

Chapter One

If Nina Abrahams hadn't been fired this morning, she never would have said yes. At least, that's what she told herself. Her face flushed with the humiliating memory: standing alone in front of Pablo's massive I'm-obviously-compensating-for-something desk and realizing no one had backed her, Pablo's smug face as he uttered the words his Napoleonic ego had been squirming to say for weeks, the sympathetic stares of her staff as she packed up her stuff, and the guilty absence of those who'd sworn to stand by her, but who'd evidently caved somewhere between vigorous nods in her attorney-general moment—*Pablo is stealing money from you, he's exploiting you, enough's enough, we shouldn't let him get away with it*—and the sobering reality of monthly bills that needed to be paid.

As if Mondays weren't bad enough.

As the credits for another *Grey's Anatomy* episode rolled onto the screen, Nina blew her nose, dug out the remote from under a throw pillow, and hit the Mute button. She checked the time: 5:00 p.m. After being thrown out of the restaurant, she'd spent the day stretched out on her couch, working her way through copious amounts of Coke and corn chips while she watched impossibly attractive doctors tear into each other and their patients.

Her phone rang, and she glanced at the screen: Lucas. Not Pablo, the Uruguayan chef turned restaurateur, admitting to a colossal mistake in firing her, begging her forgiveness and offering her and the rest of the staff at Mateo's Grill a threefold pay increase. That was

Fantasy Number Two. Lucas had taken the number one spot years ago, and it had never changed.

Sitting upright, Nina cleared her throat of the residues of a crying jag. “Lucas,” she answered lightly.

“So there’s a charity fundraiser this Saturday,” he said by way of greeting.

“No, no, and no,” Nina said. And then, as though Lucas was hard of hearing, which she knew he was not, just hard on resolve, she said again, “Definitely, no.”

“It’s for charity.”

“Still no.”

“The tickets cost me five hundred dollars. Each.”

She rolled her eyes, which only magnified her headache. That was a bodyguard for you. Trained to think of all the angles. “You can afford seven hundred.”

“Think of the kids in Zambia,” Lucas said. “They walk two hours every day to get fresh water. This will give them a tap right in their village.”

She frowned at her phone. And at the man who called himself her friend on the other end of the line. “Low blow, Lucas.”

“Did it work?” he asked hopefully. “Can you get someone to cover for you Saturday night?”

She’d been fired, so that wasn’t an issue, but she wasn’t ready to tell him. Not yet. She couldn’t cope with the resulting lecture—and there most certainly would be a lecture filled with uninteresting words like “prudence” and “responsibility” and “discretion.” Unlike the satisfying words she’d tossed at her ex-boss this morning: cretin, thief, bully.

“Saturday night?” she asked, considering. “You must be desperate.”

“Desperate enough to continue begging, if that would help.”

She laughed. And that was when she found herself saying yes.

Lucas gave a satisfied whoop. “Thank you. I owe you one.”

Add it to the tally, she thought, suppressing a sigh.

Wedging the phone between her shoulder and ear, Nina stood and stretched out too many hours of lying curled around comfort food. Finding a Doritos snagged on her pajama top, she absently pulled it free and bit into it.

There was a charged silence. “What was that noise?” Lucas asked suspiciously.

She swallowed. Quickly. “Noise? What noise?”

“Are you eating chips?”

“What?”

“You are,” Lucas accused. “You’re eating chips! Doritos, I bet.” She heard him give a loud sniff. “I can smell them.”

“As if,” Nina scoffed, and then groaned as she realized how neatly she’d fallen into his trap.

“What happened?” Lucas demanded.

“What makes you think something happened?”

“The last time you binged on junk food, that lowlife of the unmentionable name had just dumped you and you single-handedly upped Doritos’s profit margin.”

A half chuckle, half sob escaped her. “Objection to the word *dumped*,” she said, and burst into tears.

“Nina Sarah Abrahams,” Lucas said, drawing out her name in warning. “You better not be watching something sad and romantic.”

She hiccupped out a “Talking to you...so not watching...at this very moment.”

“Why do you do it?” he asked in exasperation. “Why do you torture yourself like this?”

