why?”

She shrugged. “He’s handsome, hot, rich, and a decent human being. He’s smart too. I mean, super smart. Even smarter than Ella, maybe.”

“Hey,” said Ella, pointing at Georgie with a makeup brush. “Watch it, No-No.”

Georgie rolled her eyes. “Not you too. Why does everyone in your family insist on calling me by that stupid nickname? It’s ridiculous.” She shook her head. “So, back to the prince, what do you think? Would you do him?”

Ella burst out laughing, and I gasped. “No. Geez. I can’t believe you. I don’t feel that way for him at all.”

For some reason, Georgie seemed ... relieved? I was about to ask her about it when Ella interrupted my thoughts. “Ask Chloe who she *does* feel that way about. I believe I know the answer.”

I shot my sister a dirty look. “Ella—”

“Why try to hide it? It’s so obvious who you’re really interested in.” I guess she had a point, and it was only a matter of time before Georgie found out anyway. “And he’s dreamy. How could you *not* like him?”

“Who?” Georgie’s eyes darted back and forth between Ella and me before comprehension dawned in her eyes. “Oh, baby. Does Chloe have a thing for Mr. Tall, Dark, and Grumpy? Now that would be interesting. He’s almost as hot as the prince.”

“Hotter,” I said, before I could stop myself.

Most girls would envy my position. I was about to go on a romantic date with Alex, the Crowned Prince of Latovia, and he was charming, handsome, wealthy, and incredibly nice. He covered all the bases without even being a prince. The royalty thing? The icing on an already yummy cake, but I craved something different. Something dark, decadent, and delicious.

Nico Mercia.

Ever since he kissed me, I couldn't think of anything else but doing it again.



Georgie had to leave before Alex arrived to pick me up. Due to that, Ella accompanied me to the lobby. She also wanted to meet the prince. She was so excited she practically bounced off the walls of the elevator. I felt excited, too, but for a different reason. And that reason stood right in front of the elevator doors as they opened.

“Hi, Nico.”

He gave me a nod. “Hello, ladies,” he said, shooting Ella a quick smile. “*His Royal Hotness Makes a Moment to Meet the Enchanting Ella.*”

Ella grinned. “*Tenacious Teen Triumphs By Popping in to Peek at the Prince.*”

Nico tossed back his head and laughed. “You win. You’re very good.”

Alex offered Ella his hand. “I’m happy to make your acquaintance, Ella. I’ve heard so much about you.”

He asked her questions about school, and Ella glowed with pleasure, her eyes huge on her face. My heart filled with joy as I watched them. Prince Charming had struck again, but I preferred Nico not-so-charming, the man standing right next to me.

“How are you today?” he asked, quite formally.

I peeked at him from beneath my lashes. “Much better,” I said. “And you?”

“I’m well, thank you. However, we’ve had a setback. I finally received the tapes from the police today. They weren’t as helpful as I’d hoped. We saw the moment you ever-gracefully leaped on the prince, but we couldn’t see the shooter clearly. The tapes are worthless.”

I made my expression as serious and as disappointed as possible while internally doing a happy dance. “Oh, too bad,” I said but secretly heaved a massive sigh of relief. Nico didn’t hate me. Not yet, at least.

“Yes, but please don’t be concerned. I’ll catch him eventually. It’s only a matter of time.”

And would he catch me, too? Would he figure out the truth? I hoped not, but Nico seemed to be as tenacious as he was thorough. He wouldn’t rest until all the questions in his mind were answered, including those involving me.

We said goodbye to Ella, and as he helped me into the limo, he held my hand longer than necessary and gave my arm the briefest of caresses. It made a wave of delightful shivers erupt all over my body.

Alex, already seated inside the limo, didn’t notice. He beamed at me. “Your sister is adorable. I’m so happy I got a chance to meet her.”

“It meant a great deal to her.”

“To me as well. Thank you for accompanying me this evening. I’m glad to see you’re doing better.”

Alex chatted the whole way to the restaurant about the work he’d been doing, mostly about building schools in remote villages in Africa. It was an interesting topic, but not as interesting as staring at the back of Nico’s head. He sat in the front seat of the limo next to the driver, and I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I loved how his dark hair brushed the collar of his shirt, and the strong set of his broad shoulders. It practically made my mouth water.

He must have sensed my eyes on him. He put down his sun visor, and I caught him staring right back at me in the mirror.

Busted.

He gave me a saucy wink, and I tried not to giggle, but everything in me lit up with pleasure. I loved being around him, and I enjoyed our budding connection.

We arrived at the restaurant and were led straight to our table. The other customers sent us curious glances. Alex smiled and nodded, as friendly and approachable as always. He made the people around him feel good, including me. But not everyone enjoyed the show. When Alex put an arm around my shoulder to pose for a photo, Nico may have growled. Alex found it amusing, but Tall, Dark, and Grumpy didn't even begin to describe Nico's aura this evening. He'd gone way beyond grumpy now. He was positively brooding.

When I went to the restroom, Nico followed me. There were two other security guards in place, watching over the prince, but I'd hoped Nico would be the one to escort me. When he put his hand on the small of my back to lead me down the hall, it felt delightfully possessive.

"Are you having a nice time?" he asked, his lips close to my ear.

"Yes. Except for the fact I can't stop thinking of you," I said. "Would it be bad if I kissed you right here and now?"

Nico's eyes darkened, his seductive lips curving in a smile. "Not here," he said. "But I might know a place. I want to kiss you too."

He brought me to a dark and deserted cloakroom and pulled me inside. Once there, I let out a happy sigh and wrapped my arms around his neck as his lips meant mine.

"Mmmm ... Chloe. I should take you back. You're on a date. With Alex."

"I know," I said, running my hands through his silken hair. "But I don't want to stop kissing you."

He let out a soft chuckle. "That could be a problem."

I kissed my way across his firm jawline, but the idea of Alex sitting out there in a big, fancy restaurant all alone made me pull away. “You’re right,” I said. “We need to get back. It’s not fair to Alex.”

Leaning lower, he touched his forehead to mine. “This is going to be complicated.”

“I know.”

“But I find I don’t care.”

His words brought a smile to my lips. “Neither do I.”

I spent the rest of the evening attempting to focus on Alex—a futile gesture. I sensed Nico’s gaze on me the whole night. Every time I peered at him, he had such a naughty gleam in his eyes, and I couldn’t help but blush and duck my head, hoping no one else noticed. It ended up being a long night.

Alex could not have been a better date—easy to talk to, engaging, and thoughtful. We chatted comfortably over dinner, and he asked lots of questions about my life.

“I understand you and Georgie work together at the publishing house. That must be enjoyable.”

“It’s never a dull moment with Georgie,” I said. “We’ve been friends as long as I can remember. She’s the yin to my yang. She’s also the smartest person I’ve ever met.”

“And she’s a genius at public relations,” he said. “Thanks to her, and to you, I’m getting the traction I need for my foundation.”

We clinked glasses. “I’m always happy to help. I’d rather not get shot again, but otherwise, I’m in. I love the work you’re doing. Georgie feels the same way.”

“She does?”

I nodded. “Georgie is more serious than she lets on.”

He leaned closer, folding his hands on the table. “Tell me more.”

“She’s smart as a whip, hilarious, and loyal. She’s been with me through a lot.” I forced myself to brighten my tone.

“Do you know her dad is from Jamaica? You need to hear Georgie imitate him. It’s possibly the funniest thing I’ve ever heard. And her mom is English. She does a great imitation of her too. It’s even better when she’s tipsy.”

“Then, I shall have to get her tipsy sometime soon.” He frowned. “That sounded weird, didn’t it?”

“Not at all.”

I made a mental note to tell Georgie all about this conversation later. The sad truth was, not many people recognized Georgie’s brilliance. At school, they’d called her a bad influence. In college, they saw her as a fluffy socialite. At work, they assumed she would be vapid and spoiled. In reality, she was generous, smart, and kind. If anything, I’d been the fluffy socialite. Georgie had never been interested in any of that stuff. She’d planned to enlist in the Peace Corps but delayed it after my mom died.

I was selfishly glad she had. I’m not sure I could have made it through everything without her.

After dinner, Alex and I posed for a few pictures in front of the restaurant. Alex had an arm protectively around my waist as we smiled for the cameras. Nico sent him a dark look, which almost made me laugh. If only he knew how little Alex’s touch affected me. The vibe I got from the prince was almost brotherly.

Giving a wave to the small crowd that had assembled, we slipped into the limo and drove back to my apartment.

“I’ll be in meetings all day tomorrow,” said Alex. “It’s going to be a busy week.”

“For me, too,” I said. “My doctor cleared me, so I plan to go back to work on Wednesday. The day after tomorrow.”

“Are you excited?”

“Oddly enough, yes. My boss can be challenging, but I like my job. For the most part.”

“Me, too,” said Alex with a grimace. “And the most challenging part about my boss is that he’s also my father.”

I heard something strange in his tone. Something sad and resigned. But before I could ask him about it, we pulled up in front of my place.

“Thanks for a lovely evening, Chloe,” he said, as we stood on the sidewalk. Shooting Nico a mischievous look, he leaned over and kissed the back of my hand. ““I’ll see you this weekend, if that works for you.””

Nico narrowed his eyes, muttering something under his breath, and Alex grinned. I grinned, too, mostly because I couldn’t help it. I found something so delicious in Nico’s jealousy, and his possessiveness. It thrilled me.

“That sounds like a plan. Goodnight, Alex.”

He winked at me. “Goodnight, Chloe.”

Nico insisted on walking me to my apartment. Another security guard took his place in the limo, and Alex went back to his hotel. I tried not to show the excited zing that went through me at the thought of being alone with Nico again.

He took my hand and led me into my building, nodding to our doorman and the guard standing in the lobby. He didn’t say a word as we waited for the elevator. We stood, hand in hand, watching the numbers slowly descend until finally it landed with a disturbing crunching noise and the doors opened. We stepped inside, and I pressed the button for the top floor—our penthouse. As soon as the doors closed, Nico pulled me into his arms and kissed me.

“Those were the longest two hours of my life,” he said between kisses. “I thought I’d go mad.”

“Me too.” I twined my fingers in his silky hair. “I mean, nothing against Alex—”

He pressed my body to the wall of the elevator. “Do not talk about Alex,” he said, his voice tight. “Not after I had to watch him flirt with you all evening.”

I wanted to tell him the prince had not flirted with me even once but forgot what I was going to say when Nico started kissing me again. I also forgot we were in an elevator, a public space, but I couldn’t have cared less. I moaned into his mouth,

loving the way his big hands roamed hungrily over my body, the way he made me feel like nothing but a pile of hot, wanting need. His tongue slid against mine, tasting and savoring me. I'd never been so completely turned on in my whole life.

I felt his hardness as he put his hands on my bottom and lifted me off my feet. He was wild and hot, but also careful not to touch where I'd been shot. I wrapped my legs around his waist, thankful for my short dress, and not caring that my lower half was probably exposed, especially when Nico ran his hand over my thigh.

“Your skin is so soft,” he rasped. “Every part of you is soft and sweet and perfect. God, I want you, Chloe.”

Our elevator was old and slow, and for the first time ever, I was thankful. It gave me more time with Nico.

I wanted him too. Obviously. I wiggled against him, trying to get closer. This time it was his turn to moan.

I placed my hands inside his jacket, and slid them over his back, loving the hardness of his muscles under the crisp fabric of his dress shirt. He smelled like aftershave and something spicy and rich that I couldn't quite identify. The smell of Nico himself. I nuzzled his neck, wanting to inhale him deeper.

His fingers traced the line at the edge of my panties as I found his mouth again. We were going to have sex in the elevator. This was turning into one of the better Mondays of my life.

He broke our kiss, his breathing unsteady, his eyes so dark they looked black. “Chloe, I—”

The bell on the elevator dinged, indicating we'd arrived at my floor. Nico muttered something under his breath, probably a Latvian swear word, as he released me from his embrace. I swayed, a bit wobbly on my feet, and he steadied me.

“You are messing me up, Chloe Burke,” he said, softly kissing the center of my palm. “I never intended for this to happen.”

“Neither did I,” I said, bewildered by all the different emotions this man made me feel. He leaned back, an amused smile curving on his lips. I rubbed the lipstick off his cheek as the elevator doors opened. “You know, I’ve always complained about the elevator being too slow. Now I only wish it could have been slower.”

Without waiting for a reply, I stepped out of the elevator and into the hallway. He followed, his hand at the small of my back. When we reached the door to my apartment, he instructed the guard to take a five-minute break. As soon as the guard disappeared, Nico pulled me into his arms again. He leaned closer, about to kiss me, but a noise coming from inside the apartment sent a bolt of fear through my body.

It was Ella. And she was screaming.

For a moment, I couldn’t move, but thankfully Nico sprang into action. He took the key out of my shaking hands and opened the door, rushing in to find out what had happened. I followed him, my heart pounding in my chest.

We found Ella in my father’s bedroom. My dad lay on the floor next to his bed, unconscious. Ella stood next to him, tears streaming down her face.

“He fell. I don’t know what happened or how long he’s been like this. I got home late, then I hung out in the kitchen a while, having dinner while I watched TV. I went in to check on him and found him like this. I’m so sorry.”

“Sweetheart, it isn’t your fault.”

Even though our dad spent most of his time in a wheelchair, he hadn’t been paralyzed. He did, however, suffer from damage to his spinal cord that caused his legs to be weak. It might have improved significantly with physical therapy, but he’d refused to cooperate. It was like he didn’t want to recover. He also got agitated when we tried to assist him. He didn’t want anyone to help him use the bathroom, get in and out of bed, or take a shower. Because he managed it on his own, we allowed him that bit of independence and privacy, but he may have tripped trying to get into bed. He came to as we

checked him, but his green eyes were unfocused, and he couldn't lift himself off the floor.

As I held Ella close, Nico did a quick assessment of my dad. When nothing seemed broken, he helped him onto the bed.

“Should we call an ambulance?” I asked.

He considered my question, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “I have a friend who is a doctor. He lives close by. Let me contact him and ask him what to do.”

Nico left the room to make his call. I helped my dad get comfortable, adjusting his pillows and tucking him in. He seemed tiny and frail on the big bed he'd once shared with my mother, and so old.

Ella stood back, eyes wide, her hair in two red braids. She was still in her uniform. She'd stopped crying, but she twisted one of the braids around and around her finger.

“I had play practice.” She let out a hiccup, getting hysterical again. “I should have checked on him as soon as I got home.”

“Ella, you can't think like that—”

Nico came back into the room and interrupted me in mid-sentence. “Excuse me, Chloe, but I need to ask your sister a question.” He towered over her. She had to tilt her chin up to see him. He leaned forward to stare her right in the eye, his face serious. “You need to stop blaming yourself for things not under your control. Did you plan for this to happen? Did you intend for your father to fall?”

She acted confused, but no longer hysterical. “N ... n ... no. Why would I do something like that?”

“Exactly,” he said, his voice steady. “I realize you're upset, but it's not your fault.”

“But I feel like it is.”

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I understand, but you're wrong. I know from personal experience.”

“How? What happened to you?”

For a second, I thought he might not answer, but he did, his expression haunted. “When I was your age, my older brother fell off a boat and drowned. I was far away at boarding school, studying for my university entrance exams, and yet I still blamed myself.”

She stared at him. “Why? You couldn’t have done anything to stop it.”

“True. And the same is true in your case as well.”

She let out a laugh. “Not exactly accurate, but I see what you did there. Very nice.”

“Good. Now, wash your face and quit beating yourself up about it. My friend is coming to check on your father. He’ll be here in a few minutes. Are you hungry? Do you want the guards to grab you some pizza?”

“I’m always hungry,” she said, letting out a shaky breath. “And I love pizza. Especially pepperoni.”

“Then, pepperoni pizza it is.” His eyes widened in surprise when she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. “Is this because I’m getting you pizza?”

“No, it’s because I’m so glad you’re here. It helped. It made things easier for both of us,” she said, stepping away from him. “Even though Chloe would never admit it, sometimes, trying to do this on our own is scary. The pizza is a bonus. Thank you, Nico.”

As Ella left the room, I watched her go, doing my best to stay strong and not cry. It was an emotional day for many reasons, filled with highs, lows, and kisses in elevators. Hearing my sister scream and seeing my father on the floor nearly pushed me over the edge. I sank to the corner of my father’s bed and covered his hand with mine. His eyes were closed, and his red hair had faded and was now streaked with gray. He barely resembled the person he’d been three years ago. None of us did.

“Chloe.”

Nico's soft voice interrupted my thoughts. He stood in the doorway, so incredibly handsome with his dark suit and dark hair—still mussed from the elevator incident.

“Yes?”

“I'm going to meet my friend, Stefan, in the lobby. I'll be right back.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, and by the way, I agree with Ella,” he said, pausing a moment, his dark eyes on mine. “I'm glad I happened to be here with you tonight too. And I'm especially glad you trusted me to help.”

CHAPTER

Twelve

CHLOE BURKE'S SKINCARE REGIME: CREATING A SPA-LIKE
EXPERIENCE AT HOME

I stayed with my dad until Nico came back with his friend, Dr. Maier. A kind man with warm brown eyes and a receding hairline, he concluded my father had no broken bones or major injuries. My dad didn't seem to have a concussion either, but Dr. Maier couldn't be sure, due to my father's current state.

"I don't think he hit his head, though, which is a good sign. How long has he been like this?"

"Three years," I said. "He was in a car accident. My mom died, and, well"

My voice trailed off. What else could I say? He'd given up? He'd locked himself in a prison in his mind?

I didn't know the answer to those questions, but I knew he'd been slightly better recently. I explained as much to Dr. Maier.

"He started therapy two weeks ago. I've noticed some small improvements."

"Good," said Dr. Maier, packing his stethoscope. He pulled out a notepad and jotted a few things down for me. "Sometimes a vitamin deficiency can make these things worse. I suggest you give him vitamin D-3 and a B-complex vitamin too. Would you be able to get him to take pills?" When I nodded, he continued. "Then give him a probiotic as well. Without blood work, I can't know for sure. None of these things will hurt him, so it's worth a try."

"Thank you."

Ella hovered in the doorway, her face pale, holding a plate with an uneaten slice of pizza on it. “Is he going to be okay?”

Dr. Maier stood and gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Your father is fine.” He turned to me. “Keep an eye on him for the next few days. If you need anything else, don’t hesitate to call me.”

Nico walked him to the door. Ella and I stayed in the bedroom, watching our father sleep. “That was scary,” she said.

I put my arm around her shoulders. “I know. But he’s okay. Nothing else matters. Now go, finish your dinner.”

“Thanks, Sissy.”

She left, munching on her pizza. I stood at the foot of my father’s bed, knowing he wasn’t okay. I didn’t know if he’d ever be okay ever again.

Nico came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. I leaned back against him, loving the big, supportive, comfortable warmth of him.

He kissed the top of my head. “Why don’t you get ready for bed? I’ll stay here with him.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, worried. “You’ve already done so much. The doctor. The pizza. I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

He put a hand on my cheek. “It’s not an inconvenience. Go. Take a nice long soak in the tub. It’ll make everything better.”

Heeding his advice, I filled the tub and added scented bubble bath, a rare indulgence. I sighed as I slipped into the warm water, my muscles immediately relaxing. Afterward, I dried off with a thick white towel and dressed in pink silk pajamas with a matching robe. The set had been a Christmas gift from Georgie. With my face now bare of makeup, I put on a moisturizer that smelled like roses, and stepped into a fluffy pair of pink slippers. Then I brushed my hair, tying it back with a pink ribbon, and rejoined Nico in my father’s room. He sat in a chair near my dad’s bed, reading something on his

phone. He'd taken off his jacket and tie and removed his shoes. He'd also rolled up his white shirt sleeves, exposing his smooth, bronzed forearms. He smiled when I entered the room.

“Ah. All better now?”

“Yes. Thank you again for—”

He waved away my words. “Please don't thank me all the time. It's getting annoying. I would not do it if I didn't want to do it.”

“Well, okay. I will try to stop thanking you, but you're making it hard.”

“I'm difficult like that.” Tilting his head, he indicated my father's bed. “He's resting more comfortably, but we should still keep a close eye on him. He could fall again, and that would be dangerous. If it's okay with you, I'll stay here tonight and sleep on your couch. To be safe.”