“Meredith and Derek are never going to get it right!” she wailed.

“*Grey’s Anatomy*? Seriously?” Lucas’s sigh was heavy. “I’m coming over. You better not drink all the Coke.”

#

Lucas lived in an apartment in the city, as did she. That was where the similarity ended, though. Lucas owned an expansive three-bedroom apartment in a trendy residential tower; she managed in a shabby one-bedroom in one of the city’s dodgier areas. Lucas’s building was upscale, flashy, and boasted its own gym and indoor pool. Her building...well, at least it had an elevator and hot water.

They lived close enough so that whenever he was away on a job, she could water the herb pots he wouldn’t give up on, collect his mail, and sneak in a few laps in the communal pool. And perhaps, now and then, open the drawers in his bedside cabinet and rummage through the contents. It was an urge she didn’t indulge in too often, because the guilt trip afterward wasn’t worth it. Besides, Lucas never left anything around worth finding. A few years ago, he’d been in charge of the protection detail of a prominent but now disgraced sports star. He’d learned from the mistakes of his client.

It would take Lucas roughly twenty minutes to drive to her place. Twenty minutes to splash her face, dab on a bit of makeup, and pick up the detritus of her six-hour pity party: corn chips scattered like grenade fragments, empty glasses and sodden tissues littering the carpet.

Nina sorted herself out first. Priority number one was brushing her teeth, because after consuming nearly a liter of soda, she could practically feel her molars growing cavities the size of craters.

After applying a quick coating of mascara, she ran a brush through her dark, copper-highlighted hair and tied it up in a high ponytail, aiming for the jaunty, sporty look. *See, look at me, still going for gold!* She was thankful for her coloring. Olive skin and dark eyes meant she didn't look washed out, even though inside she was hitting the spin cycle.

She stacked the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, vacuumed the carpet, and folded away the blanket she'd been buried in for most of the day. A quick glimpse of her reflection in the TV screen reminded her with a jolt that she was still in the comfort pajamas she'd put on as soon as she'd arrived home. She hurried to her bedroom to change, but halted abruptly.

What am I doing?

Her mind flicked to the makeup she'd applied, the frantic tidying up. She bit her lip. Why was she trying so hard to impress him? Nina didn't like this occasional detached glimpse of herself: a back wheel caught in a rut, revving herself up only to end up sinking deeper into the mud, making it so much harder to free herself.

Her intercom buzzed just as she remembered she possessed a spine. She picked up the entry phone. "Lucas?"

"Yep."

She pressed the button to let him into the building. A few minutes later, there was an impatient knock, and Nina drew back the bolts and opened the door. Lucas stood in the hallway, hands in the pockets of his black jacket, cheeks flushed from the crisp air.

Her chest ached at the sight of him. His tall, wide-shouldered build dominated her doorway. Even standing still, he carried himself with the assurance of a man who'd been trained to handle risky situations. She loved that confidence in him.

"You didn't check the peephole," he said.

She raised surprised eyes to his. "You can't know—"

"I know, Nina." One eyebrow lifted coolly. "What if I were some psycho stalker?"

She tilted her head to one side and made a show of looking him over: dark dress jeans, cashmere sweater under the designer jacket, Italian shoes. “A stalker dressed like he’s stepped off the runway? Really?”

“Come on, Nina, evil comes dressed in all forms. You know that.” After a pause, he said, “But those pj’s are evil all on their own.”

“Hey, it’s Einstein! He rocks,” she protested.

He winced. “Not on clothes. Never on clothes.” He motioned to the doorway she was absently blocking. “Let me in before someone sees you.”

“You mean, before someone sees *you* with me.” With a sweeping gesture, she stepped aside, acknowledging on a sigh, “I know I need to be more careful. I’ll check my peephole from now on.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Lucas stepped inside, and she shut the door. Peeling off his jacket, he turned to face her, but didn’t move from the entrance hall. That eyebrow lifted again. Nina was overcome by the urge to shave it.

“Forgetting something?” he asked.

She set her hands on her hips. “I have a trained and possibly armed bodyguard in my apartment. Why would I need to bolt my door?”