I didn't want Nico on my couch. I wanted him in my bed. But I couldn't say something like that, not without embarrassing myself completely. Also, my dad was currently in the room with us. Since I had no idea how much he heard or understood, I decided not to suggest Nico and I continue what we started in the elevator. Then again, if anything could snap my dad out of his current state, hearing his daughter proposition a man right in front of him might do the trick.

But I decided not to go there. “Are you sure?”

I was about to say I didn't want to inconvenience him but held back the words when he shot me a dark look. “I am sure. Ella has already turned in for the night. Do you want to have a slice of pizza? Your ravenous sister let me know she only ate half, which seemed like some sort of an accomplishment to her.”

I laughed, leading him to the kitchen. “She's always hungry, poor kid, and growing like a weed. I'm glad I was finally able to get her a new uniform. Ella nearly burst out of the old one. Can you believe she got detention twice for her skirt being too short but tried to keep it a secret from me? She

didn't want me to feel bad, and knowing she'd tried to protect my feelings made it even worse."

We sat at the kitchen table. I handed him a plate and a glass of wine from the bottle we'd opened the night before. Although it seemed like ages ago, only yesterday he'd bought us Chinese food, charmed the socks off my whole family, and kissed me in the foyer. It felt like it had been longer.

He took a bite of pizza and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "So, you're using the funds from the interviews to do extravagant things, like paying for therapy for your father and buying school uniforms and food for your sister. Have you bought nothing for yourself? Not even one pair of shoes?"

I smiled at him. "*You* bought me a pair of shoes. I don't need anything else."

"What about a coat?" he asked with a concerned frown. "Yours got ruined and now has a bullet hole in it. Don't you need a new one?"

I did, but I'd never admit it. "No. I'm fine."

The coat I'd worn to dinner tonight had been a loaner from Georgie. If I didn't have her, I honestly would resemble a character in a Dickens novel.

Nico and I chatted as we ate, like we'd known each other forever. For the first time, it felt like a perfectly normal situation. A guy. A girl. A pizza. Some flirting. For tonight, I wanted to pretend it was just about us. No assassins. No sadness. No princes. No lies.

When we finished, I made up the couch with sheets and a soft blanket and brought him a pillow. My bottom ached since this was the most activity I'd engaged in for weeks, but I didn't feel tired. Evidently, Nico didn't either. I poured each of us another glass of wine, and we sat side by side on the couch, staring out at the lights of the city, in the darkened room.

I turned to him. "I'm sorry to hear about your brother."

He reached for my hand and squeezed it, twining his fingers with mine. "Thank you. It happened a long time ago."

“It doesn’t matter. Grief doesn’t have an expiration date.”

He gave me a sad smile. “No, it does not.”

“What was he like?”

Nico considered my question. “Smart. Handsome. Funny. Spoiled. Impulsive. Careless. The first three are why I miss him. The last three are why I lost him. He got blind drunk at a party on a yacht off the coast of Malta. No one saw it happen, but the assumption is he got up in the middle of the night and stumbled right off the side of the boat. They never found a body.”

“My parents were a lot like your brother,” I said, my voice soft and my hand still in his. “They weren’t bad people, but they made terrible choices.”

“How did it happen?”

“They were coming home from a New Year’s Eve party. My father had been drinking. He wasn’t drunk, but he’d had enough to slow his reaction time, and the roads were icy. He slid through a red light and got hit by a truck. My mother died instantly. Sometimes I forget my father didn’t die, too,” I said, stifling a yawn. “Is that a terrible thing to say?”

“No, it’s not. And no one can understand what it’s like unless they’ve lived it themselves. Are you tired?”

“A bit. But it’s nice sitting here. With you.”

“Then let’s stay like this a little while longer, shall we?”

When I nodded, he put our empty wine glasses on the end table and wrapped an arm around me, pulling me close to his side. I snuggled next to him, my cheek pressed against his chest, and one arm around his waist. We stayed like that, in the quiet darkness. As I listened to the steady rhythm of his heart, my eyelids growing heavy, I realized I felt more relaxed and content than I’d been in a long time.

The next morning, I woke as the sun started to rise. I was still on the couch, draped on top of a sleeping Nico Mercia, with his arms wrapped tightly around me. Somehow, we’d

ended up being horizontal. I wondered if we'd been like this all night. If so, it could not have been comfortable for him.

I shifted, trying to give him more space, and he slowly opened his eyes. "Good morning," he said, his voice still rough with sleep. "Did you sleep well? Are you hurting?"

"Hurting?"

"Your wound." His hand slid over my silk robe until he touched my bottom. It made me suck in a breath, but not from pain.

"No, I'm not hurting. Not at all."

"Good." He shifted to give me a kiss. And then another. And then another. Before I knew what was happening, I was back on top of Nico, straddling his hips as I unbuttoned his shirt. I needed to touch his skin, and he must have felt the same way because he untied the belt of my robe and slid his hands under my pajama top. I was so into what I was doing that my father had to clear his throat twice before we realized he was in the room.

"Gah," I said, falling off Nico. I would have landed on the floor if Nico hadn't caught me in time. He pulled me to the edge of the couch as he got up and quickly straightened his shirt, his back to my dad. He needn't have bothered. My father had gone back to staring out the window. Maybe the throat-clearing had been a fluke.

"Hi, Daddy," I said, my voice overly bright as I kissed the top of his head. "I'll get you something to eat. Give me a minute."

I ran back to my room, brushed my teeth, and gave Nico a spare toothbrush and towel so he could wash up too. He acted so mortified I had to giggle. When he joined me in the kitchen, I was still laughing.

"It's not funny," he said, but I could hear the humor in his voice as he hugged me from behind, his cheek resting against the side of my head.

"It kind of is." I gave him a quick kiss on the lips. "If my dad had woken up about ten minutes later, he may have had

quite the show.”

Nico grimaced. “Oh, God. Please don’t go there.”

“Don’t go where?” asked Ella, who’d stepped into the kitchen. “And why are you two making out in the pantry?”

She was right. We were in the pantry. “I’m getting coffee,” I said, my cheeks burning. “And Nico wanted to help.”

Ella snorted. “Yeah, right. You’re a rotten liar, Chloe.”

She grabbed a big bowl of cereal and sat at the kitchen table. Her words pierced me like a knife to the chest. I used to be a rotten liar, but not anymore. Now I lied to everyone, even my baby sister.

“Are you okay?” asked Nico, his eyes on my face.

I put on a bright smile. “I’m fine. I need coffee, that’s all.”

He acted unconvinced but didn’t press me further. Then again, Nico had nothing to hide. I did.

Ella let out a bark of laughter. “You’ve got to see this.”

She held up the paper. On it was a photo of Alex and me in the restaurant last night. The headline read *Famous Chef Names His Signature Dessert After Chloe Burke*.

“All you have to do is eat now, and you’re in the headlines,” she said. “What if you did something that was actually interesting?”

I sighed as I made coffee and toast, listening to Nico and Ella chat. Ella was right. I used to be a rotten liar, but now I seemed to do it all the time. I lied to my family, my friends, and my coworkers. I lied to the city of New York and the rest of the country too. And now, I found myself lying to Nico, someone I’d begun to care about a great deal. It had become a trap of my own making. The only question?

What would Nico do if he learned the truth?

CHAPTER

Thirteen

On Wednesday morning, the sound of applause greeted me as I walked through the revolving doors and entered the elegant marble lobby of Wilson Publishing, the owners of *Haute NYC*. Nico insisted on accompanying me, and so had Georgie. They flanked me, with Georgie on my right and Nico on my left, his hand protectively hovering on the small of my back.

He leaned close, his warm breath a soft caress to my ear. “It appears you’re quite popular here.”

“I wasn’t three weeks ago,” I said, lips barely moving as I tried to keep a smile on my face. “This is new.”

In response, he stroked my back with his thumb, the smallest of gestures, but it sent a zing over my body. Even through several layers of clothing and a borrowed coat, Nico’s touch affected me.

I was glad he’d come, and not only because of the hand-zinging thing. First of all, he had on an impeccably tailored black suit, and I liked looking at him. Secondly, I felt thrown off after being away from work for three weeks. Coming here seemed surreal. Having Nico around grounded me.

With its sleek, modern interior, Wilson Publishing looked nothing like the inside of Burke Books. When my grandfather founded his company more than half a century ago, he put a lot of attention into the atmosphere, creating a warm, welcoming area with glowing wood and soft lighting. Books lined the walls, almost like a library, and soft chairs and

couches were placed strategically throughout the quiet space. On the other hand, this lobby was cold, hard, and bright. Instead of books lining the walls, there were giant framed posters of various magazine covers. Many were from *Haute NYC*, including several that had won international awards.

I studied the assembled people. Everyone who worked in the building, from the top acquiring editors down to the lowliest of proofreaders, stood in the lobby, clapping and cheering. I found it bizarre.

A security guard named Dale offered to escort me to the elevator. He'd always been kind to me.

“Thank you, Dale.”

“It's good to have you back, miss.”

I hardly needed Dale with Nico around, but this seemed like a big moment for him. “It's good to be back. Lead the way.”

Dale wasn't the only one offering me a greeting this morning. A snooty girl named Livonia, who'd never spoken to me before, handed me a bouquet of roses. “Thank goodness you're okay. I missed you so much.”

Unsure what to do, I took the flowers and gave her an awkward thumbs up. “You too.”

Georgie tried to hold back a laugh. It came out as a weird, strangled snort. Then she gasped. “In the name of all things holy, what is she doing?”

I followed her gaze and saw Felicity Fuller, my evil boss, waving at us. She held a giant sign reading, “Welcome Back, Chloe!”

“Is she smiling?” asked Georgie with a shudder. “I've never seen her smile before. Make her stop. It's freaking me out.”

I gave Georgie a sharp nudge with my elbow, knowing everything we did and said might be recorded. “Be quiet, Georgie,” I said from between clenched teeth. “People are listening.”

“I can’t help it,” she said. “It’s so annoying to be besties with a celebrity.”

Her words made me pause, and I experienced an odd jolt of surprise. Not because my new-found celebrity bothered her, but because I suddenly realized it didn’t bother me.

As weird as it might sound, the people staring at me and snapping pictures made me feel somehow normal again. After seeing my face in the society pages my whole life, the anonymity caused by our financial and social demise hit me like a personal and hurtful blow. I quickly learned that without the Burke fortune and the Burke Books dynasty, I was a big fat nobody.

I hated being a big fat nobody.

Even worse, I hated how easily I slipped into my new role. How quickly I’d accepted it.

It was a sad sort of realization. Without meaning to, I’d faded away bit by bit until I became the ghost of the girl I used to be and changed into someone sad and miserable and lonely. But now I was back, and even bigger than before. People knew my name. I could breathe again. And Nico? He was the icing on the cake.

He stood next to me, all hot and protective, and I nearly swooned. It might make me sound weak, but I enjoyed the way he looked out for me. I’d been on my own for so long. I’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone besides Georgie and Ella watching my back. Now, even if it only lasted a short period of time, I had Nico. Beautiful, sexy, Nico. I was a lucky girl.

In fact, other than the whole getting shot thing, my life had never been better. For the first time in a long time, I was happy to be at work. I hadn’t realized everyone else would be glad to see me, especially Felicity Full-of-Herself. She was the meanest of all mean girls and now wanted to be my friend. This was the first truly negative thing my new-found celebrity had brought me.

“Chloe. Come here, darling.”

Felicity handed off her sign to Imogene, the poor woman who'd replaced me as Felicity's editorial assistant for the last few weeks. In typical Felicity fashion, she didn't pay attention when she flung the sign and nearly smacked poor Imogene in the face. Fortunately, Imogene ducked in the nick of time.

Her eyes met mine and we shared a moment of solidarity. There was a lot of ducking where Felicity was involved. Ducking insults and thinly veiled threats and sometimes even a book. That actually happened to me. Twice.

Poor Imogene. I owed her a drink. She'd aged five years in one month.

As the other Wilson Publishing employees watched our interaction, Felicity opened her arms and gave me a giant hug. "Chloe. Sweetheart." She held me so close I felt every hard angle of her bony body. When she leaned back, she kept my hands tightly clasped in hers, her rings biting into my fingers. "Back right where you belong."

"Thank you, Felicity," I said, wrestling my hands out of her grasp. "You're too kind."

"And this is ...?" she asked, giving Nico a head-to-toe perusal, her dark eyes calculating. I couldn't tell what she was thinking, but knowing Felicity, it could not be something pleasant.

"Nico Mercia," he said curtly. "Prince Alexander sent me to see to Ms. Burke's safety."

"Oh," she said, placing a hand on his bicep. "How lovely."

Turning away from Nico, Felicity ignored Georgie completely and linked her arm in mine. Together we followed Dale to the elevator. Nico brought up the rear.

"You look gorgeous," said Felicity, gushing in a way I found vaguely disturbing. "I've always admired your style. Is your dress Givenchy?"

I bit my lip as I glanced down at my midnight blue wrap dress with ruffles along the edge of the skirt. Georgie answered for me, which made sense since it happened to be her dress.

“Yes, it is. And her coat is Max Mara.”

Felicity shot Georgie a hostile glare. “Well, you certainly know a lot. What about her underwear?”

“Agent Provocateur,” she said, without missing a beat. “Sheer navy with mixed French floral embroidery.”

Nico made a funny choking noise, which he tried to hide with a cough. I didn’t know if Georgie’s comments had shocked or amused him, but Georgie told the truth. I did have on Agent Provocateur, but only because I had an old friend who worked there. She knew how much I liked the product and gave me anything she came across with imperfections in my size. The colorful floral embroidery on my sheer navy bra was not symmetrical, but I didn’t care in the least. In my opinion, the right bra and good shoes made a world of difference as far as self-confidence and happiness were concerned. Also, wearing pretty lingerie made any girl feel sexy.

“She’s right.” I caught Nico’s eye and gave him a wink. When he blushed, I knew he’d just tried to imagine what I had on under my dress. That made me feel good too.

As I semi-flirted with Nico, Georgie and Felicity engaged in some sort of stare-down. It lasted an uncomfortably long five seconds before Felicity finally focused on me with an ingratiating expression.

“Agent Provocateur is the best and very European. Like your prince.”

Nico’s eyes narrowed, an adorably jealous response. I shouldn’t have enjoyed it so much, but I couldn’t help it. Being the focus of his attention was a heady sensation.

When the elevator doors opened onto our floor, Nico put a hand on my elbow and bowed in Felicity and Georgie’s direction. “Excuse us a moment, ladies. I need to have a word alone with Ms. Burke.”

“Certainly,” said Felicity, a big fake smile on her fire-engine-red lips. Normally, she’d have a fit if I took a moment of time for myself. We even had to negotiate restroom breaks.

Now I had a feeling I could pee any old time I wanted. This was huge. If I'd known about this particular perk, I would have gotten shot in the butt ages ago.

They entered the office, and Nico led me to a quiet corner a few feet from the elevators. He turned his back to the doors of the *Haute NYC* office, effectively blocking me from any curious onlookers.

"I have to go now," he said, his hands resting gently on my arms as he stared into my eyes. "Will you be alright?"

"Georgie will be with me. How much trouble could I possibly get into with her around?"

He snorted. "Do you want an honest answer to your question?"

I let out a giggle. "Probably not."

Tucking a lock of hair behind my ear, he became suddenly serious. "You have to be careful. Don't go anywhere alone. Until we figure out who tried to hurt the prince, you must be cautious as well."

"I will. I promise."

"Good."

My eyes went to his mouth. I wanted to kiss him. But we were in a public place, and I was pretending to date his boss at the moment. I licked my lips involuntarily, and he groaned.

"If you continue looking at me like that, I won't be responsible for my actions."

"Sorry," I said, but I wasn't sorry at all, and he knew it.

"Behave." He lowered his dark head. "I shall be thinking of you and your undergarments all day. Even though I have no idea what French floral embroidery is, I find I'm suddenly curious about it."

Certain no one else was watching, I shifted the neckline of my dress and gave him a quick glimpse of the sheer navy tulle edged with brightly colored flowers. "And now you know," I said.

He swallowed hard. “And now, I know.”

I went onto my toes to whisper in his ear. “Maybe I can show you the matching panties later. I mean, in the interest of teaching you more about embroidery. And lingerie.”

After giving him a saucy wink, I left him standing there. Dumbfounded. It was a new look for Nico Mercia, and I loved that I’d been the cause of it. I gave him one final glance over my shoulder and waved a quick goodbye before entering the offices of *Haute NYC*.

Spanning the entire seventh floor of Wilson Publishing, the office set up was one giant room filled with a series of white, boring cubicles. Only the prominent editors got window offices, and only the biggest got corner offices. Felicity lusted after those corner offices so much I worried she might poison someone to get one. Her office wasn’t bad, though. Spacious and airy, it had views of the Flatiron District and Fifth Avenue. Located in front of her office, my cubicle had a nice view of the ladies’ room.

When I set my purse on my desk, Felicity stopped me. “Oh, no, Chloe. Imogene is using your desk now. You’re getting your own private office.”

I lifted an eyebrow in surprise. “I am?”

Judging by her reaction, Georgie had known this was coming. “It’s because you need a comfy chair,” Georgie said, pointing to her own bottom. “For your injury. Your buttocks injury.”

Felicity, who had developed an eye twitch, interjected, “Also, you’ll be busy with your new job. You’ll need the space.”

“My new job ...?”

She led me to the door of a small office not far from hers. On the door was a sign reading *Chloe Burke, Royal Reporter*.

I swung to face Felicity. “Since when do we have a royal reporter?”

“Since today,” she said, her smile so brittle I wondered if her face might crack. “This comes from the top—Mr. Wilson himself. Your assignments are on your desk, and you would be wise to complete them on time.”

“But I’m not sure—”

Her expression darkened, and she moved closer, her voice taking on a much harder tone. “This is your fifteen minutes of fame, Chloe. Enjoy it while it lasts. Tomorrow you could be like the Moth Man of Manitoba.”

She shut the door of my office, and I stared at Georgie. “Who is the Moth Man of Manitoba?” I asked, totally confused.

Georgie plopped into the chair in front of my desk. “Nobody. Famous for the blink of an eye and then gone. I believe that was Felicity’s point.”

“Oh,” I said, not sure what to do. Nico would not like this, but what other option did I have? Felicity itched for a chance to fire me. I refused to give it to her.

Taking off my coat, I hung it on the hook on the back of the door, straightened my pretty blue dress, and took out my laptop. I’d never wanted to work on the society pages, nor did I want to cover royals, but I didn’t have an option. My heart sank, however, as I picked up the paper on my desk and read it. “They want me to write about Alex.”

“Obviously.”

“They’re ordering me to do a sort of journal about dating him. What I wore. What he wore. Where we went. How far we went.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

I showed her what Felicity had written in clear, block letters—*Romancing a Royal: All the Dirty Details*. “She literally wrote ‘How far you went,’ and ‘Dirty Details,’ She’s not talking about mud wrestling. What am I going to say?”

Georgie crossed her legs, her toe tapping like it always did when she was thinking hard. “We’ll partner with His Royal

Hotness on this, but let's give them what they want. All the dirty details. Completely fictional, of course. I'll sort it out with the prince. This will be fun."

"Fun?"

Nico would not see it the same way at all. He and Alex sometimes had an oddly contentious relationship for an employer and employee, and I knew he wasn't comfortable with our original idea for a fake relationship between Alex and me. Now that Nico and I were sort of ... whatever we were, I suspected he'd be even less pleased with Georgie's plan. But what choice did I have? Felicity's message came through loud and clear. Imogene already occupied my old desk, and my fifteen minutes of fame would be up before I knew it. "This doesn't feel like fun. If I don't produce what they want, I'll be royally screwed."

"Royally screwed? Do you mean that the way it sounded? Because I'm not sure Nico would be on board with that."

It took me a second to get her meaning. "I meant it figuratively, Georgie. You're such a weirdo."

"I'm the weirdo?" She let out a laugh and grabbed a notebook and pen from her bag. "First things first. We need to come up with a few good alliterations. Should we say you plan to pounce on the prince? Get some nookie from a noble? Attack the aristocrat?"

"Why do you make it sound so violent? Geesh, Georgie. None of this is real. I'm not planning to pounce on anyone."

Except for Nico. But I didn't want to say it, not even to Georgie. It was the first time I'd allowed myself to get close to a man in years. I didn't want to jinx it.

Georgie jotted something in her notebook, the tip of her tongue protruding from the corner of her lips as she wrote. Georgie always did that when she concentrated hard.

"I'm afraid to ask, but what are you writing?"

She spun her notebook around and showed it to me. On it, she'd drawn stick figures doing nasty things, with the words, *Seducing the Sovereign* written above them.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You aren’t funny.”

“What? I wanted to write *Banging the Baron*, since that’s one of Alex’s many titles, or *Riding the Royal* or *Coitus with the Crown*, but I didn’t want you to be offended.” She closed her notebook. “I never thought I’d say this, but Felicity is right about one thing. This is your fifteen minutes of fame, and we need to use it wisely. Maybe we can make some bank for you and your sister Cinder-Ella, and help out a handsome prince in need. He would benefit as much from the publicity as you would. Remember all those poor, illiterate orphans. We have to keep it positive, and yet make it interesting.”

“What about telling the truth?” I asked softly.

Georgie’s pretty face grew serious. “People don’t want the truth, Chloe. I assumed you knew that already. They want a fairy tale, and you’re the perfect girl to give it to them.”

CHAPTER

Fourteen

THE DARLING DEBUTANTE: HOW CHLOE CONQUERED THE
HEART OF A PRINCE

“Another day, another morally questionable decision,” I murmured to myself as I finished my first royal reporter article for *Haute*. I’d chosen what I hoped was the least explosive topic out of the five on my desk— *Our First Date: A Casual Coffee with the World’s Most Eligible Bachelor*.

Short, sweet, and honest. I wrote about what a nice guy Alex was, brought up his foundation several times, and revealed the big secret he shared with me in private. He’d never had a pumpkin spice latte before. He’d become a fan—a true story and super cute. Georgie said it made him basic, but I didn’t share her opinion about Alex’s pumpkin spice passion in the article, though. There was nothing negative, only the simple truth about a good man who did noble things, and it felt lovely not to lie for once.

A sad commentary on my life.

I glanced up and saw Imogene in my doorway. Her brown hair had slipped out of its bun and now hung in lank strands around her face. She had dark circles under her eyes, and judging by the puffiness and redness of her cute, little nose, she may have been crying. I rose to my feet, ushered her into my office, and closed the door behind us.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, but her lip wobbled. “It’s ... well, you know.”

I patted her arm. “Yes, I know,” I said softly. “I wish I could say it gets better, but it won’t. I’m sorry. Your only

option is to get shot in the butt if you want to escape.”

She let out a shaky laugh. “I’ll look into it. I didn’t want to bother you, but I came in to discuss the Wu and Andersen wedding. Are you still able to cover it this Friday? Felicity wanted to do it herself, but the family insisted on having you there. It, uh, didn’t go over well, but I guess you went to school with the bride?”

“I did. Melanie Wu is an old friend. I’d already planned to go, so that won’t change my schedule.” I took the invitation out of my briefcase. “It’s on Friday night at the Plaza.”

“And you have a ‘plus one,’ I see,” said Imogene, a twinkle in her dark eyes. “I wonder who you should bring?”

Immediately, I thought of Nico and imagined dancing the night away with him in the Grand Ballroom, but then my heart sank. I couldn’t go to the wedding with Nico, not while pretending to be interested in Alex.

Lies upon lies upon lies.

“It’s going to be the social event of the season,” Imogene went on. “It sounds like fun.”

“It does,” I said, but she must have detected my lack of enthusiasm from the tone of my voice.

“Is everything alright, Chloe? I’m sorry I didn’t ask. I know you’ve been through a lot.”

I forced a smile onto my lips. “Everything is fine. I’ll let Felicity know I’d be pleased to cover the wedding. I hope that’ll keep you out of the line of fire—for a day or two, at least.”

I gave her a wink, and Imogene went back to her desk by the restroom—poor woman. I knew precisely how stressful working with Felicity could be. She was unfair, unreasonable, and maybe even a bit unhinged.

I texted Felicity, letting her know I’d be happy to cover the wedding, and telling her it was kind of her to give it to me. Which it wasn’t. And she didn’t.

I also informed her I'd completed the first royal reporter article and emailed it to her, thanking her again for the great opportunity. I sent a copy to Georgie, too, and she loved it. But I got nervous when Georgie met me at the elevator, and we went to the lobby together. How would Alex respond to the news of this new job? And, most importantly, how would Nico handle it?

It wouldn't be long before I found out because they both waited for us by the limo. Alex chatted happily with a small group of reporters, and his face positively lit up when he saw us. I didn't think it was all for show. He'd become a friend to Georgie and me over the last few weeks, and a total sweetheart when he'd met Ella. Prince Alex was indeed charming, but he wasn't the person who made my heart flutter with excitement at the sight of him. Only Nico did that, but I couldn't let anyone know. I gave him an apologetic look. He nodded, which meant he understood the situation, knew I wanted to kiss him all over his grumpy face, and wouldn't hold it against me for pretending to be hot after his boss.

At least that's what I hoped it meant.

Conscious of the cameras on me, I put a big smile on my face and hugged Alex. "What a nice surprise. I didn't expect to see you again until the weekend."

"I got out of my meeting early and wanted to check on you. Did you have a good day back at the office, darling?" he asked, keeping an arm around my shoulders and speaking loud enough for the reporters to hear. A woman holding a notebook sighed and began scribbling. Alex was good at this, and I suppose I had a gift for it as well. I shot him a bashful glance from under my lashes.

"I did. Thank you."

We answered a few questions before slipping into the limo and driving away. I sat in the back with Alex and Georgie. Nico sat directly in front of me, silent and slightly distant. Was he hurt? Or mad? I couldn't tell but I knew I'd have to talk with him about my new position at *Haute* as soon as I had him alone for a minute. He wouldn't like it, but once I explained

the situation clearly, surely he'd see I had no other choice. I could become Chloe Burke, Royal Reporter, or Chloe Burke, Unemployed Former Debutante. It was an easy decision. He'd definitely get it. But I needed to approach it the right way and explain it to him fully so his head wouldn't explode. And to do that, we needed to be alone when it happened. The worst thing would be to talk about it right now.

"Guess what?" asked Georgie, digging through her giant purse for a pen. "Chloe has a new job. She's the royal reporter for *Haute*. Isn't that awesome? She's going to share all your secrets, Alex. What a hoot."

I watched Nico's shoulders stiffen and could almost sense the anger emanating from his body. This was not how I'd wanted to approach this topic. If Georgie had been sitting next to me, I would have kicked her.

"I can explain—" I began, but Alex interrupted me.

"What a fantastic idea. This will give us even more media coverage. Thank you, Chloe."

"I didn't—"

This time Georgie interrupted me. "That's exactly what I said. We can mold this to our needs. Chloe submitted the first article already about your coffee date. It's adorbs."

They both turned their heads to stare at me. Alex's blue eyes sparkled because he trusted me. Georgie's grey eyes danced with mischief. She saw this as a big joke, a way of pulling the wool over the eyes of as many people as possible. But when Nico lowered his sun visor, and his dark eyes met mine in the mirror, all I saw was anger ... and a hefty dose of disappointment. He thought I'd betrayed their confidence.

"It was only a short, meaningless article," I said, mostly to Nico. "I wouldn't have written anything important without checking first."

"I know you wouldn't," said Alex, oblivious to the glares I'd gotten from Nico. "But this works to our advantage."

"She's been given a list of topics. Show him the topics, Chloe," said Georgie, pointing to my briefcase. I pulled out

Felicity's instructions and handed them to Alex. He chuckled as he read them.

"Oh, my. You've got to be joking. They want you to write about whether or not I'm a good kisser? How does one judge, may I ask? We might have to work on this one first, Chloe."

Nico made a strange growly sound. I had no idea how to fix this, so I plunged ahead. "Most of the topics are pretty stupid," I said, "but maybe we can use them as a starting point and take it a step further."

"What do you mean?" asked Georgie, her eyebrows drawn together in a worried scowl. "Wait. Do you want to write about what Alex is like in bed?"

"No." My response came out louder than intended. "What the heck, Georgie? Definitely not. I meant we could add weight to this fluff. Skirt around the topics and talk about real things. Important things. Like your foundation."

"Good idea," said Alex. He studied Nico, an unreadable expression on his face. "We can start this weekend. Do you have plans on Friday?"

"I do. I have to work." I took the invitation to Melanie's wedding out of my purse. "I'm covering this wedding for the magazine. The bride is an old friend."

Georgie leaned forward excitedly. "Alex should be your 'plus one.' It would be a good chance for some photos. Don't you think it's a great idea, Alex?"

"As long as Chloe agrees, I'd be delighted."

"Of course, she agrees. And Nico can be my date," said Georgie. "I'm invited too. What do you say, hot stuff?" Nico grunted, which Georgie took to be affirmative. "I'm excited. I bet you're super adorable in a tux."

Despite the fact I was currently pre-mad at Nico in anticipation of the argument I knew we'd have the minute we were alone together, I had to admit Georgie had been correct about several things. This was a good idea, and Nico would look fabulous in a tux. I wished he could be my date, and I also wished he hadn't found out about my new job like this.

When the limo arrived in front of my building, Alex offered to drive Georgie home, and I thanked him. Nico opened the door for me and followed me into the building, his footsteps heavy as he stomped through the marble foyer. The guy almost pulsated with anger. I frowned at him, feeling both frustrated and worried.

“I can explain—”

“I’m sure you can,” he growled. “What excuse will you make for your behavior this time?”

“It’s not an excuse. I didn’t have a choice.” I sounded whiny, and I hated sounding whiny. I stood straighter and glared at him. “My boss gave someone else my job while I recovered. I could either take this job or quit, and you know I can’t quit. We’re barely getting by as it is. You’ve seen how my sister eats.”

I’d hoped to lighten up the situation with my last comment, but it backfired. “Now you’re blaming Ella? Will you ever take responsibility for your actions?”

Nico wanted to fight, and no matter what I said or did, he wasn’t going to see reason right now, but it still hurt. Reaching the elevator, I jabbed the button several times before poking him in the chest with the same finger.

“Don’t say another word. None of this is my fault. I didn’t ask for it. I don’t want it.”

I spoke in an angry whisper. He leaned forward until we stood nose to nose and did the same. “Is that so? Do you mean this hasn’t worked out beautifully for you? A better job. Lots of attention. Money. Fame. And you have a prince calling you his ‘darling’ in front of a flock of reporters. Sorry if I’m not jumping on the Chloe Burke sympathy train right now.”

His words stung. I stared at him in shock. “The sympathy train? Is that what you think I’ve been doing? Trying to get your sympathy?”

He scowled at me. “Hasn’t that been your goal all along? This is the best thing that could have happened to you, and we both know it.”

I nearly shook with anger. “You’ve gone too far. I shouldn’t have to explain my actions to anyone, least of all you.”

“Least of all me?” He stiffened. “Oh, I see. Because I’m a servant? Because I’m not the prince or one of your vapid former boyfriends? They were all the same, weren’t they? Old money, prep school, boring. Did you ever date someone not nicknamed Chip or Kip or Trip?”

I shook my head, perplexed, mostly because I had dated guys in high school and college with all those nicknames. And he was right about the other part too. My ex-boyfriends were all old money, prep school guys, mostly because I’d been an old money, prep school girl. They were all pretty bland and boring and tedious.

“How do you know who I dated? Have you been looking into my past?” He didn’t answer, but I could tell from the shuttered expression in his eyes that it had to be true. I didn’t know how to respond. I couldn’t even think straight right now, mostly because Nico was ridiculous, and he’d misinterpreted what I’d said. “And about the other part, it has nothing to do with your job, doofus. It’s because I let you in. I showed you my life. I trusted you.”

His eyes darkened. “You trusted me? Prove it.”

“How?” I asked, hating the way Nico treated me right now.

“Tell the truth. About everything. Because I believe you’re a liar, Chloe Burke. And I don’t trust you any more than you trust me.”

“Oh, wow.” His words struck me like a punch to the stomach. It hurt so much I actually couldn’t breathe for a moment. “Oddly enough, I did trust you, Nico. But I’m glad you made your feelings so clear. Thank you.”

He let out a noise of pure frustration. “Listen to me—”

“No.” The elevator doors opened, and I stepped inside. When he tried to follow me, I held out a hand to stop him. “You’ve said enough.”

When the doors shut on his handsome, angry face, I sank back against the wall of the elevator and wanted to cry. I didn't know if I felt so devastated because of what Nico had said about me, or because I knew he was right. Well, about some of it, at least.

As the elevator slowly heaved its way up to the top floor, I remembered something my mother used to say.

Never let them see you cry, darling. It'll ruin your mascara, but it'll make their day. And the last thing you ever want to do is make their day.

She'd been right about all of it. And it made me miss my mom more than ever.

"Never let them see you cry," I said, whispering the words as I steeled myself, waiting for the elevator doors to open. When they did, I stepped out onto my floor, wishing I'd never met Nico Mercia. Wishing I'd never gotten shot in the butt. I wished for many things, but if life had taught me one lesson over the last three years, it was a simple one.

Wishes never came true. Not for me, at least.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

PRETTY AS A PRINCESS CHLOE BURKE ATTENDS SOCIETY
WEDDING ON THE ARM OF HER OWN PRINCE CHARMING

“Wait, he said what to you?” asked Georgie, her eyes ablaze with fury.

She had on a beautiful persimmon-colored chiffon gown and matching lipstick. Her skin glowed, and she'd somehow twisted her unruly hair into a perfectly executed chignon. She looked incredible but also amazingly pissed off.

“Where should I start?”

She put her hands on her hips. “From the beginning. I want to hear every word.”

Georgie had come over to help me get ready for the wedding, meaning she intended to do my hair, approve my makeup, and tell me what to wear. It had become our routine. Not that I was complaining. Georgie had great taste, and she'd brought me a gorgeous pale pink gown, on loan from the designer. It clung to my curves and made me feel like a goddess. Or maybe a naked nymph wrapped in nothing but a cloud of pink tulle, filmy organza, and a flounce of feathers. She pulled my hair into a loose updo of curls and lent me a pair of champagne-pink sparkly earrings. Since the reception would be a masquerade ball, she'd also found a pretty pink mask. The rose gold strappy heels were the perfect finishing touch.

“Well, he called me a liar and said I'm enjoying my new notoriety.” I eyed my beautiful dress with a surge of pure, unadulterated guilt. “Which I am, but that's beside the point.”

“Sorry that I blurted out the news about your job. I got excited for you.”

I squeezed her hand. “Not your fault. If he doesn’t trust me, there’s nothing I can do about it, which is sad because”

“Because why?” she asked, her voice gentle.

Giving her a sad smile, I answered her honestly. “Because I actually liked him. He’s the first person I’ve felt this way about in a long time. But I’m obviously a terrible judge of character. We both know it’s true, right?”

“You want to see the best in everyone,” she said, her eyes sad. “It doesn’t mean you’re a poor judge of character.”

“But it does mean I’m sometimes a fool. Especially in this case.” I blew out a breath. “Enough. Let’s go. We have a wedding to attend, and the limo will be here soon. At least I judged Alex’s character correctly. He’s a nice person.”

She grinned at me. “And tonight he’ll have his gorgeous bod in a tux—not something I want to miss. I’m sure Nico will look good, too, not that we’ll notice, since we’re mad at him. Very mad. He’s definitely off our lust list. If I could, I would uninvite him. Sadly, it’s too late for me to dump him, but I plan to make things extremely awkward for him all evening.”

I snorted. “Don’t you usually make things awkward for him?”

“I’m taking it up a notch. He’s going to be sorry he ever messed with us.”

“Thanks, Georgie,” I said. “You’re a good friend.”

“And I’m a horrible enemy. Nasty Nico is going to get a taste of his own medicine. I’m going to out-nasty-fy him tonight. The big jerk.”

He was a big jerk. And the idea of seeing him tonight made me oddly nervous. How would he act? How should I act?

We’d planned to meet both of them at the Plaza. Alex couldn’t make it in time for the ceremony but promised to be there for the reception. We arrived early so I could interview

Melanie as she got ready before the other guests arrived. Several of her bridesmaids were our old classmates, and we enjoyed hanging out with them and drinking champagne as they got ready.

“You’re a beautiful bride,” I said when Melanie came out of the dressing room in her gown. She would put on a completely different dress for the reception, and I’d already taken detailed notes about each one.

Mrs. Wu gazed at her daughter, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “We’re glad you’re the one to cover Melanie’s wedding,” she said. “I didn’t like the other lady who called. The pushy one. I told her we wanted you or no one, and I’m glad I did. It’s so nice to see all of you girls together again.”

“We’re happy to be a part of it.”

Melanie practically glowed with joy. Her husband-to-be, Will Andersen, had been her high school sweetheart, and they were the perfect couple. They always had been. And I could say with absolute certainty that Will had never accused Melanie of being a lying, untrustworthy schemer.

Then again, Melanie was an angel. The only lying, untrustworthy schemer in the room was me.

Melanie gave me a dimpled smile as she adjusted her veil. “I heard a rumor about your ‘plus one,’ Chloe. Is it true? Will Prince Alex be here?”

“Yes,” I said, as the rest of the bridesmaids giggled in excitement. “He can’t make it for the ceremony. He sends his regrets, but he’ll come to the reception.”

“A prince at my daughter’s wedding,” said Mrs. Wu, beaming. “It’s going to be the perfect evening.” I hoped she was right because it had been a super crappy week.

Georgie and I found our seats moments before the music started. Melanie entered the room on her father’s arm, looking blissful. Her father cried. We cried. The only person who didn’t weep was Melanie. She was far too happy to shed a tear.

The ceremony went beautifully. The bridesmaids wore lilac, which reminded me of the bouquet Nico had brought me

in the hospital after I'd been shot. Odd to think it happened only a few weeks ago. In truth, I barely knew the man, and yet I'd allowed him to get close. Too close. And he'd disappointed me on so many levels.

"Let it be a lesson to us all," I said to myself.

"Excuse me?" asked Georgie, sniffing, as the officiant spoke about love, joy, trust, and other made-up stuff.

I hadn't realized I'd spoken aloud. "Nothing," I said, not wanting to ruin the moment for Georgie with my newly cynical mindset. "I'm happy for Melanie."

"Me too."

After the ceremony, we donned our masks, laughing at the sudden anonymity it provided. Some of the masks were simple, others quite ornate. Georgie tied mine behind my head with pink ribbons. Hers was a sexy swathe of black lace.

"I kind of like it," she said. "I feel like a dominatrix."

An older man standing next to her coughed to cover up a chuckle. His wife acted less than amused. I linked my arm with Georgie's to pull her into the grand ballroom before she said anything else.

"I need to get a filter" Her voice trailed off as she stared around in wonder. The room had been altered into a magical space, with elegant flower arrangements on each table, tall candles, and dramatic pink and purple lighting. The effect was incredible, like we'd entered another world. Georgie nudged me. "Well, princess, it looks like you got a fairyland. It should make your job easier, don't you think?"

"Definitely. It's incredible. I need to find a way to describe it well enough to do it justice."

We found our table and were enjoying themed cocktails when Alex and Nico arrived. They stood across the room from us, chatting with Melanie and Will. Melanie had changed into her second gown, which was silver and sparkly and made her look like a fairy queen. And even though Alex and Nico were masked, I'd known who they were as soon as they walked into

the room. At this point, I could sense Nico's presence like a disturbance in the force.

I lifted my glass and drained my cocktail in one gulp. Making random sci-fi references meant I was a woman on the edge. This was not good. Not good at all.

Nico's eyes scanned the room until his gaze landed on me. I tried to ignore him but found it impossible.

Gosh, he looked terrific.

Gosh, I needed to get drunk.

But getting drunk would be the worst idea ever. First of all, I always got kissy when I drank. I kissed everyone. Friends. Boyfriends. Strangers. It was a real problem.

Secondly, I could imagine tomorrow's headlines if I got wasted.

Drunken Debutante Embarrasses Everyone at Elite Event.

Not going to happen. I decided to sip water instead, but my hands shook as Nico and Alex approached. Why did he have to be so ... so ... everything?