His gaze was steady. “For those times when that trained and currently unarmed security specialist is not around. Habits, Nina.”

Yeah, annoying ones like nagging. “All right, Dad, locking us in,” she said. “Locking us in so that when my hair straightener catches alight and the fire spreads and we’re both unconscious from the heat and smoke, no one can open the door to rescue us.”

Laughter flickered in his green eyes. “And the odds of that happening are?”

“Probably the same odds of a psycho stalker seeing me in my Einstein pj’s and being overcome by murderous lust,” Nina replied as she bolted the lock on her door, the one Lucas had installed the day she’d moved in.

Lucas followed her inside to the living room. She watched his eyes make a quick sweep of the area before moving over her in that same assessing mode: eyes red and swollen from crying—check. Pj’s on alarmingly early in the evening—check. Female employing sarcasm to disguise the fact that she’s hanging on by a thread—check.

Resentment rose up inside her, but before it could spill over, Lucas closed the distance between them and gathered her into a hug. With her cheek pressed against his broad chest, his heart beating steadily in her ear, feeling the solid strength of his arms around her, Nina knew this was why she put up with his fault-finding protectiveness and the sometimes unbearable pain of platonic ignorance.

Her arms looped tightly around his back, and she closed her eyes and lost herself in the moment. *A good end to a really crappy day.* After a while, Lucas patted her shoulder blade. Cue received, she stepped back.

“Coke?” she asked.

“I’ll help myself.”

He poured himself a small measure of Coke and took a sip. He drank more in commiseration with her, Nina knew, than a desire for the sugary drink. Lucas was careful about what he put into his body. He had a training regimen that punished his body, but he typically didn’t punish it further with junk food.

Resting a hip against the counter edge, Lucas eyed her over the rim of the glass. “What’s going on?”

She tried to sound nonchalant, but couldn’t help the crack in her voice when she blurted out, “Pablo fired me.”

He straightened. “When?”

“This morning,” she said, slumping onto a barstool. “Called me into his office and gave me the news. Told me I had to leave straight away.”

“You got fired this morning,” Lucas said, “and you were planning on calling me when?”

She mumbled, “Probably when I’d finished all the Doritos.”

“Nina, this is...what?...the seventh job you’ve had—”

She held up an index finger, stopping him midsentence. “Not what I need from you right now, Lucas Wilson,” she said. “If I wanted a lecture, I’d call my mother, who has a PhD in the field of Disappointing Daughter.” And who wouldn’t miss the opportunity to also bring up her daughter’s sorry succession of short-term relationships. Another area of her life that lacked staying power and invited criticism.

Nina banged a fist on the counter. “C’mon, you know what I want.”

Lucas pulled up a stool and straddled it, resting his forearms on the chair back. “Pablo is a short, rat-faced, selfish, greedy fraudster,” he provided dutifully. “He doesn’t deserve you. He never deserved you. Your talent was wasted in his poor excuse of a restaurant.”

She smiled and said softly, “Thank you.”

“You want me to rearrange his nose?”

“It would improve his face, but why give it to him for free? Let him pay to have it done.”

Lucas was silent for a beat, as if weighing the impact of his next words. At last, he said, “You can’t take on everyone, Nina. You can’t fight every injustice. Your résumé can’t handle it.”

She stiffened. Of all the things she expected him to say, that was never on the list. Struggling to speak through the disappointment seeping into her, she said, “Pablo was filling out fake skills certificates for the waitstaff, all migrant workers, in return for exorbitant sums of money. He was bullying them, exploiting the fact that they’re so desperate for permanent

residency, they'll take whatever injustice he dishes out. What did you expect of me, Lucas? That I'd stay silent, keep my head down, make sure I was okay, and ignore the misery of everyone else?"

A pained grimace crossed Lucas's face. "All right, time to help your crusader conscience off the podium." His calm gaze didn't waver when he said evenly, "There are Pablos wherever you go. Little toads carving out their kingdoms on the backs of others. Too often, I'm protecting those toads. I'm required to put the lives of my men on the line for them." He raked his fingers through his hair, no doubt in an effort to stop them from shaking some sense into her. "Some fights you need to let go."