Although I found it difficult to pull my gaze away, I forced myself to turn to the prince instead. "Hi, Alex," I said.

I plastered a big smile on my face, even though it felt completely unnatural. Alex leaned forward to kiss my cheek.

"You look lovely, Chloe."

"Thanks. So do you."

Alex greeted Georgie as well. When he leaned to whisper something in her ear, she frowned and then nodded.

"What's wrong?"

Georgie shifted over one seat. Alex took the seat between us, which meant Nico had to sit on my other side. Great.

"Security protocol," said Alex, with an exasperated sigh. He moved closer to me and spoke in a soft voice. "We have undercover people all over the room, but since Nico hasn't had

time to thoroughly vet other people at our table, he thinks it's best if you and I sit in the middle. I hope you don't mind."

"Why would I mind?"

Alex's eyes twinkled, and I wondered if perhaps he could tell I lied. "Good. Thank you."

I tried to focus on Alex as the waiters served the first course. But then I caught a whiff of Nico's cologne. Why did he have to smell so nice?

"Chloe," he said, leaning close, "we need to talk."

Keeping my expression as neutral as possible, I refused even to glance his way. "No, we don't. You made yourself clear. We have nothing else to discuss."

I held it together nicely, but my smile faltered when I turned back to Alex. "Are you okay?" he asked, his blue eyes concerned.

"Yes," I said, but I wasn't okay. Not even a little.

Here I sat, in a beautiful place, watching an old friend begin her new life, and all I could think about was the big, bad-tempered guy in the chair next to me. It annoyed me, and made me sadder than I cared to admit.

Never let them see you cry.

So, I ate the delicious meal, drank some fantastic wine, and took meticulous notes on each course as I jotted down details about the decorations, people in attendance, and music. I wanted to fully describe the ambiance when I wrote my article for the magazine. The wedding photographer had already agreed to provide *Haute* with photos. I only had to write the story. And I also had to make it through the evening without allowing Nico to get under my skin.

It was hard. I kept a smile on my lips until my face hurt, but I refused to even glance at him. My anger and hurt were raw right now, and I feared if I did speak to him, I might say something I'd later regret.

As Melanie and Will celebrated their first dance together as husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Wu stood proudly to the

side, as did Will's parents. The father/daughter dance just about did me in, though. Trying to imagine if I'd ever have the same sort of moment with my dad made my heart hurt. I wanted to excuse myself to get a breath of fresh air, when the DJ made an announcement.

"We'd like to ask Melanie and Will's special guests to take the floor for the next dance. Miss Chloe Burke, accompanied by Prince Alexander of Latovia."

Several people reacted with surprise at the announcement, including Melanie. Only one person didn't find this deviation from the planned schedule unexpected.

Mrs. Wu.

She waved at me happily, grinning from ear to ear. Ah-ha. The mother of the bride was the culprit. Lovely.

Alex stood, offering me his hand. "Shall we?"

As we walked to the dance floor, I felt the attention of everyone at the wedding on us, but only cared about Nico's reaction. It may have been the high point of the evening, but he seemed so jealous and angry, he practically had steam coming out of his ears.

That was a good thing. He'd hurt me and I wanted to hurt him too. Dancing with Alex was just a bonus. He was an incredible dancer and a delightful person. As he twirled me around the floor, I could almost forget about Nico for a moment and have fun.

Almost. But not quite.

"If looks could kill, I'd be dead right now," Alex said with a laugh.

"What do you mean?"

He spun me under his arm, then pulled me close again. "Oh, I think you know. Nico has been like a bear with a toothache. Did the two of you have a fight or something?"

I shrugged. "Or something." When Alex lifted a questioning eyebrow, I went on. "He's mad at me for taking

the royal reporter job. He thinks I'm using you, but that's not the case at all. You know that, right?"

"I do, but Chloe, there is something I should explain about Nico." He opened his mouth to speak, but we were interrupted by Melanie and Will.

"Can we cut in?" asked Melanie with a shy smile.

"It would be our pleasure," said Alex, letting go of me with a bow and taking Melanie's hand.

Will held open his arms. "Well, Burke. You're stuck with me. Are you ready to trip the light fantastic?"

"Definitely. But tripping is never good, Will. Let's not embarrass Melanie."

As soon as we began dancing, it was a sign to the rest of the guests to join in. Soon, the dance floor was crowded with people. I lost sight of Alex, and when one of the bridesmaids asked Will to dance, I ended up with a groomsman, a big guy with a receding hairline.

"You don't remember me, do you?" he asked as he dragged me across the floor. "I'm Bryce Bonnet. We went to high school together. I invited you to homecoming junior year."

"Oh, did you?" I asked, trying to avoid getting stepped on by his big feet. "It's hard to recognize people with the masks and everything."

"I knew you right away. You were always the prettiest girl in school. You're still so pretty," he said, and I realized he was drunk. Or possibly high. Or maybe even both.

"Thanks, Bryce," I said, patting his arm. "Nice seeing you again. I'd better get back to my table." I tried to pull away, but he refused to let me go.

"Come on. Dance with me," he said. "For old time's sake. After all, you broke my heart in eleventh grade. You owe me."

I didn't know what to do. Big, drunk Bryce didn't seem dangerous, but he could cause a scene, which might ruin

Melanie's wedding. Then again, I also didn't want to get groped by a former classmate I didn't even remember.

Fortunately, I didn't have to decide which of the two bad options to take, since a third option appeared out of nowhere. "Excuse me," said Nico. "This is my dance."

When Bryce opened his mouth to protest, Nico grabbed him by the arm and said something in his ear. Whatever it was must have worked, because all the color drained from Bryce's face, and he let go of me.

"Whatever. So not worth it."

Worried Nico might take a swing at him, I grabbed his hand. "He's wasted. Let it go," I said, as Bryce stumbled back to the bar for a drink. Nico watched him, one arm wrapped protectively around me. It felt way better than it should have.

I gave myself a mental shake and tried to step away from him. He stared at me, the ambient lighting in the ballroom highlighting the planes and angles of his ruggedly handsome face.

"Dance with me."

I knew I should say no, but when he pulled me close, I didn't move away. It felt good. Incredibly good. I sighed as he brought me even closer, his big body pressed against mine.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice rough, his breath warm against my ear. It sent tingles all over my body.

I leaned back so I could stare him in the eye. "Why?"

"Do you want a list?"

"Yes."

He blinked, confused. "Because I hurt your feelings."

I didn't know what I wanted him to say, but that wasn't it. I backed away from him, ending our dance. "Thank you. I accept your apology."

He muttered something I could only assume was a Latovian curse word, grabbed my hand, and pulled me into one of the small, quiet alcoves inside the arched columns

gracing the walls of the ballroom. He positioned me with my back against the wall, his body blocking me from view, and both of us hidden behind a large palm plant.

“I messed up. I know I did. Please don’t push me away.”

I blinked at him, still wary. “But what’s the point if you don’t trust me?”

He let out a sad sigh. “I want to trust you, but it’s hard for me to let my guard down. Surely you of all people can understand why. You’ve built quite the fortress around yourself as well.”

He made a good point. But in order to fix this, I had to come clean. “There is something I need to tell you—”

“No, you don’t.” He pressed a finger briefly to my lips. “Georgie told me what’s going on.”

I gaped at him. “She did?”

“Yes. She explained how you feel guilty taking the money for the interviews. How you didn’t want a new job. And she yelled at me for being” He paused. “What did she call me? Oh, yes. A massive, pig-headed, mega-jerk.”

I laughed. “That does sound like Georgie.”

I hovered a moment, because the most significant lie still hung between us. I hadn’t saved Alex on purpose, and once Nico knew, the walls would go up again, and he’d hate me. Forever.

I didn’t want him to hate me forever.

I swallowed the words ready to spill from my lips. I couldn’t tell him. Maybe, if I got lucky, he’d never have to know. Perhaps no one would. I hadn’t told anyone, not even Ella or Georgie. Would it be so hard to keep it a secret? And I wasn’t the one who started this whole rumor in the first place.

Nico stared at me intently. “What do you say, Chloe?” he asked, pressing his lips to mine with such a sweet gentleness it nearly made me swoon. “Will you give me another chance?”

He kissed me again, longer this time, making me dizzy than the champagne I'd had with the bridesmaids before the ceremony. I let go of his hands and twined my arms around his neck, kissing him with everything I had.

He let out a groan. "You're killing me. I know we should stop, but I'm powerless against you. What have you done to me, Chloe? How can you be so perfect?"

He whispered the words close to my ear, his cheek pressed against mine. And that's when I saw the flash as someone took a photo of me making out with Nico behind a potted palm.

Disaster.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

It turned out Nico's reflexes were lightning fast. Within seconds, he'd pulled Bryce Bonnet into the alcove with us, taken the cell phone from Bryce's hand, and deleted the photo of us kissing. He also deleted every other photo on Bryce's phone and all of his videos. He did this ever so casually, all while twisting Bryce's arm behind his back, and not even breaking a sweat.

It was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. I definitely had problems.

"What are you doing?" asked Bryce, his face contorted in pain. "You're going to break my arm. Give me back my phone."

Bryce's eyes were glassy, and he could barely stand. "Nico, he's drunk. He's probably not going to remember anything that happened tonight. Let go of him."

"Certainly," said Nico, plopping the phone into the breast pocket of Bryce's tux. "But if I hear a word of this from anyone, you will regret it. Are we clear?"

Bryce nodded, his chin wobbling like he might cry. "Dude, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Good man," said Nico with a nod. He released Bryce's arm and patted him on the back. "Go have a drink. You need it."

As Bryce stumbled toward the bar, Nico turned to me. "Are you okay?"

I stared at him, unable to process even the simplest thoughts. “I’m fine.”

“Did I frighten you?”

“No.”

He put his hands on my upper arms, his expression worried. “Then why are you staring at me like that?”

I answered him honestly, the words flying out of my mouth. “Because I’ve never been so attracted to someone in my life. I know I probably shouldn’t admit it, but I can’t help —”

He silenced me with a swift kiss. “Chloe Burke, you’re full of surprises. I never know what you’re going to say.”

“Funny. Neither do I.”

“We’d better get back to the party and act like nothing happened. But you need to stop looking at me like that, or I can’t be responsible for my actions.”

I puckered my brow in confusion. “Looking at you like what?”

“Like I’m dessert,” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

The actual dessert ended up being a gigantic, multi-tiered confection with buttercream frosting. As I ate it, I imagined putting the frosting all over Nico and licking it off. I let out a happy moan.

“Mmmm. I love dessert.”

Nico nearly choked on his cake. Alex gave him a funny look. “Are you alright?”

Before Nico could answer, the DJ made an announcement. “I need all the single ladies to come to the dance floor right now. It’s time to toss the bouquet.”

With an excited flutter, a bunch of women rushed toward the dance floor. Nico watched them in confusion. “What’s going on?”

“The bouquet toss,” I said, finishing my cake. “The girl who catches the bouquet is supposedly next to wed.”

Georgie grabbed my arm and pulled me away from my cake. “Come on, Chloe. You heard the man. All the single ladies.” With a groan, I lowered my fork, and Georgie sent Nico a sympathetic look. “Don’t worry, dude. She never catches it. Trust me. I’ve been to hundreds of weddings with her.”

It turned out Georgie was both right and wrong. I didn’t catch the bouquet. It smacked me in the face. All the other guests at the wedding stared at me in stunned silence. I eyed the bouquet like it was an animal that had just crawled in and died at my feet.

“Pick it up, Chloe,” said Georgie from between clenched teeth. “Everyone’s watching.”

Her words jolted me out of my stupor. I lifted the bouquet and held it high in the air. Seconds later, people pulled out their cell phones and started taking pictures of me. To make the most of the moment, Georgie waved Alex over. He laughed as he joined me, kissing the top of my head. Nico stood near the edge of the dance floor, arms folded across his chest, but he didn’t seem angry. Not this time at least. But the more involved I got with Nico, the harder this ruse became.

We left after having a final glass of champagne and wishing Melanie and her husband well. Georgie planned to stay over, so there was no hot elevator make-out session unfortunately. With a yawn, she left us in the hallway, saying we should wrap it up quickly since she needed to get her beauty sleep. Nico and I stood there for a long moment, staring at each other.

“I don’t think Bryce will be a problem,” he said. “He fell asleep under the groom’s table right before we left. There is a real possibility, however, that the photo he took could circulate. I doubt it, but it could. It may have already uploaded to the cloud.”

I nodded. “What should we do about it?”

He moved closer, tilting my chin up with one finger. “Are you asking what I’d like to do about it? If so, the answer is nothing. I’d love for everyone to find out about us, and I hate the way things are right now, but I realize it’s not the time. Alex is speaking to the United Nations on Monday. Then he has another week in New York raising funds and schmoozing.”

“Schmoozing?” I asked with a laugh.

He kissed me once on the lips, gently and so sweetly. “Schmoozing. Something both you and Alex excel at.” His hands cupped my face, and he kissed me again, not quite as sweetly this time. It made every nerve ending in my body come to life, and I let out a groan as I wrapped my arms around his waist under his jacket. Nico Mercia knew how to kiss.

“And you excel at this,” I said, as he nibbled on my lower lip.

“What?” he asked, his voice husky.

“Kissing.”

He smiled against my mouth. “Thank heavens I excel at something.”

After he left, I closed the door behind him and sighed happily as I leaned back against it. Making Nico smile did something strange to my heart. Unlike Alex, who smiled all the time, Nico’s smiles were hard-earned but so worth it.

Georgie and Ella were waiting for me when I got to my room. Ella wore pink pajamas, and Georgie still had on her ballgown, the persimmon chiffon surrounding her as she sat cross-legged on my bed. They both looked at me when I came in. Ella grinned.

“You’re right. They made up. Chloe just got kissed.”

“I did,” I said, with another happy sigh. I was happy-sighing a lot lately. But I shook myself out of my Nico-induced daze and explained to them what had happened with Bryce Bonnet as I took off my gown and hung it carefully on a hanger. Georgie listened, chewing nervously on her fingernail.

“Nico deleted them? But the photos may have uploaded automatically to the cloud.”

“That’s what Nico said.” I put on my pajamas and joined them on the bed. “Alex is speaking to the United Nations on Monday. After he finishes, he’ll have another week in New York for fundraising. Surely we can keep a handle on things for a week.”

“And you were both masked, right? Plausible deniability,” said Ella.

Georgie and I laughed. “I love how this kid thinks,” said Georgie, getting up to change. I’d asked her to stay over, assuming I’d need the moral support after spending the evening with Nico. Now we could simply have fun.

We hung out, chatting for hours, until we couldn’t keep our eyes open any longer. Ella went to her room, and Georgie left to sleep in the guest room. I fell asleep with a smile on my face, thinking about Nico, but as soon as I woke Saturday morning, panic set in. Had Bryce shared the photo somehow?

I grabbed my phone, but before I could start scrolling, Nico texted me. *Good morning. Your old boyfriend hasn’t shared anything on social media. Yet. So far, so good.*

Rolling my eyes, I texted him back. *Not my old boyfriend. But I’m glad to hear he didn’t post anything.*

I saw dots form on my screen as Nico typed his next message. *Even if he had, it would have been worth it.*

I hugged the phone to my chest. *I think so too. How many days of schmoozing do we have left?*

He responded immediately. *Ten days, six hours, twenty-two minutes.*

Then he texted again. *Not that I’m counting. See you tonight.*

Alex and I were attending a fundraising dinner for his charity. According to Georgie, I only had to sit there, look pretty, and smile at people, which didn’t sound too hard. But

she also said I needed to stop sneaking off to kiss Nico. That could be a problem.

Ella bounced into my room with the newspaper in her hands. She showed me the front page, a photo of me holding the bridal bouquet as Alex stood next to me, beaming. I beamed, too, but only because the photo showed me staring directly at Nico, who stood somewhere off to my right and out of the frame.

Will Wedding Bells Ring Soon for America's Princess?

I frowned. "America's princess? That escalated quickly."

"People love you. They say it's like a fairy tale come true, and they don't even know the half of it. You're a real-life Cinderella. I mean, without the mice and the dirt and the bad clothing. Felicity could be the evil stepmother. Can you imagine? People would love it."

I patted her leg. "I hope they never find out. We have to keep private things private."

She rolled her eyes. "You're such a Burke."

Laughing, I gave her a playful kick. "Then, what are you?"

Her answer sounded surprisingly solemn. "I'm not sure."

I reached for her hand. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said, but her smile didn't quite meet her eyes. Before I could ask her about it, she left, claiming the waffle iron was hot, and she needed to eat soon, or she'd die.

I put on my robe, washed my face, and went to the kitchen, planning to figure out what was bothering Ella. To my surprise, my father sat at the table in his wheelchair, eating waffles. Georgie sat beside him, sipping coffee and reading the article in the paper.

"It's amazing," she said. "Chloe gets bonked in the face with flowers, and everyone is talking about her adorableness. We've created a monster."

My father's lips quirked, and he almost smiled. Almost, but not quite.

I wondered what to say, if there was anything I could mention that would light a spark somewhere inside him and release him from the prison of his mind. If I talked about my mom, would it make things better or worse? If I brought up my job, would it make him recall Burke Books and all that we'd lost? It felt like walking on eggshells on a rickety bridge over flaming hot lava. I didn't want to say the wrong thing and push him back into his funk, so I didn't say anything at all. I just reached for him and squeezed his hand.

Georgie continued leafing through the paper, oblivious. "Oh, my. They're getting closer to identifying the guy who tried to shoot Alex."

I took the paper from her. "They are?"

Ella, carrying a plate loaded with waffles, put them on the table and studied the page over my shoulder. The paper showed a photo of the prince, his parents, and his younger brother, Leopold. Ella's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wow. Is he Alex's brother? He's even hotter than Alex."

"No one is hotter than Alex," said Georgie, almost automatically. When she caught us staring at her, she blushed. I'd never seen Georgie blush before. Not even when her new wrap-around skirt unwrapped itself by accident in front of our entire middle school science class. She cleared her throat. "I mean, they're both good looking. Obviously."

"Okay," I said, drawing out the word slowly.

"Stop it, Chloe. You're giving me a weird vibe. What does the article say?"

Ella answered for me, grabbing the paper out of my hands. "It says a group called the Latvian Liberation Army is claiming credit for the attempt. No one has been able to confirm it. Not yet at least." Her eyes darted back and forth as she read the rest of the article. "Oh, my."

I didn't like the note of fear I heard in her voice. "What is it?"

Her green eyes met mine, and I saw the worry in their depths. She gave me back the paper and pointed to the last

paragraph. “It says they are trying to take back the throne, but they also have another goal.”

I read the words, “And we will have our revenge on the woman who foiled our plans the first time. Chloe Burke, we’re coming for you.”

We sat for a moment in stunned silence. Then the only person I didn’t expect to speak actually spoke.

My dad turned to me. “Call Nico,” he said. He pulled away from the table and wheeled himself back to his room, I stared at him, stunned, but I knew he was right. Nico would know what to do. Nico would understand how I should handle this.

I grabbed my phone and dialed his number as I paced back and forth in the living room. He answered on the first ring, his voice soft.

“You saw the photo?”

I pulled a Georgie and chewed on my thumb nail. “What photo?”

I heard a door open and close, and the background noise dimmed, like he’d moved to a place with more privacy. “It just appeared online. Search your name.”

“Hold on,” I said. “I’m putting you on speakerphone.”

As soon as I typed in my name, a fuzzy photo of me kissing Nico at the wedding popped up with the heading, *Is Chloe a Cheater?*

“It’s okay,” he said. “No one can confirm it’s you or me. We’re both masked. Also, the quality of the photo is poor, and the room is so dark, it’s not even clear if we’re kissing in this picture or not.”

“Plausible deniability,” I said, echoing my sister’s words.

“I’m sorry this happened,” he said. “But I’m not sorry we kissed.”

I laughed despite my fear involving recent events. “Me neither.”

When he spoke, I could hear the smile in his voice too. “It’s Saturday. Alex is speaking on Monday. Tonight, you’ll attend the charity dinner at Le Bernadine. Alex will be talking about his foundation, but we’ve already said we won’t be taking questions from the press. Tomorrow, we have nothing planned, so you can lie low. After his speech at the UN is over, he’ll be in meetings for the rest of the day. We may not even have to address any of this until you have your joint interview on Tuesday with Dirk Deacon. We’ll figure out a plan well before then, but Mr. Deacon is a reasonable man. If we ask him to avoid certain subjects in exchange for future interviews, he’ll most certainly agree to it.”

“I think you’re right,” I said. “But that’s not why I called you. Did you see the article in the paper today? About the assassin?”

“No. I’d focused on keeping my eyes out for the photo. What did the article say?”

I stared out at Central Park, barely seeing the beautiful vista. “The Latvian Liberation Army is taking credit.”

“I am aware,” he said with a wry laugh. “They take credit for any terroristic event connected to Latvia.”

“They also said they want revenge. On me.”

Nico didn’t respond. There was dead silence for a solid ten seconds.

“They mentioned you by name?”

“Yes.” My heart pounded in my chest, and I couldn’t quite catch my breath.

“I will not let it happen,” he said, his voice so confident the knot in my stomach eased. “Do you trust me, Chloe?”

“I do.”

“Then know this. I don’t believe this is an actual threat, but if it is, I will not permit anyone or anything to harm you. Not the Latvian Liberation Army. Not a random assassin. Not a crazy fan. You will be safe. I swear it.”

I hung up the phone, telling him I'd be ready when the limo came to pick me up later in the day, feeling oddly calm. Despite the threat, and the photo, and everything else, when Nico made a promise, I knew he'd keep it. And somehow, by some miracle, my father knew it too.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

DANGEROUS DATE: HOW CHLOE BURKE SNIFFED OUT
TROUBLE

The day after I found out an international terrorist group wanted to kill me, Alex and I attended an event sponsored by a women's literacy society. It was held at the famous Le Bernardin restaurant, in a private room called Les Salon Bernardin. To my surprise, I knew several of the women in attendance. Many of the ladies in the group and their spouses had been friends with my parents.

I greeted the other attendees, trying not to appear nervous. Every time I experienced even a flutter of fear, I locked eyes with Nico and immediately relaxed. He never left my line of sight, and I stayed by Alex's side. With the multiple undercover Latvian secret service agents placed strategically around the room, I actually started to enjoy myself.

Alex's speech inspired everyone. His foundation already did so much good for needy children, and I could tell right away from the crowd's response that he would get lots of support for his group from the people in attendance. I did my part by chatting and schmoozing. I brightened when I saw an old friend of my mother's, Veronica Boyle.

She opened her arms to me, kissing me on the cheek. "Sweet, Chloe. How nice to see you, and you look lovely." She backed up to admire my dress, then gasped in surprise. "Wait. Was this your mother's?"

"Yes," I said, holding out the swirly silk and chiffon skirt of my lilac-colored gown. Simple and strapless, it had a tight, fitted bodice made of twisted layers of delicate fabric.

“We were together when she bought it. It’s Chanel.” Veronica blinked away tears. “I miss her so much. You could be her twin in this dress. How’s your father doing?”

“Much better.”

“And now you’re dating a prince. She would have been very proud of you.”

Her well-intended words made me feel kind of sick. “Thank you,” I said, somehow managing to keep everything together. “Excuse me a moment.”

Nico hovered close by. I tilted my head to indicate I wanted to use the restroom. I needed to compose myself. I had to hold on a bit longer, and then we could leave. We’d already finished dessert and coffee, and the guests were hanging out for a silent auction. People strolled around, eyeing the various items, and the master of ceremonies now stood at the podium, getting ready to announce the winning bids. We probably had no more than thirty minutes or so left.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I want to freshen up, if you don’t mind.”

I could tell he didn’t believe me but wouldn’t push the issue. He knocked on the door of the ladies’ room, made sure it was secure, then let me go inside while he waited in the hallway.

As I finished and washed my hands, I stared at my reflection. I did resemble my mom in this dress, especially with my hair pulled into a bun and my mother’s pearl choker around my neck. But what would my mom think about the woman inside the dress? I’d lied to everyone about what happened the day I got shot. I’d lied about my relationship with Alex. I mean, I never specifically said I was dating him, but I’d allowed it to be implied. Omitting the truth still qualified as a lie. Or at least I thought it did.

When I left the restroom, Nico waited for me with a worried expression in his eyes. “Are you going to tell me what’s upset you?”

I opened my mouth to answer but couldn't. My eyes filled with tears. He glanced around, then pressed a button and murmured something softly in Latvian in the communication device he wore around his wrist.

"Come with me," he said, taking my hand. He led me, once again, to a cloakroom. Nearly empty, this one was the size of a closet, and I had to guess it was for employee use.

He shut the door and locked it, enclosing us in the dark room, the sounds from the party muffled. The only light came from a small window high on the wall in the back of the room, but it provided enough illumination for me to see the concern etched on his face as he pulled me close, enveloping me in a hug.

For a moment, we stood there, quiet. It felt so good to be wrapped in his embrace, his chin resting on the top of my head. "Please tell me what's wrong."

"Everything is fine." With my cheek pressed against his chest, I could hear his steady, strong heartbeat. I inhaled, breathing him in, holding him tightly in my arms.

"I know you're hiding something." He pressed his lips against my hair. "Why don't you save me the trouble of interrogating you and telling me what's wrong?"

"Interrogate me? Like with handcuffs?" I asked, sounding hopeful.

He laughed. "What is it with you and handcuffs? As intriguing as your idea may be, I know you're deflecting."

Sighing, I lifted my head and stared at him. "The woman I spoke with earlier was my mother's good friend, Veronica. She'd been with my mom when she bought this dress." I showed him my skirt, lifting the fabric then letting it fall back into place, as soft as a whisper. A lovely gown, it meant so much to me knowing my mom had worn it too.

"This was your mother's?"

He ran his hand along the bodice, the gesture surprisingly intimate, and I sucked in a breath. "Yes. It's Chanel."

He placed his big hands on my waist, his thumbs caressing the bottom of my rib cage. The only sound I could hear was the steady cadence of his breathing and the pounding of my own heart. Since I couldn't see well in the darkened room, all my other senses heightened. I became acutely aware of his smell. His warmth. The feel of his wool jacket under my fingertips. The soft silk of his tie. And his hands. His amazing hands. I mainly focused on what his thumbs were doing right now. He barely moved them, but they somehow sent shock waves throughout my body.

“She ... um ... she bought it in Paris years ago. I only saw her wear it once or twice. She wasn't a big fan of pastels.”

“But you are.”

“I am.”

My brain had officially stopped working. The good news was that I didn't feel frightened anymore or guilty. I just felt turned on. Very, very turned on.

With his thumbs still making those circles, coming closer and closer to the underside of my breasts, I found myself wanting more. I wanted his hands on my breasts, and on the rest of me too. And somehow, the spot he'd found on my ribcage seemed directly connected to the place right between my legs. Who knew?

He brushed his lips against mine. “Well, it looks beautiful on you.” His voice was a husky whisper as I reached up and twined my fingers in his silky hair. The rest of Nico was hard, but his hair felt so soft. I couldn't stop touching it. I couldn't stop touching him.

“You look beautiful too.”

The words came out spontaneously, but they were true. I said them with such sincerity that he grinned, his smile a slash of white. I caught a glimpse of it before he gathered me closer and kissed me again.

“Oh, Chloe. I've been thinking about kissing you all night.”

“Same here,” I said, smiling against his lips as I slid my hands down over his broad shoulders and under his jacket to wrap them around his waist. “Well, kissing and other things.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “What other things?”

“Nico, Nico, Nico,” I scolded, running my nose along his jaw and tugging on his earlobe with my teeth. It made him shiver, and his shiver made me bold. “Do you honestly have to ask?”

With a growl, he lifted me, his hands grasping my bottom, and my legs automatically went around his waist. I pressed against him, needing him close, my arms around his neck. He put me on a small table, my back against the wall, and I let out a sound of protest, wanting to be closer, wanting him naked. Even though whatever was left of the rational part of my brain told me getting naked with Nico in a cloakroom at a charity event for poor orphans probably was not a good idea, I couldn't think of anything else. All the fear and longing and pretending and lies pushed me to my tipping point, and I was quickly losing control.

Nico kissed with the determined attention to detail he employed in every aspect of his life. He opened his mouth to me, his lips warm and firm as he tasted me with masterful strokes of his tongue and murmured words of encouragement and praise. He was delicious. And powerful. And perhaps even dangerous. But, without any hesitation, I answered him stroke for stroke, our tongues engaging in a primal dance that made me press even closer. I wanted Nico Mercia in a way I'd never wanted anyone before.

He was right about my previous experience with guys. I had dated a Kip, a Trip, and several Chips. I'd also dated a Skip, but he hadn't mentioned that one when we argued, and I certainly hadn't brought it up. But all the very wealthy, very boring people I dated in high school and college had been boys. Nico was very much a man. An arrogant, handsome, sometimes grumpy, completely irresistible, and impossibly sexy man.

I pulled at his shirt, needing to touch his skin. When I finally freed it from the waistband of his pants, I slid my hands over his stomach and up his chest. He groaned in my mouth, his hands automatically going up my skirt to grasp my bare thighs.

“Chloe”

When his rough hands cupped my bare bottom under my panties, moving closer to the spot where I needed him most, I started getting even more out of control. I wanted to touch and taste every inch of him, especially the part pressing hard and hot against the juncture of my legs. Never breaking the kiss, I ran my fingers along the waistband of his pants and found his belt buckle.

“Chloe, we can’t—”

His words morphed into a strangled moan when, unable to get his belt unbuckled, I dipped my fingers inside his pants.

“I want to touch you. Please, Nico.”

Before he could answer, we heard a noise in the hallway and froze. It sounded like the waiters were walking back and forth as they cleared the tables. It brought both of us back to our senses. Closing his eyes, Nico took a deep, shuddering breath as he removed my fingers from inside his pants and pressed his forehead against mine.

“I’m so out of control when I’m with you,” he said, his voice unsteady. “I’ve never been like this before. It’s dangerous. You’re dangerous.”

I let out a soft laugh, kissing the line of his jaw. “*I’m dangerous?*”

He opened his eyes and locked his dark gaze on mine. “Yes. Look at me. I’m attacking you in a cloakroom in a public place, and it isn’t the first time I’ve done something like this to you.”

“Well, I happen to like it when you attack me in a cloakroom. And I attacked you right back, so I guess we’re even.” I let out a sigh. “But you’re right. We should go. Alex is probably wondering what happened to us.”

“Yes,” he said, his voice rough. “Our absence will be noted. I hate this. I hate everything about this.”

I didn’t have to ask him to explain. I felt the same way. “It’s only for a few more days.”

“A few more days?” He blew out a breath. “I don’t know if I’ll make it.” He sounded so serious it made me laugh.

I still giggled to myself as we snuck out of the cloakroom hand in hand. Despite our situation, I was full of joy, and I hadn’t been this way for a long time. And I’d fallen so hard for this guy it almost scared me. How could I help it, though? He was everything. Handsome. Hot. And bad enough to be interesting. I wanted to be bad with him.

Nico caught my eye and groaned. “You need to stop looking at me like that,” he said.

“Like you’re dessert?” I asked with a grin.

“Yes, like I’m dessert.”

His hair had been thoroughly mussed, and he had pink lipstick on his collar. I was about to tell him as much when a waiter walked past us carrying a long, black coat. I didn’t notice his face since Nico automatically turned and blocked me from his view. Like always, Nico had gone into protective mode, but I caught a whiff of something odd as the waiter walked past—the faint aroma of sweat, body odor, and something else. Something minty.

I recognized it immediately. I’d smelled the same thing the day I’d gotten shot, and I remembered the long, black coat as well. I grabbed Nico by the arm.

“It’s him,” I said. “The shooter.”

Nico, evidently still a bit dazed from our kissing, snapped to attention as I pointed at the man with the coat. “Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

He headed right for the dining room, but a bunch of waiters stood between him and us. Nico swore, contacting the

other guards with his communication device before hustling me out the restaurant's back door.

"Go to Alex. Don't worry about me," I said, digging in my heels as I pointed in the direction of the dining room, horrified.

Nico half carried me and half dragged me toward the door. "They are leaving now. Please don't fight me. Alex is already in the limo."

With that, I stopped trying to impede his progress and followed him. Grabbing me by the hand, he led me out to the street and hailed a taxi. We jumped in and he gave the driver an address I didn't recognize. When the taxi took off down the road, I turned to Nico. "Why didn't we go with Alex?"

"No time. I couldn't risk it."

He spoke again in his communication device, in Latvian, and got an immediate reply. He slammed a fist on his thigh. "The man got away. Again. They are bringing the prince to the consulate for the night. He has quarters there. He'll be safe."

I stared out the window, knowing I'd been partly responsible. Nico would have gone after the assassin if it weren't for me.

"I'm sorry."

He squeezed my hand. "It's not your fault. I'm glad we got out in time, and no one was hurt."

"Me too."

"If he'd discharged a weapon in the restaurant, it could have been terrible."

I shuddered because Nico was absolutely right. Tonight had been yet another close call. I wasn't used to this, and it rattled me. As Nico spoke with someone on his phone in Latvian, I stared out the window and struggled to compose myself.

It started to rain, and the night became dark and cold. I turned to Nico when I realized we were moving away from my apartment, not toward it. "Where are we going?" I asked as he shut off his phone.

“I don’t think we’re being followed, but the last thing I want to do is lead the shooter to your father and your sister. I’m taking you somewhere else instead.”

I swallowed hard. “Is my family in danger?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m being extra cautious.”

I reached for his hand. “Thank you, Nico.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s because of us you’re in this mess. It’s the least we can do.”

Nico led the taxi driver in circles, and, nearly an hour later, we stopped in front of a ritzy apartment building near Gramercy Park. Nico paid the confused cabbie and led me quickly into the building.

The apartment was spacious, with views of the park and a gorgeous balcony. As soon as we got inside, Nico loosened his tie and got on his cell phone again, speaking quietly in Latovian. I wandered around the apartment, appreciating the sleek, modern elegance of the interior and the expensive artwork. When he got off the phone, his expression was grim.

“One of my teams spotted the shooter a second time this evening. He was close to the prince’s hotel, but managed to evade them once again,” he said, with a frustrated shake of his head.

“I’m sorry, Nico.”

“It isn’t all bad news,” he said. “We finally have a definite ID on the shooter. His name is Sergei Paloka. He’s a known dissenter, and dangerous, tied to quite a few militant groups, but not a professional assassin. And not part of the Latovian Liberation Army. Which is why Alex isn’t already dead.”

The thought of Alex dying made my heart ache. Although I’d only known him a short time, he’d become a friend. “Why would anyone want to kill Alex?”

He shrugged. “Our country has a violent history. Sergei disagrees with many of the king’s policies. He’d once been a politician with a promising future, but ...” He struggled to find a way to explain the situation diplomatically and failed.

“Alex’s father has many enemies. Alex is his opposite, but it doesn’t matter. They associate him with his father.”

I shivered, partly from the cold, and partly from fear. Nico lit a fire in the marble fireplace, which made me feel a bit better. He sat on the black leather couch and pulled me close. I curled up next to him, resting my head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Nico. I know this is hard for you.”

He kissed the top of my head. “If it weren’t for you, the prince might be dead right now. This is the second time you’ve saved his life, Chloe.” His words made me stiffen, but he didn’t seem to notice. He went on speaking. “I’m so happy you recognized the shooter. How did you?”

“Well, I smelled him.”

“You smelled him?”

I nodded. “He has a distinctive odor. I recognized it because I’d been next to him before the light changed at the crosswalk, the day I got shot. Body odor and mint. I remembered the smell and the black overcoat, but it didn’t click for me until he walked past us in the restaurant.”

Nico threaded my fingers with his. “Sometimes it’s like that. Memory is a multi-sensory experience. You may not have remembered the shooter’s appearance, but his smell had been buried deep inside your mind. When you smelled him, it brought it all back.”

“I guess it did.”

“We’ll have to stay here for the night. I hope you don’t mind. It’s safer this way.”

“Is this your apartment?”

“Yes. I’m in New York quite often for business. It helps to have a place of my own here. Although, lately my focus has been on the prince.”

“Poor Alex. It’s such a mess. What happens after tonight?”

“I’m not sure. We’ll have to reevaluate in the morning. Sergei is smart, and he’s also good at blending in and slipping

past any security we set up. He's able to disguise himself amazingly well."

"Except for his smell. He couldn't disguise his aroma."

He gave me a crooked smile. "But you were the only one to notice. We owe you a great debt. All of our men will be alerted."

"What will you do now?"

"The U.N. has enough safety protocols in place that we should be fine on Monday, but I'm worried about the television interview on Tuesday. The station has some weak areas and multiple points of entry. I've gone over everything with my team, and with building security, but I'm still not completely confident about it."

"Why not change the location?"

"Alex," he said, with a roll of his eyes. "He doesn't want to put anyone in danger, but he also insists on not living in fear. He can be rather pigheaded about it. Do you know I caught him sneaking out the other night? The man is impossible." He shook his head. "And I hate hotels. They are hard to manage. Too many people are coming in and out. Too many employees. At least, he's safe for the night, and so are you."

When Nico went to another room to make a few phone calls, I called Ella to let her know I wouldn't be home until tomorrow. "Keep the doors locked, okay? And be careful."

"I will," she said. "Are you alright? You sound weird."

"I'm always weird. Love you. Good night."

Nico came back, his jacket gone, and the top buttons of his shirt undone. In the firelight, he reminded me of a dark angel or a warrior of old. He had precisely the right combination of beauty and arrogance in his features. He could have pulled either one off. He ran a hand through his hair, the stress of the day apparent on his face and in the set of his broad shoulders.

"Everyone is fine, for now, so I suggest we get some sleep. I'll take you back to your apartment first thing in the morning."

Are you okay with that?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He handed me a soft T-shirt and a pair of sweats, both of which would be enormously large for me. "You can have my room," he said, indicating a door on the left. "I'll sleep on the couch."

I nodded, but halfway to his room, I stopped and turned around. "No," I said.

He acted confused. "No? To what?"

"I don't want you to sleep on the couch." My cheeks burned, and I couldn't meet his eye, but I forced myself to go on. "I got shot only weeks ago. That was traumatic enough. Then you and I came within inches of the man who shot me tonight. We both could have died, either time. I don't want to take another chance. If I die tomorrow, I want tonight to be the one thing I don't regret."

He grew very still, the light from the fire dancing on his harshly beautiful face. "Are you certain, Chloe? Is this truly what you desire?" he asked, his accent more noticeable as his voice grew thick with emotion. "Because if this happens, I won't be able to ever let you go. I'll want to hold onto you forever."

I put my hand on his cheek, stared deeply into his eyes, and told him what was in my heart. "That's what I want too."

CHAPTER

Eighteen

CHLOE BURKE, WEARING VINTAGE CHANEL, DISAPPEARS
AFTER SECOND ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT: WHEREABOUTS
CURRENTLY UNKNOWN

Nico Mercia was a man of action. He crossed the distance between us in a few long strides and pulled me roughly into his arms. His kisses were frantic and hungry. He wanted me as much as I wanted him, and there were no games between us—only open and honest desire.

Well, at least the desire was honest.

I'd have to tell him eventually about the other part, about the lies and omissions, but not tonight. This evening would be about one thing—getting Nico naked and having my wicked way with him.

He cupped my face with his big hands and stared into my eyes. “I can’t believe my good luck. I never thought this would happen, but the stars have somehow aligned.”

“What do you mean?”

He gave me a crooked grin. “Well, we aren’t in a cloakroom.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “First time for everything,” I said, and then kissed him soundly. As his hands roamed restlessly over my body, burning me everywhere they touched, I grabbed handfuls of his crisp, white shirt and began pulling him toward the bedroom with focused determination. He laughed when I tugged on him, walking backward as I continued to kiss him, and making demanding little noises in the process. But he stopped laughing when we reached his bed. As I worked on the buttons of his shirt, he made a sound somewhere between a growl and a moan.

“Chloe Burke. What are you doing to me?”

Yanking the last button free, I opened it and ran my hands over his muscular abdomen and firm chest. I couldn't stop touching him. I doubted I'd ever get enough of this man.

“Hmmm. I know what I'd *like* to do to you.”

He gave me a look so hot it could have melted ice cream. “Tell me.”

“Tell you what?” I asked, still thinking about ice cream. And melted ice cream. And licking melted ice cream off Nico's luscious body.

He gave me a devilish smile, one so naughty it should have been illegal. “Tell me what you want to do to me.”

The way he looked at me made it hard to think straight. “First, I want to get you naked. Getting you naked is number one on my list of priorities right now.”

“Your wish is my command.”

His eyes locked on mine as he discarded his shirt, and then slowly began to unbuckle his belt. I couldn't tear my gaze away even if I wanted to because seeing Nico Mercia strip like this was indeed a wonder to behold.

His body was perfect, big and muscular without being bulky. His skin, darker than mine, was smooth, and he had exactly the right amount of hair on his chest, with a dark trail leading to the area in his pants that held my gaze right now.

He knew the effect he had on me. I could tell by the way his lips twitched in amusement as he slowly unbuttoned his pants, drawing out the tension and moving much slower than I would have liked.

“What's the matter, Chloe?” he asked, his fingers pausing at his zipper. “You look ... frustrated.”

I frowned at him, nearly stamping my foot. “I am frustrated. You're taking way too long.”

Lifting his hands, he grinned, his teeth a white slash of light in the dimly lit room. “Then why don't you take care of

it?”

He may have thought I would act demur about it, but I didn't. Reaching out, I decided two could play this game. Rather than yanking down his pants like I wanted to, I ran one finger down the line of his zipper.

“I will take care of it,” I said, placing my palm against his hardness and grasping him through his pants. He groaned, practically pulsating with need as he pushed against me. I brushed his hands away when he tried to unzip his pants. “No. I want to do this. You lost your chance.”

I lowered his zipper inch by lovely inch, and when it was down, I placed my hands on the waistband of his pants and pushed them to the floor. His boxer briefs followed. I didn't break eye contact with him until he was naked. That's when I finally got a look at exactly what I was dealing with and gasped in surprise. None of the Kips, Trips, Chips, or Skips came even close.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Nico. You're...well, I guess impressive covers it.”

He looked down at himself as if considering my words. “Impressive? I'll take it.” He glanced back at me, a mischievous twinkle in his dark eyes. “What are you thinking, Chloe?”

I bit my lip, my eyes glued to his ... impressiveness. “Thank goodness you aren't shy.”

He took a step forward, his gaze hot. “I am most definitely not shy,” he said as he caressed my cheek. “And now it's your turn. Can you let your hair down, Ms. Burke?”

Wordlessly, I reached up and removed the pins from my hair, letting it fall to brush against my bare shoulders. He ran his fingers through it, before putting his hands on my arms and turning me around. Moving my hair to the side, he kissed the line of my neck and my shoulder.

“You're so soft,” he said. “Like silk. Or like the petal of a flower. And so beautiful. Sometimes it almost hurts to look at you. Do you know what that feels like?”

“Yes,” I said. “I feel the same every time I look at you, Nico.”

He hugged me from behind, his hands clasping mine, and we stood there for a long moment, his lips against my shoulder. The lights of the city shown through the floor to ceiling windows of his apartment. We were up high enough to have a fantastic view, but I didn't care about the view as I stood quietly in the darkness with Nico. I didn't want this to end.

Pressing his cheek against mine, he whispered, “Can I take off your dress?”

Unable to answer, I nodded, my senses heightened as his warm fingers slid down my bare back. When he pushed the dress down to my hips, he covered my breasts with his rough hands.

“You aren't wearing a bra,” he said. “Thank you. Thank you very, very much.”

He sounded so sincerely grateful, I giggled. “There is one built into the dress.”

“Then, I should thank Chanel instead. Thank you, Chanel,” he said, without missing a beat.

That caused another fit of giggles, but I stopped laughing when he pushed my dress down the rest of the way, kissing each bit of skin as he bared it. Everywhere he touched me came to life, like I'd been frozen and was reanimated bit by marvelous bit.

Holding my hand, he helped me step out of the delicate silk and hung the dress carefully on a chair. Then he turned to look at me.

I'm not sure what he saw as I stood there wearing nothing but a tiny pair of lilac panties. But whatever it was, it caused him to walk toward me with single-minded intent and lift me, wrapping my legs around his narrow waist as he kissed me senseless.

Actually, I was senseless long before this. He made me go a step beyond senseless, to a place where only Nico and our

mutual need existed.

He put me gently down on the bed, breathing hard, his body covering mine. I ran my hands along the smooth skin of his back and down to his bottom. He kissed my eyes, my cheeks, and my lips, each press of his lips lingering and sweet. Then he began to slowly apply those same kisses as he worked his way first to my breasts, then my belly, and then lower, placing a hot kiss right over the center of my panties, the place where I yearned for him most.

“I dreamed of doing this,” he said, nuzzling me there. “The thought of your lingerie drives me mad. When you showed me the edge of your bra at your office, it was all I could think about for the rest of the day.”

As he nipped at the delicate skin of my lower belly, I ran my fingers through his silky hair. “Not true. You were mad at me that day.”

He paused. “Yes, but I still couldn’t stop thinking about your undergarments. Agent Provocateur has haunted me, but the reality of this,” he said, indicating my panties, “is even better than I could have dreamed.”

When he teased me with his lips and tongue, I completely forgot what we were discussing. He turned me onto my stomach, so he could kiss the small scar where I’d been shot. After he’d done that thoroughly, he returned me to my back, and pulled down my delicate lace panties. When he gave me a naughty look and got up from the bed, I groaned in frustration. He moved only steps away, far enough to get a condom, but I could barely stand it.

“Hurry, Nico,” I said, my voice breathless and strange. “I need you.” I reached out for him.

“I need you too.” He kissed me, hovering over me, then spread my legs apart, kneeling between them. “So much.”

As he entered me, I realized making love with Nico Mercia was unlike anything I’d ever known. I hadn’t slept with many men, but enough to understand, he was different. It was like drinking Dom Perignon. Once you’ve had it, it’s tough to go

back to drinking cheap champagne. Nico was the Dom Perignon of lovers. He'd ruined me forever for anyone else.

We were so in sync. He knew exactly where to touch me, exactly how to whisper in my ear. And I learned how to please him as well, how to make his accent sound thicker with passion and how to make him lose control.

When we came together, in a blur of heat, longing, and hunger, something inside me shifted and changed. I wasn't the same person anymore. I was forever marked as belonging to Nicolai Mercia, a man I'd only known a few short weeks. And, as I fell asleep wrapped in his strong arms, he said the words I needed to hear.

"I never want to let you go. I want to hold you like this forever."

I put my hand on his cheek, stared deep into his eyes, and whispered back to him, "That's what I want too."

CHAPTER

Nineteen

The next morning, I woke up tired, but also blissfully happy, in Nico's big bed. He had loved me thoroughly, and the memory of it made a slow, satisfied smile curl across my lips.

He stepped out of the bathroom, wearing only a towel, his hair still damp from the shower. When he saw me watching him, he sent me a sexy, knowing, kind of grin.

“Good morning, Chloe. Did you sleep well?”

I loved how he pronounced my name, in the French way. It made chills go over my skin, like a verbal caress.

I sat up, holding the sheet close to my breasts. “Better than I have in a long time.”

He leaned over and kissed me, tasting of toothpaste and smelling like soap and pure, unfiltered man. “Stay here,” he said against my lips. “I'll get your breakfast.”

I rested against the pillows, a stupidly happy thrill in my heart, waiting for him. When he brought in a tray containing coffee, toast, jam, and the morning paper, I fluttered my eyelashes at him adoringly. “Coffee? You wonderful, perfect man.”

“And it's cappuccino. Extra whip. The way you like it.”

I sat and sipped my coffee, watching him get dressed. He had the most beautiful body, all lean muscle, and perfect lines. I could look at him all day. His eyes darkened when he noticed me staring at him, and he gave me a smile so full of sexual

promise I found it hard to breathe. Unfortunately, it seemed he didn't have time to play this morning. He sat next to me on the bed, his hand cupping my jaw as his thumb brushed over my lower lip.

"I hate to leave you like this, all naked and adorable in my bed, but I have to meet with my security team for a few minutes downstairs. I also need to make some phone calls to check on Alex."

"It's okay. I understand. I'm not going anywhere," I said with a wink.

His grin deepened, and his voice grew husky, making me warm all over. "I'll be back in just a moment."

He kissed my forehead and stepped out of the bedroom. I heard him leave the apartment as I took a bite of toast and picked up the paper. As soon as I saw the headline, my heart slammed to a stop in my chest.

Poor Little Rich Girl. The True Story of Chloe Burke, the Cinderella of Park Avenue.

My entire life had been laid bare on the pages of the *New York Times*. The sale of Burke Books, the accident, my mother's death, and my father's disability. They discussed my terrible job at Wilson Publishing and my struggles to help my sister. The reporter hadn't missed a single detail, including the night my father fell and couldn't get off the floor. Even Georgie hadn't known about what happened that night.

My hands shook by the time I finished. Someone had rattled on me—someone I'd trusted. My circle of confidants had grown smaller and smaller in the last three years, so it wasn't difficult to name a culprit. I knew exactly who'd done it.

Nico came back less than ten minutes later to find me stomping around the room and gathering my things. He stared at me in confusion. Gone was the sleepy, love-struck girl he'd kissed nearly senseless. In her place was a bitter, angry, desperately disappointed woman.

"Chloe. What's wrong? What happened?"

I threw the newspaper at him. “This happened. How could you, Nico? I let you into our lives, and you betrayed us.”

He stared at the newspaper, his brow wrinkling in confusion. “I don’t know what this is. I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“I trusted you, but I won’t make the same mistake again. Goodbye and good riddance.”

I tried to march out of the apartment, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm. “You can’t go out on your own. It’s too dangerous.”

I wrenched my arm free. “I’m not afraid of Sergei Paloka, because now I know what’s even more dangerous. Falling for a jerk like you.”

“Chloe, calm down.”

“I will not calm down,” I said. “Get out of my way, Nico. I mean it.”

“But you’re only wearing a sheet.”

He was right. I hadn’t even noticed. Lifting my chin in the air, I grabbed the clothes Nico had put out for me to borrow the night before and stomped to his bathroom. The T-shirt and sweats were miles too big, but I rolled up the waistband several times and made it work. The only good thing about being this angry? It made me too mad to cry. I’d save the crying for later. Right now, I wanted to focus on how furious I was with Nico.

When I flung open the door of the bathroom, I found Nico waiting for me, his expression anxious. “We need to talk. Please.”

“No, we don’t. Absolutely not. I’m leaving.” I located my shoes, a sparkling pair of heels that would look ridiculous with Nico’s sweats, but I didn’t care. I hooked them over one finger and grabbed my dress from Nico’s bedroom.

Running a hand through his hair, and swearing under his breath, he followed me from room to room. “I called the limo,” he said. “I’ll go with you.”

“No, you will not.” I opened the door to his apartment and stomped barefooted out into the hall. I didn’t refuse the offer of the limo, though. I’d left my purse at the restaurant last night. Nico had assured me his men would bring my things to my apartment when they checked on my father and Ella, but that meant I had nothing on me. No cash. No ID. No credit card.

Nico followed me to the elevator. “Please, Chloe. You’re being irrational.”

Not a good choice of words. He didn’t realize he’d tossed a match on a pile of kindling. I swung around so quickly I startled him. Glaring at his stupid, handsome face, I poked him in his chest, the same muscular chest I’d admired only hours before. Even his muscles pissed me off at this point.

“Don’t you dare call me irrational, Nico Mercia. I’ve been shot at, lied to, and humiliated. The only thing I had left was my pride, and now that is gone too.” He opened his mouth to reply, but I silenced him with one hand as I stepped into the elevator. “Stop. There is nothing you can say to make this better. I trusted you, and you failed me. End of story.”

The door closed on his stupidly perfect face, and I was alone. At last. I stumbled backward until I hit the wall of the elevator, but I refused to cry. I had to hold it in just a bit longer, so I slipped into my shoes, straightened my shoulders, and steeled myself.

A member of Nico’s team waited for me downstairs. He escorted me to the limo, but as soon as I settled into the comfortable leather seat, a thought occurred to me. What if Sergei Paloka did intend to harm me? If so, going home would be the worst idea. I gave the driver Georgie’s address and texted her to let her know I was on my way over. She called me immediately, sounding groggy.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes. We’ll talk when I get there, okay? Do you have coffee? I need coffee.”

Georgie did have coffee. When I arrived, she took in my outfit, messy hair, and lack of a bra and handed me a big mug of coffee as soon as I walked through the door of her Upper West Side townhouse. Located on a beautiful tree-lined street, it had belonged to Georgie's parents. It became hers as part of their divorce settlement. Now her mother spent most of her days in London, and her father lived full-time in Jamaica, but they both stayed with her whenever they were in town.

"What happened?" she asked, taking my dress out of my arms and hanging it carefully in her hall closet. "This looks like a walk of shame."

"Oh, it is. In more ways than one."

I slipped out of my heels and followed Georgie into her spacious kitchen. It was light and bright, with modern updates, but done in such a way as to keep the historical integrity of the home intact.

We sat at her kitchen island, and she handed me a donut. "It's an emergency. I figured you might need sugar. I grabbed these from the bakery down the street as soon as you texted me."

"Emergency donuts are the best," I said, letting out a sniff. My face crumbled as I stared at the iced donut. It grew fuzzy and out of focus due to my tears.

Georgie shoved a tissue in my hand and moved her stool closer to mine. "Talk. Now."

I wiped away a tear trickling across my cheek. "Did you hear about what happened last night at the charity dinner?"

She held up the newspaper and pointed at the headline: *Socialite Stops Sergei and Saves the Prince*. Included was a photo of Alex being hustled out of the restaurant. Right next to it was a small inset photo of me.

I narrowed my eyes. "Did they use my senior picture from high school? Dear God. Make it stop."

"What's wrong?"

"It was taken during my awkward phase. Look at my hair."

Georgie snorted. “You never had an awkward phase, but that’s beside the point. Did you seriously recognize the assassin by smell?”

“Yes. Weird, huh? I didn’t remember anything about it until he walked past me in the restaurant. He pretended to be a waiter, and I ran into him as I was, uh...coming back from the restroom.”

With Nico. After our heated make-out session. But I didn’t share that with my friend.

“Can you describe the way he smelled?” she asked. “I’m wondering how you recognized it.”

“It was odd, like a mix of body odor and something minty and strong.” I wrinkled my nose. “Trust me, once you smell something like that, you remember it.”

I took a sip of coffee, surprised to see my hands were shaking. The incident at the restaurant last night had upset me more than I realized, and the events of this morning had pushed me over the edge. After taking a bite of the donut, I continued.

“It was scary. I worried he might hurt Alex, but they got the prince out quickly. We left separately. Nico snuck me out the back door, and then he took me to his apartment.” I closed my eyes and shook my head softly. “I should never have trusted him.”

She put her hand on my shoulder. “Did he hurt you?”

I blinked at her, surprised. “No. Well, not in the way you’re thinking. I slept with him quite willingly. It was my idea, in fact. But then I woke up and found out he shared what he knew about my family with the whole world.”

Georgie winced. “I guess you’re referring to this?” She showed me a second newspaper, the one I’d seen at Nico’s this morning.

“Yep. He spilled the beans.”

“How do you know Nico did it?” she asked, her eyes scanning the article.

“Who else could it have been? No one else has even been to our house. No one else knows the truth about us, and I know with one hundred percent certainty it wasn’t you.”

“Of course, it wasn’t,” she said, her eyes sad. “But how do you know that?”

“First of all, you’d never betray me. Secondly, I forgot to tell you my dad fell.” I pointed to the part in the article about his accident. “And I thought Nico was so kind. Saving the day. Calling his doctor friend to come and help.”

“Could it have been his friend?”

I frowned. “I wondered about that, too, but no. There is too much detail. There is no way he could have known everything in this article. It had to be Nico.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Well, this whole thing sucks. Why do you think he did it?”

“No idea. Publicity for Alex, maybe?”

She bit her lower lip. “It’s possible, but Nico didn’t seem particularly interested in drumming up publicity.”

She made a good point. “Maybe it’s payback,” I said. “I saved the prince. He got a lot of grief over it.”

“If that is the reason, it’s karma. After all, you stopped the assassin again last night.”

“You’re right.” At least I didn’t lie about saving Alex this time. I couldn’t say those words, even to Georgie, so I tried to lighten the mood instead. “I’m glad it was with my nose this time and not my butt.”

She gave me a high five. “Good one,” she said. “But I’m sorry about what happened between you and Nico. I know you liked him.”

“I did,” I said, the tears coming again no matter how hard I tried to contain them. “And I trusted him too. I guess I learned my lesson, huh?”

Georgie studied me, her eyes sad. “Not everyone is the same. They won’t all disappoint you, you know. You can’t let

this make you lose faith in people, Chloe.”

“Too late,” I said, giving her a shaky smile. “I already have.”

She let out a sigh. “Was he at least good in bed?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “I’m not going to answer that question, Georgie.”

She laughed it off. “Fine. But I would share details with you. Just saying.”

“I know, but I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t.” I blew out a breath, unable to continue. “But I have a favor to ask. Can I stay here until tomorrow? I don’t want to intrude if you have plans, but I’m afraid I could encounter the press, or even worse, Mr. Paloka, if I go home. Do you mind?”

“Mind? I’d love it.” She eyed my outfit and my messy hair. “Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll give you some clothes that actually fit. I have to run a few errands, but then we can order in food and watch crap movies all night to make us cry.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Georgie.”

I texted my sister to let her know I’d be staying with Georgie and wouldn’t be home until tomorrow. I gave her a brief explanation about the story in the paper, apologized for letting Nico into our lives, and asked her to call me when she had a chance. She responded a few minutes later, telling me everything was fine. Short and sweet. Maybe too short.

“Ella’s mad at me,” I said as I curled up on Georgie’s sofa in a pair of borrowed yoga pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. My hair was still damp from the shower, so I pulled it into a bun to keep it off my shoulders.

“Why would she be upset?” I showed her Ella’s text, and she shrugged. “Wait. Isn’t it mid-terms week? You know your sister. Unlike me in high school, she actually studies. She’s probably getting ready for a test tomorrow.”

“You’re right,” I said, putting my phone away. I had ten messages, and three missed calls from Nico. I’d already checked to make sure the texts didn’t contain anything urgent.

Most of them said something along the lines of *You're being ridiculous. We need to talk.* I decided ignoring him would work better than lashing out at him. I took the high road. "Can I borrow your laptop while you're out? I have an article due tomorrow. I wanted to work on it, and I should let Felicity know we won't be in to work tomorrow."

"We?" asked Georgie, hopefully.

"We," I said with a smile. "We have to listen to Alex's speech tomorrow at the United Nations building."

She squealed and hugged me around the neck. "You're the best."

As soon as Georgie left, I set to work on my article, highlighting the work of Alex's foundation. Not exactly what Felicity wanted, but I knew she'd go for it. After working for her for three years, I'd learned how to deal with her—not that I liked her any more than I had when I first started.

It felt good to jump into my work. It gave me something to focus on besides Nico, but no matter how hard I tried, my thoughts kept going back to him.

How could he do such a thing and why?

Last night had been pretty spectacular. Although I wasn't quite ready to tell Georgie this yet, it had been the best night of my whole life. But he'd ruined everything with what he'd done and made it even worse by giving me the newspaper this morning. Before I'd even finished my coffee. What kind of sicko did something so cruel? Or did he think I wouldn't connect the dots?

Either way, it didn't matter. Nico had betrayed me, and I'd never give him the same opportunity again.

My heart had been broken too many times already. I didn't have the courage to risk it once more, especially not with Nico Mercia.

CHAPTER

Twenty

CHLOE CAPTIVATES THE WORLD AND PRINCE ALEX SHINES
DURING INSPIRATIONAL U.N. SPEECH

Due to heightened security measures after the recent assassination attempts, Georgie and I had to sit in a separate room to watch Alex's speech on a live video feed. He did an incredible job, moving both of us to tears with his vision for his foundation.

The article I'd written about Alex's mission came out in this month's issue of *Haute NYC*. I'd come up with it thinking Alex could use all the help he could get, but seeing him here, in his element, made me realize he'd do fine on his own.

Alex was kind, friendly, and easy-going. Any girl would have been lucky to have him for a boyfriend. Why couldn't I have fallen for him and not Nico? He didn't growl or glower, and he certainly wouldn't sneak around behind someone's back and tell all their secrets to a tabloid.

Well, not a tabloid. A prominent, respectable newspaper. Somehow, that made it even worse since no one would question its validity.

I saw Nico standing in the background as I watched the video. He was busy taking care of security for the prince. He'd tried to speak with me when we first arrived, but I refused to listen. And now he had the nerve to act all hurt and even grumpier than usual, the big jerk.

Watching him on the video feed, I noticed he looked tired. He had dark circles under his eyes, and his broad shoulders sagged with exhaustion. Not that anyone else would have

noticed. The only reason I could tell was because I knew him so well.

Or at least I'd thought I did.

We left the United Nations building without seeing Alex or Nico. I didn't feel up to answering questions from the press about the article or about my family. Instead, I posed for a few photos, waved to the crowd, ignored their shouted questions, and went back to Georgie's. Tomorrow, Alex and I had a big interview with Dirk Deacon again on his morning show, and Georgie wanted to prep me for it. Although everyone reassured me it would be safe for me to go home now, and our apartment seemed well-guarded, I didn't want to risk it. I also wasn't ready to face my dad or my sister. I'd let them down in a way I doubted I could ever repair.

I phoned my sister and left a message, but she never called me back. She did text me to let me know she and Dad were both fine, and her AP Calculus test had gone well. She didn't act fine, but I couldn't press her. It wouldn't be fair.

After we changed into comfortable clothing, Georgie and I opened a bottle of wine and ordered Vietnamese food from our favorite restaurant. As we munched on banh mi sandwiches and fresh spring rolls filled with shrimp, she pulled out her notebooks and prepped me for the questions I might be asked the next morning.

"They are going to ask you about the situation with your family."

"I know," I said, putting down my sandwich. "But I'm not sure how to respond. It's not anyone else's business, is it? I mean, I can refuse to talk about it, can't I?"

She studied me, a wrinkle appearing between her brows. "You could, but it's already out there. What purpose does lying about it serve?"

"I wouldn't be lying. Not exactly. I'd be avoiding the truth."

"Which sounds kind of like lying."

My shoulders slumped. "I know, but I'm scared."

“Of what?” she asked, pouring me more wine.

“Of their pity, I guess. Or maybe their derision. Do you remember what happened to Dee Sinclair? Her parents lost their fortune while we were in high school, and she had to take a job at the school to pay for her senior year. She worked in the cafeteria, cleaning the trays. Everyone acted nice to her face but laughed at her behind her back.”

“Because Dee was a vile human being. What happened to her felt like karma. It’s different with you.”

“Is it?” I pulled my legs up and hugged my knees to my chest. “Maybe it is karma. Maybe I deserve what I get.”

“Or maybe this is your chance to be free of pretending once and for all.”

I considered her words and realized that the idea of coming clean, about all my falsehoods, held appeal. Georgie thought we were talking about the secrets I’d kept about my family, but the lie I’d told about saving Alex weighed heavily on me too. Admitting the truth would be terrifying, but it would also be a huge relief. One lie had led to another and another, and I wanted it all to stop.

“Do you think so?”

She nodded. “It’s the only way to go, honey. It’s not like you did anything wrong. None of it was your fault.”

She sounded like she might cry, which was very out of character. Georgie never cried. I’d known her for years, enough to realize she wasn’t telling me everything.

“What is it? I know there must be something else going on. I can see it in your eyes.”

She pursed her lips. “I have no idea what you are referring to, young lady.”

“Yes, you do. And you always call me ‘young lady’ when you’re hiding something.”

“I do not, young lady.” She wrinkled her nose when she realized what she’d said. “Oh, crap. You’re right. But this isn’t about me. It’s about you.”

“It’s about both of us.” I gave her my best no-nonsense glare. “Do you remember the night you slept with Jake Jones in high school? And you didn’t want to tell me because you knew I would disapprove?”

“Yes,” she said. “You had an unreasonable hatred for lacrosse players. I thought it was for the best that you didn’t know.”

“But I *did* know because I know you. Better than anyone. Fess up, Georgie. Who have you slept with now? And if you say Bill from accounting, I’ll slap you upside the head.”

She chuckled at my joke. Bill had been hitting on her for months, but she couldn’t stand him. “I am not sleeping with Bill. Ew. Stop trying to distract me.”

“Come on. Tell me, Georgie. Please.”

Lifting her hands, she blew out a breath. “It’s nothing. I feel...” Her voice trailed off, but when I nudged her, she continued, her voice thick with emotion. “Well, I guess I feel responsible. I encouraged you to take this a step further, to pretend you’re dating the prince. I didn’t realize, however, how hard it would be for you, and for Nico.”

I took a long drink of wine. “Let’s get one thing straight. You didn’t force me to do anything. I made my own decisions, and Nico made his.”

She winced at me sympathetically. “Can I do anything to help you? I mean, I could talk to him. Or maybe give him a kick in the chicken tenders.” She sounded so serious, I laughed. “Or I could slash his tires. That wouldn’t be hard. I’ve done it before.”

I stopped laughing, mostly because I realized she was not joking. “No tires will be slashed, and no tenders will be kicked, Georgie. Are we clear on that?”

She wrinkled her nose. “If you say so.” She skimmed her notes again and cleared her throat. “Fine. Let’s get back to work. We need to get you ready for tomorrow. I have to say, I don’t necessarily think this newspaper article is a bad thing. I know how psycho you are about privacy, but so far, the

reaction to it has been nothing but a huge outpouring of sympathy. I analyzed the numbers. Your approval rating is actually on the rise.”

I lifted my eyebrows at her words. “I have an approval rating?”

“Yes, you do,” she said. “It goes up every single time you give an interview, or you’re seen with the prince. You’re a phenom. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, the press puts a positive spin on it. You have bizarre juju.”

“Juju?”

“Yes. I’ve never seen anything like it. Tomorrow you could say, ‘I’m a bank robber,’ and the response would be, ‘Isn’t that awesome?’ Everything you do is gold. You’re like some kind of lucky leprechaun.”

“A lucky leprechaun?” I scowled at her. “Seriously?”

“Well, maybe not a leprechaun, but you have been incredibly lucky lately, don’t you think? And you deserve it. You’ve earned it. So please try to enjoy it.”

“I will,” I said, unconvinced. Georgie could put a positive spin on anything.

“And I have even more good news. After the article about your family appeared in the paper, Burke Books put together a contract for you. A lovely six-figure kind of contract. They want to publish your life story, and they want you to write it.”

“They do? But why?”

“They’ve seen what you’ve done at *Haute*, and maybe I sort of sent them samples of some of the papers you wrote in college. You’re good. They know it.”

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t bother asking how she had access to the papers I wrote in college. Georgie was Georgie. She had her own methods.

“You truly are an evil genius.”

“I am, and you have to trust me on this. Getting shot might have been the best thing that ever happened to you, but the

article was probably the second best. I know you hate it, but it's true. And the more honest you are about what you've been through, the better it will be."

I agreed with her, to a certain point, but opening up about all the things I'd kept secret for so long made me uncomfortable. The person I worried most about was Ella. The other students at her ritzy, exclusive school now knew she'd basically turned into a charity case. It made my blood boil.

I barely slept and still felt exhausted when I woke before dawn on Tuesday morning, but I managed to put my game face on after several large cups of coffee. For the interview today, I borrowed another one of Georgie's dresses, a blue Dior.

"Thank goodness we're the same size," she said.

The dress had a wide belt that made my waist appear tiny. I gave my friend a grateful smile. "You're the best. I'm sorry you've had to dress me and take care of me the last few weeks, Georgie, but I appreciate every single thing you've done."

"Are you kidding? I had a blast. I finally got to use all the branding stuff I learned in school and really enjoyed it. I think I'm finally going to open my own publicity firm. Alex said he'd be my first client." She blushed, odd because Georgie never blushed. "But that isn't the only reason I've enjoyed all of this. The best part was I got to see you ..."

She paused in mid-sentence. "See me what?" I asked.

Georgie let out a sigh. "I got to see you come to life again. You seemed so happy about Nico and excited about the future. It's been a long time since I saw that sort of hope in your eyes."

"Let's not talk about Nico anymore, okay?" I asked, trying not to cry. "I need to get through today, and then I'm done. I won't have to pretend anymore. About anything."

Our second interview with Dirk Deacon would take place at the TV station. It was supposed to be a fun, light follow-up to our previous discussion, but nothing could have been

further from the truth. It didn't feel fun or light. It felt like I was being led straight to the gallows.

As I waited in the studio for the show to begin, I wondered if the people watching me get interviewed would notice my nervousness and my discomfort. If so, it could ruin everything. I needed to stay focused and get this over with.

I wrung my hands again and silently chastised myself for the wringing. What would be next? Swooning? I'd somehow morphed into a character in a regency romance novel.

Alex sat next to me, his blue eyes filled with concern. Nico was nowhere to be seen. Different security guys were taking care of Alex today, which probably meant Nico had accomplished what he'd hoped for by ratting me out to the press. He'd gained both U.N. support for Alex and even more publicity for the prince's foundation. Yippee. Now he didn't even have to pretend to care anymore, so he'd gone on his merry way.

The slime bucket.

"I heard about what happened," said Alex, his voice soft. "Nico told me. He's distraught."

"Distraught? Really?" I had to keep a super fake smile on my face so no one else in the room would know what we were discussing. "Was he distraught before or after he betrayed my trust?"

Alex reached out to touch my arm. "Chloe. You have to believe me. There's been a terrible misunderstanding."

I almost burst out laughing. Not a happy laugh. A crazy, woman-on-the-edge kind of cackle. I barely held it in.

"You're right. There has been. I should have known better. I was a complete and utter idiot."

Alex leaned forward like he wanted to say something else, but Dirk arrived, interrupting him. Georgie sat in the corner, head bowed, eyes on her clipboard, and shoulders drooping with exhaustion. My poor friend. She'd been through a lot recently, too—all because of me.

The morning show music swelled, and the set grew quiet. A man standing next to one of the cameras did a silent countdown.

Three. Two. One.

“Good morning, New York,” said Dirk, flashing his megawatt smile. He had a face for television and a voice for radio, the perfect combination. And he was a nice guy too. He did all sorts of work for charity and got emotional whenever he had to discuss something sad on his program. I liked him and felt safe with him, which said a lot. I didn’t feel safe around many people these days. And my ability to trust had taken a serious nosedive. I was one step away from becoming a bitter, cynical, very crabby person.

Dirk spoke to me, giving me a start. I hadn’t realized we were ready to begin. “Ms. Burke, I’d planned to ask you about what happened last weekend at the restaurant,” he said, “but in light of what has come out in the paper recently about your family, is there anything you would like to say to our listeners?”

I let out a long breath and met his intense gaze directly. No sense in going back now. I had no other choice. I’d reached the point of no return.

“Yes, I’d like to say I was devastated when that article came out, but now I’m almost relieved. I don’t want to lie anymore, about my family or anything else.”

“So, what you mean is”

I inhaled deeply and let it out. “I mean that every word in that article is true.”

“All of it?”

“Yes. After my parents were in the accident, the one that killed my mother, things got bad for us. But I’d been raised with the idea that private things should be kept private and talking about money is gauche.” I gave him a wry smile. “Especially if you don’t have any.”

Dirk shook his head. I guess he’d expected something different, like an attempted cover-up. “It’s so hard to fathom.

One of the wealthiest families in New York, reduced to this. How does it feel?"

"To be poor?" I asked, gazing at the ceiling and blinking away an unexpected wave of tears. "Oh, it's awful. Trust me. I spend most of my day sick with worry. I worry about how I'll take care of my dad and my sister, and about the apartment, which needs repairs I can't afford. I worry about...everything. I worry so much it's hard to sleep. Sometimes I feel like there's no way out, but I have to wake up and keep moving."

"It must be horrible. And very stressful."

"It is, but I'd been clueless before. Thoughtless. And so out of touch with reality it was embarrassing. Because of this, however, I've learned some hard lessons. Important lessons." My eyes found Georgie's. "I've learned who my true friends are." I gave her a nod. "And I've learned the importance of family. It wasn't until I lost my mother that I understood I would do anything to keep my sister and my father safe. Even if it meant lying."

Alex reached out and touched my hand. "Chloe Burke, you're the bravest person I know."

I gave him a sad smile. "What else can I do? Crawl into a corner and weep? No, thank you. I'm a Burke, and I'm a New Yorker. There is no crying in the corner for us."

One of the cameramen, a tough-looking guy in a black T-shirt, wiped away a tear. Even Dirk reacted with unexpected emotion, his impressive chin wobbling slightly. "Well, Chloe, we fell in love with you because you saved the prince, and now this." As Dirk got choked up, I stared around the room. Everyone seemed to be dabbing their eyes with a tissue, even Georgie.

I couldn't believe this had happened. This was not at all how I'd intended my revelation to go. First, I'd been called a hero because people thought I jumped in front of a bullet for Alex. Then they did it again simply because I remembered the smell of someone's body odor. Now they called me heroic for taking care of my family.

“Hold on,” I said. “There is nothing heroic or unusual about doing what is best for your family. Wouldn’t anyone else do the same?”

“Yes, but ...” When Dirk finally managed to finish his sentence, he had real tears in his eyes. “I can’t imagine anything worse than what you’ve lived through.”

“Oh, Dirk. I can. There are lots of things far worse than being poor and scared and all alone.” I hugged my arms around my torso, holding myself tightly so I wouldn’t shatter into a million pieces and embarrass myself on national TV. “I lost my mother. I watched my father disappear slowly, right in front of my eyes. I saw my sweet sister try to put on a brave face while dealing with unspeakable heartbreak. It was like living in a nightmare, but I refused to give up. I refused to let it break me. But do you know what nearly did break me?”

“What?” asked Dirk.

“Betrayal.” I knew I should stop talking, but I couldn’t. I was too angry and too hurt to hold anything back. I stared at Dirk, unflinching. “I found out someone I trusted, someone I cared about, someone I actually may have even loved, betrayed me. Something like that truly destroys what’s left of a person’s heart.” I’d gone completely off-script. This wasn’t what Georgie and I had planned, but I stared right at the camera, wanting to speak directly to Nico. Wanting to hurt him as much as he’d hurt me. “What hurts the most is that I thought I’d finally found what I’d been looking for, something extraordinary, and discovered it was all nothing but a big, fat lie.”

“Enough,” said a voice from the darkness behind the cameras. “Stop it now, Chloe.”

I lifted my hand to shield my eyes from the light as I tried to see who had spoken. “Ella?”

Ella stepped forward, wringing her hands as tears streamed down her face. When did the two of us start wringing our hands? Dear heavens. We’d become the Brönte sisters.

Dirk waved Ella over, offering her a seat on the couch next to me. “This is your sister?”

I nodded. “Yes, and she’s supposed to be at school. Why aren’t you at school, Ella?”

She wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. “I had to come here. I had to tell you what I did. I called the newspaper. I told them about our family. I wanted to h-h-help. To do the right thing. I’d gotten so sick and tired of lying about it all the time, pretending our lives were okay at home. I thought you were sick of it too. I didn’t know how mad you would get. I didn’t know it would ruin everything for you.”

“Baby,” I said, pushing her hair away from her face. “You didn’t ruin anything.”

“Yes, I did. Nico was perfect for you, and I messed it up.”

Dirk frowned in confusion. “Um, excuse me, but who is Nico? Aren’t you and the prince dating?” Dirk’s gaze darted back and forth between us, trying to figure out what was going on. He’d lost control of the entire interview, poor guy.

Alex straightened his jacket. “We were never dating. It was a ruse. A deception. And all because of me.”

I stared at him in shock. This could ruin all the good work he’d done, with his foundation and with building all those libraries for needy children. I couldn’t let him do it. I just couldn’t.

“No, Alex. You don’t understand—”

At that moment, Nico burst into the room. The camera guys shushed him, but he ignored them, his jaw tight and his eyes darting back and forth. A man on the edge. He probably thought I was about to ruin the prince’s reputation, but I had another plan in mind. I’d been living a lie for so long, I no longer recognized the truth anymore. It had taken Ella’s confession and her tears to make me understand, and I finally knew exactly what I had to do. It was time to come clean.

“I lied,” I said, staring directly at Nico. “About everything.”

Nico gazed back at me, his brow furrowed. I wished more than anything I didn't have to do this. Knowing Nico had not called the paper made me think there was a chance we might be able to pick up where we'd left off. A small chance, but still a chance. By telling the truth right now, though, I knew I'd destroy any hope we had of being together, but I had no choice.

I turned to Alex. "I lied to you."

Alex watched my face closely. "What do you mean?" he asked.

I could barely look at him. I felt embarrassed and ashamed by what I'd done. I placed my hand over his. "You're a good, decent, and honorable man, Alex, but I didn't mean to save your life. I tripped crossing the street and knocked you over. It was totally on accident."

After a moment of stunned silence, Alex was the first to speak.

"It doesn't sound like an accident. It sounds like an enormous stroke of good luck on my part, but why did you lie about it?" he asked. "What purpose would it serve?"

Ella answered for me, a note of disbelief and awe in her voice. "You did it for us," she said, her voice soft and her green eyes huge in her face. "For Daddy and me, so I'd have enough to eat, and he could have the therapy he needed."

I nodded. "And so I could buy you a school uniform that actually fits." I gave her jacket a playful tug. "I'm sorry I lied to everyone, but most of all, I'm sorry I lied to you, Ella. We're stronger together, aren't we?"

"We are," she said, hugging me. "Always."

I waited for someone to get mad, and to give me the verbal lashing I deserved, but it didn't happen. Slowly, one by one, the people in the room rose to their feet and clapped. It was unexpected—a standing ovation for being a liar and a cheat.

Nico, his dark eyes as hard and cold as stone, didn't clap. I stared straight at him as I spoke.

“I know some people assumed I wanted my fifteen minutes of fame, but that wasn’t true. I didn’t plan for any of this to happen, and I knew it was wrong. I did it to help my family, but if I’d known the other damage it would cause....” I shook my head sadly, pleading Nico with my eyes to forgive me. “I never would have done it. I swear.”

Dirk stared at me in astonishment. “Ms. Burke, I’m flabbergasted. What an incredibly brave thing to do. To come out publicly and have the courage to admit you’ve done something wrong.” He shook his head. “Frankly speaking, it’s amazing. I admired you before, but now I know you truly are a hero.”

“Are you serious?” I didn’t expect to be complimented for lying. “A hero? You did hear the part about me tripping and lying about it, right?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Alex. “And I happen to agree with Mr. Deacon. You truly are a wonder, Chloe. It takes such character to admit to something like that, but you’re being far too hard on yourself. You may have done the wrong thing by lying, but you did it for all the best reasons.”

I stared at him in shock. “You don’t hate me for what I did?”

He shook his head. “You saved my *life*. Whether by accident or on purpose, you’ll always be a hero in my book. And I lied, too,” he said, focusing his blue-eyed gaze on the cameras. “I let people believe Chloe and I were dating, but none of it was true. She’s a lovely, wonderful girl, and we’re good friends. I hope we always will be, if you agree, Chloe?” he asked, turning to face me.

I smiled at him. “Definitely.”

Georgie, who’d been holding her clipboard in front of her face, slowly lowered it. She acted like she might turn around and bolt from the room. This had gotten way out of control and could easily have been a publicist’s worst nightmare. If I hadn’t been so upset at the moment, I might have laughed.

Alex noticed her distress and his lips quirked. “Georgie, come here, please.” She shook her head vehemently and he lifted a haughty eyebrow at her. “If you don’t, I shall drag you to the stage myself.”

As Georgie walked toward us, I could tell she swore softly under her breath. It was probably a good thing she didn’t have a microphone on. When she got to the stage, she paused and stared at the cameras, straightening her shoulders.

“I have a confession to make. It’s all my fault.”

“Why did you do that, Ms. Knowles?” asked Dirk, obviously overwhelmed by the sheer number of confessions on his program this morning.

Georgie sent Alex a guilty look. “I wanted His Royal Hot —” She winced. “I mean, His Royal Highness, to have the chance to build more schools and libraries for poor children. The work he does is inspiring. And it was my idea to make people believe Chloe and Alex were a couple.”

“Your idea?” asked Dirk, trying to get control of this interview.

She turned back to face him. “Do you blame me? Look at them. They’re gorgeous together. But what I did was wrong. Very, very wrong. And if my best friend ever gets shot in the a —”

“Bottom,” interjected Alex.

Georgie blushed. “Yes. Bottom. If Chloe ever gets shot in the bottom again, I will not pimp her out to royals. I promise.” She lifted her hand to give a scout’s honor salute. “That’s all. Carry on. Tally-ho. Whatever.”

As Georgie moved to sit near Alex, my eyes searched for Nico in the crowd. He stood off to one side, shaking his head in disbelief. I understood how he felt. There had been quite a few revelations in the last ten minutes or so, but there was more I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him I was sorry, and that I loved him, and that Saturday night had been the best night of my whole life. Before I could say anything, however, a man stepped out from the shadows not far from Nico. He had a

beard and glasses, and I couldn't figure out why he seemed so familiar to me until I caught a whiff of something strange. It wafted toward me from all the way across the room. A strong scent, and one I recognized.

Body odor and mint.

Nico must have smelled it at precisely the same moment because his eyes widened in surprise. I screamed Nico's name, but he was too far away. He sprang into action, but all he could do was watch as Sergei Paloka took a gun out from inside his jacket and raised it toward Alex's heart.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

CHLOE DOES IT AGAIN! AND THIS TIME IT'S ON LIVE
TELEVISION

If I'd had time to think things through, I don't know if I would have jumped in front of Alex, saving his life again. It was an instinctual reaction, not something planned or calculated. It turns out what I'd said as a lie in my first interview with Dirk had been the absolute truth. I couldn't watch an innocent man get shot and not do anything about it. But I didn't plan to get shot again.

Twice in a month. It must have been a new record.

Nico was the first one to reach me. He gathered me into his strong arms, assessing the damage as he dabbed at the wound on my forehead with a handkerchief. "Chloe, please be okay. Please don't be hurt," he said as he used his handkerchief to apply pressure to my temple.

I tried to answer him but couldn't because Ella and Georgie were next to me, crying hysterically. Alex was there too. His security team tried to hustle him into the back room, but he refused to go.

"I won't leave her," he said. "So back off. Now."

I squeezed Nico's hand. "Sergei Paloka? Did you get him?"

He nodded, his face pale, and his expression grim. "Yes. My men have him right now. He'll never bother us again. I promise."

My head burned where the bullet had struck me, and it hurt. Blood ran down the back of my neck, likely ruining the blue Dior dress I'd borrowed from Georgie. I should have

chosen a black one. The color would have hidden the bloodstains better.

“Nico. There is something I need to say to you.”

“Stop talking, my darling. Save your strength.”

“No. It’s important.” I studied him trying to memorize every detail of his face. “I love you.”

“Chloe, there is no need to—”

“Wait. Let me continue.” I took a long, shaky breath. “A few days ago, I told you I didn’t want to have any regrets if I died. Well, I don’t. I’m glad about what happened between us. I only wish we could have had more time together.”

He rolled his eyes. “We’ll have plenty of time together. I promise you. The bullet barely grazed your temple.”

I gawked at him. “Are you sure?”

He pushed the hair from my forehead and stared deeply into my eyes. “You’re fine. Completely and absolutely fine. You’re bleeding a lot because you’re a redhead and because head wounds are notorious for it. But, there is something I must tell you too.”

“What?”

“I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you.” He kissed my cheek so softly, so sweetly, it brought tears to my eyes.

“When I got shot in the butt?”

He laughed, and I felt the vibration of it from somewhere deep inside his chest. “Yes. Or perhaps it was a few minutes later. In the ambulance, when you apologized for being cranky, you crazy, beautiful, impossibly brave girl.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m not crazy—”

He gave me a smile. “I said it to see if you were paying attention. You’re not crazy. You’re perfect. And you’re going to be fine.”

Ella sniffed, holding my hand, her eyes on Nico. “Are you sure? Is she really going to be okay?”

He nodded. “I promise. It looks a lot worse than it is. She can’t help herself. First getting shot in the middle of the street, and now on live TV. Always playing the heroine. It’s so annoying.”

I tugged on his tie. “Shut up and kiss me, Nico. You’re the one who’s annoying.”

He immediately complied, making me both blissfully happy and kind of dizzy. The dizziness could have been caused by blood loss, but I suspected it was all Nico.

One of Nico’s men rushed over to us. “*Monsieur le Comte*. Excuse me. We have Sergei Paloka secured and will take him to the nearest police station for questioning. Would you like to accompany us, sir?”

Nico answered, but he never took his eyes off me. “You can handle the processing, Igor. The officers from the Latvian consulate are already on their way. I have other things to see to at the moment.”

With a bow, the burly security guard took off. I stared at Nico. “Are you sure I’m not brain damaged? I swear he called you *Monsieur le Comte*.”

“There is nothing wrong with your brain, my love.”

“I don’t understand.”

Alex gave my hand a gentle pat. “Nico is my cousin. The Count of Mercia. He’s also third in line to the throne. That’s why he works so hard to keep me alive. He doesn’t want to be king.”

Nico chuckled. “You’ve got that right, Your Royal Highness.”

“Hotness,” said Georgie and Ella at once.

Alex grinned, and it was dazzling. It didn’t work on me, however. I only had eyes for Nico.

“He’s going to make that his new title,” I said.

Nico's lips quirked. "I have no doubt."

As an ambulance siren wailed outside the building, and EMTs rushed in with a stretcher, Dirk Deacon sat off to the side, his face pale as he adjusted his earpiece. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Dirk Deacon reporting." He ran a trembling hand through his perfectly coiffed blond hair. "Holy heck. Did you guys see what happened? She saved his life. Again. Chloe Burke. The Cinderella of Park Avenue. The hero of our city ... and of our hearts."

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

I didn't have to stay in the hospital this time. As Nico had predicted, the bullet had barely grazed my temple and lodged somewhere in the wall behind me in the studio. My action had been enough to move the prince out of the way, but I'd been very lucky. I easily could have died. As it was, all that I needed was a small bandage, a couple of painkillers, and a little rest. Soon, I'd be as right as rain.

Nico told me how terrified he'd been as we waited to get discharged from the emergency room. "I came so close to losing you," he said, his voice deep and tortured as he held me. "You're lucky to be alive. That bullet could have killed you."

"But it didn't," I replied. "I'm fine. *We're* fine. And the good news is, maybe I'm no longer a living, breathing example of Murphy's Law."

"Everything that can go wrong will?"

"Yes, but now everything feels right. Especially when I'm with you."

He kissed the top of my head. "Who'd have thought? America's sweetheart, Chloe Burke, and some guy from Latovia"

I smacked his arm. "You aren't some guy. You're my guy."

"Good to know," he said with a slow, sexy grin. "And what if your fifteen minutes of fame are up? Are you okay with being ordinary, or will you continue to yearn for the spotlight?"

“Nope. Not even a little.”

Georgie and Alex waited for me outside the emergency room. Georgie’s eyes were puffy from crying. Alex had a protective arm around her shoulders. When Nico pushed me out in a wheelchair, she let out a sigh of relief.

“You look much better,” she said, hugging me with such enthusiasm she nearly cut off my oxygen supply. “You were so pale. Like, even paler than usual. Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

Nico went to call for the limo. When Georgie released me, and I could speak, I shot her a worried glance. “I’m sorry about what happened. You aren’t mad at me for lying to you?”

She considered my question. “You didn’t lie. You simply omitted a few details.”

“You told me omitting the truth was still lying.”

“Well, I was wrong. One hundred percent wrong. It’s never happened before, but there has to be a first time for everything, right?”

“You should tell her the other news,” said Alex with a grin.

Georgie’s eyes widened. “Oh, yeah. Felicity got fired.”

“For what?”

“Plagiarism. Imogene caught her trying to pass off several things you and other assistants had written as her own.”

“Way to go, Imogene,” I said, impressed.

“Oh, it gets better. Guess who is being offered Felicity’s old job?”

I shook my head in confusion. “Who?”

She grabbed my hands. “You,” she said, jumping up and down. Just watching her hurt my head.

“Ow,” I said, wincing. “Stop jumping. Please. But about the job—why me?”

“Well, you’ve kind of been doing her job for three years now already, haven’t you? The bigwigs of Wilson Publishing

recognize how hard you've worked, and they also think you're the person to bring *Haute NYC* in a fresh, new direction. Seeing your interview this morning, and the way you saved this big lug again," she nudged Alex, "sealed the deal. Congratulations, Chloe. You deserve this."

Already ideas for how to improve the magazine spun around in my mind. "Thank you, Georgie."

"Hey, you did it on your own. I'll stay at the magazine until you're settled. I can't give up my advice column. It's too valuable. People need to hear bad advice so they can figure out the right thing to do on their own."

"Brilliant," said Alex. "Sometimes you scare me, Georgiana."

"Sometimes I scare myself," she said, with a cheeky grin.

The limo arrived, and Georgie and Alex joined us. After Nico helped me inside, we cracked open a bottle of champagne and drove away from the hospital. Nestled against Nico's side, I only had a few sips, not wanting to risk any interaction with my painkillers, but we made several toasts. To me. To my new job. To Alex's foundation. To Nico not being a mega-jerk anymore (that one came from Georgie). To the arrest of smelly Sergei. To Nico being a count, and not at all like Count Dracula (also from Georgie). To the limo driver for being such a good limo driver. And to Georgie's lousy advice.

By the time we reached my apartment, Georgie was well on her way to being tipsy. She brought all of us to tears with her imitation of her Jamaican father. Giggling, Nico and I got out of the limo in front of my building. Alex promised he would see Georgie home.

"Have pity on me. I'm going to have to continue to listen to this the whole way to Georgie's place," he said, his face bright with laughter.

"No worries, mon. Mi shame tree dead," said Georgie, very seriously as she patted Alex's arm.

We heard Alex ask, "What does that even mean?" as Nico shut the door of the limo.

He grabbed my hand in his, eyes twinkling. I loved it when Nico twinkled.

“I’m curious as well. What was she saying?” he asked as we walked hand in hand into my building. “Mi shame tree dead?”

He enunciated each word clearly, which made me laugh even harder. “Oh, it means Georgie is not easily embarrassed. Which is a completely factual statement.”

When Nico and I entered the apartment, Ella greeted us at the door with a hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she said, leaning closer to whisper in my ear. “Daddy saw everything. He was watching the show on TV. He saw you get shot.”

“Uh-oh,” I said, slipping out of my coat. He hadn’t watched a television program in three years. It figured he’d choose today to start. “Is he okay?”

“I think so,” she said. “I told him you were fine. But you should probably speak with him yourself.”

I was surprised to find my father, fully dressed, and waiting for us in his wheelchair. He wasn’t facing the window, and his vacant stare had been replaced with one full of worry. He relaxed visibly when he saw me, but the concern in his eyes remained.

I kissed his cheek. “Hi, Daddy,” I said. “You’re looking well today.”

“Am I?” he asked, swallowing hard. “I saw what happened, Chloe. I watched you get shot.”

“I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t you dare apologize.” He glanced at Nico and Ella. “If the two of you don’t mind, Chloe and I need to talk. Now.”

“Of course,” said Nico, leading Ella to the kitchen. “Come, Ella. I’ll make you a sandwich.”

“But I don’t need a sandwich.”

“Yes, you do. I’m a master grilled cheese maker. You’ll be impressed.”

“I do really like grilled cheese...”

“Of course, you do. Come now.”

After shooting me a concerned look, she followed him into the kitchen. I heard the soft murmur of their conversation as I sat in the chair closest to my dad’s wheelchair.

“What is it, Daddy?”

He reached out to touch my face, his eyes brimming with tears. “I’m so sorry, darling.”

“For what?” I asked, not wanting to assume anything. My father was acting like himself again. I couldn’t jinx it.

“For everything.” He shook his head, composing himself. “When we lost your mother, I went to a very dark place. I didn’t want to live, but I also didn’t want to die. Dying meant giving up, and I couldn’t do that to you and your sister. But I was weak. I didn’t have the strength to face life without her. She was my world, Chloe. The three of you meant everything to me, but she’d been my rock. I didn’t know how to function.”

“I know and I understand. You don’t have to explain.”

“But I do. It was all my fault. The money. The accident. I couldn’t face it. I was a coward. I wanted to hide from everything, including my own guilt. But there is no hiding from the truth.” He took a long breath. “I left you all alone. I deserted you when you needed me most.”

I squeezed his hand. “But you fought your way back to us, and you’re here now. Nothing else matters.”

He lifted my hand to his lips. “I don’t deserve either of you.”

I stood and gave him a hug. “That’s not true. We’re stronger together, Daddy.”

“The Burke family motto,” he said, with a soft laugh. He cupped my face in his hands. “And I promise I’ll be better from now on, my sweet girl. For you and your sister.”

“And for yourself as well. We need you and we love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too, pumpkin.”

The doorbell rang. Ella skipped out of the kitchen to answer it, nibbling on the last bite of a grilled cheese sandwich, and came back with a package in her hands. The package, wrapped in brown paper, looked an awful lot like one of my favorite things in the world—a shoebox.

“It’s for you, Sissy,” said Ella, handing it to me with a confused frown on her face. “It came for you by special courier from London.”

Nico joined us as I sat back down in the chair next to my father and began to remove the paper. “From London? Really?” Peeling it away, I immediately recognized the elegant, silver logo, my eyes widening in surprise. “Jimmy Choos? Who sent me a pair of Jimmy Choos?”

Nico lifted both his hands in surrender. “It wasn’t me. I swear.”

“Then who—”

“Open the box, silly,” said Ella. “There is no return address, so that’s the easiest way to find out. Also, I want to see the shoes.”

“Fine, Miss Bossy Pants.”

When I lifted the lid, I gasped in surprise. Inside were the most perfect, gorgeous, sparkly shoes I’d ever seen in my life. They glittered in the light from the setting sun shining through our window.

I covered my mouth with one hand. “Are you sure I didn’t die?” I asked Nico. “Because I think I’m in heaven. Oh, my goodness. They are so beautiful it almost hurts to look at them, but who could have sent them?”

“Maybe if you read the note, we can find out,” said Ella.

“Note?” I asked, unable to tear my gaze away from the shoes.

She rolled her eyes and handed me a thick, ivory envelope. “Seriously, Sissy. You are easily distracted when it comes to Jimmy Choos.”

I hadn’t even seen the note. I’d been too mesmerized by the beautiful footwear.

“Thank heavens that is the case,” said Nico. When we stared at him in confusion he smiled. “If you hadn’t been distracted by the Jimmy Choos a month ago on your way to work, Alex would have been shot, and we never would have met.”

“You’re right,” I said, tearing open the envelope. “My shoe obsession saved the day.”

Ella climbed onto the arm of my chair. “What does the note say?”

My eyes scanned the page, and I gasped. “It’s from Jimmy Choo himself. This is his new design. He’s calling it ‘The Chloe,’ and asks if I’d accept this pair of shoes as a thank you for inspiring women everywhere to be brave, beautiful, and still recognize the power of a good pair of shoes.”

I hugged the note to my chest. Then I hugged the shoes to my chest and kissed them before slipping them onto my feet. I couldn’t stop staring at them.

“I have these beautiful, incredible shoes. I have my father back. I have my darling sister, and I have you, Nico. I thought I was a disaster magnet, but I feel like the luckiest person in the whole world.”

My father reached out and put a hand on my cheek like he had when I was a girl. “Enjoy the shoes, Chloe,” he said. “But no more saving princes. Please. You need a new hobby.”

I shrugged, my gaze still glued to the shoes. “Well, it beats quilting.”

My father laughed, an actual real laugh. Then he nodded to Nico. “I owe you a huge debt. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure, sir.”

My dad wheeled himself to his room. Ella went off to her room to call her friends. I watched them go, so happy I thought I might burst.

“Things are going to be alright, aren’t they?” I asked, tears in my eyes.

“They’ll be more than alright,” said Nico, kissing the top of my head. I let out a yawn, still exhausted from my ordeal. Without a word, Nico swept me into his arms. I sighed and nestled against him, lifting my leg so I could continue to admire my sparkly, gorgeous shoes.

“You don’t have to carry me. I can walk, you know.”

“I know, but you don’t have to do everything yourself. Not anymore.”

He took me to my room and put me gently onto the bed. After removing my shoes and placing them carefully on my nightstand, he covered me with a soft blanket before lying down next to me. We faced each other, both of us resting on our sides, and I touched his cheek.

“You don’t have to do everything yourself now either.”

He turned his face to kiss my palm. He treated me like a gift. A treasure. I didn’t know if I’d ever get used to it, but I planned to try. He gazed into my eyes.

“Taking care of you is a full time job, but I rather like doing it. Is there any chance I could have the position on a more permanent basis?”

I bit my lip; my heart so full of love for this man I thought it might burst. “I want to see your resume first.”

He lifted one dark eyebrow. “My CV?”

I giggled at the expression on his face. “And I’ll need some references.”

“I’ll be certain to provide them. That won’t be a problem.”

“Oh, Nico.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his arrogant nose, his strong jaw, and his sweet, extremely kissable lips.

“Chloe,” he said, between kisses. “Do I need to remind you that your father is in the other room?”

“The door is closed,” I said. “It’s fine.”

“I intend to do things properly,” he said.

“So do I.” I sat up, intending to kiss him some more but moved too quickly. My head swam and I winced. “Ow.”

Nico responded with a frown. “Do I have to remind you of the fact that you were shot today?” he asked, adjusting my pillows, and forcing me to lie back down.

“Do I have to remind you that for this relationship to succeed, we need to be open and honest with each other?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I want to kiss you. Now. I’m being open and honest.”

He touched the tip of my nose with his. “We have plenty of time for that later, my love,” he said, wrapping his arms around me and holding me close. “But right now, you need to rest.”

I put my arm around his waist and snuggled against him. “Fine. But we should talk.”

“About what?”

“Your royal lineage. Are you seriously a count?”

“Yes. Does it matter?”

“No, but it does explain the arrogance and your aristocratic attitude.” I laughed at the expression on his face. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I didn’t even think of it. I only use my title in Latovia. It’s basically meaningless here.”

“But you could have told me you were Alex’s cousin. I thought you were his security guard.”

“I’m both, but I prefer to keep the personal and professional aspects of my life separate. I own a company that provides security services.”

“So, you put yourself in danger like this all the time?”

“No. I specialize in cybersecurity, but, occasionally, there is a client who requires other services as well. I’m not usually in the field. I have a nice desk in a lovely office only a few blocks away, and I’ve never been shot—unlike you, Ms. Burke.”

“Thank goodness. I’m not sure I could handle you getting shot at all the time. It’s extremely worrisome.”

“Now you understand how I feel. I can’t turn around without you getting into trouble. You need constant supervision.”

He leaned closer and kissed me, gently and sweetly, the way he always did. I smiled at him, never so happy in my life. Everything had finally come together. My father had returned. Ella was doing well. Georgie had embarked on a new career. Jimmy Choo named his newest Cinderella-style shoe after me, and I planned to publish my life story with Burke Books. But, most importantly, I now had Nico, the person I wanted more than anything.

“Well, Monsieur le Comte. So do you. You’re a royal pain in my bottom, but I kind of like having you around.”

I wasn’t the same person anymore. I was changed, forever, by a shot in the butt and by my feelings for this impossible and yet perfect man. As I began to fall asleep, wrapped in the safety of his strong arms, he said the words I longed to hear.

“I love you, Chloe Burke. With all my heart. I never want to let you go. I want to hold you like this forever.”

“That’s what I want too. Because I love you more than anything, Nicolai Mercia,” I said, putting my hand on his cheek, and staring deep into his fathomless eyes. “Even a pair of Jimmy Choos.”

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About the Author

Abigail Drake is the award-winning author of seventeen novels, but she didn't start her career in writing. She majored in Japanese and economics in college, and spent years traveling the world, collecting stories wherever she visited. She collected a husband from Istanbul on her travels, too, and he happens to be her favorite souvenir.

Abigail is a coffee addict, a puppy wrangler, and the mother of three adult sons. To learn more about Abigail, please visit her website: <http://www.abigaildrake.net>



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