"I couldn't let this one go."

A mix of concern and frustration sharpened his voice. "You can never let any of them go. And it's costing you."

"Exactly, it's costing *me*, not *you*. Stop interfering."

When she saw the hurt in his face, remorse rolled over her. She was a horrible person. The moment Lucas had learned she was having a bad day, he'd come straight over. Her closest friend—*call it as it is, Nina*—was only trying to help, and here she was, sneaking sniper shots at him.

"Sorry," she whispered.

A beat of silence passed before Lucas said, "I'd be a poor friend if I wasn't honest with you."

"I know," she responded, "and that's a character trait of yours I really do appreciate, but right now, Lucas...right now, I'll take empathy over honesty."

His brow creased. "Uh, I believe that falls in the mysterious realm of female friendship."

"Hey, you badgered me into window-dressing duty for your charity function. It's only fair you bear the burden of sobbing-on-shoulder duty."

His eyes widened. “You’re over the sobbing part, though. Right?”

“I’m sure I could squeeze out a few more tears,” she said cheerfully.

“Don’t exert yourself on my behalf.”

She stretched her arms above her head. “Fortunately for you, I’m pretty much all cried out.”

“My very expensive sweater thanks you. Any idea which restaurants you’ll apply to?”

“I’ll start looking tomorrow.”

“You’ll find something. You’re the best front-of-house manager I know.”

Her chin dropped to her chest while her finger glumly bullied a water droplet on the countertop. “Let’s hope someone else recognizes that.”

“Nina.” The forceful way Lucas uttered her name had her head jerking up. Affection softened his features and caused her throat to tighten. “Your confidence has taken a knock, but don’t you dare doubt yourself. One day, you’ll own your own restaurant, you’ll pay your workers a fair wage, and you’ll run your place the way you want.”

Nina could feel her cheeks coloring as embarrassment crept in, Lucas’s rebuke hitting home and snapping her out of her funk. He was right. How many ways did she want Pablo the Toad to win here? Sitting up straighter, she smiled her thanks at him. “You’re forgetting rave reviews from top food critics and the line of people queuing up outside for a table,” she murmured, basking in the dream.

“That sounds more like it.”

“I’ll have to hire you as a bouncer.”

“Nina, please. That word is never to be mentioned in my presence.”

She laughed at the disdain in his voice. “Snob,” she teased. She stretched out her legs, pointed and flexed her sock-clad feet. “What about you? You on assignment at the moment?”

He shook his head. “I’m out of the field this week.”

“That explains the unshaven look you’ve got going.”

He rubbed a hand over his stubble. “It’ll be gone soon. A job’s coming up out of state where we have to babysit a diplomatic delegation.”

“Diplomats,” she said. “Your favorite.”

“At least they’re one step up from rock stars.”

“I can only imagine. So the terrorist threat is still high?”

“High enough for the government to want a visible display of security.”

“When do you leave?” she asked.

“Sunday.”

“How long?”

“Four days.”

She nodded. Lucas was thirty years old and ran a successful close-protection agency. He had twelve people working for him, but he still opted to take on many of the high-profile jobs where he could sometimes be away for weeks at a time.

Lucas stood, rotated his shoulders. “Feeling better?”

“I believe I’m all done with wallowing.” She got to her feet. “Lucas, I really appreciate you coming over.”

He hooked an arm around her neck and planted a friendly kiss on her forehead. “Hey, you’d do the same for me. Buddies forever, remember?”

As if she could ever forget. When Lucas looked at her, it was through the lens of the past. A lens he couldn’t seem to shake off. She’d first met Lucas when he’d been placed in her brother Ryan’s class in first grade, where he and Ryan had hit it off immediately. Over the years, Lucas became a near-permanent presence in their home, shooting hoops with Ryan, conducting science experiments in the backyard, and blitzing through multiplication

worksheets at their dining room table. And because Nina adored her brother, she had no choice but to form a cautious and slightly uneasy alliance with his best friend.

Her primary school years were defined by Lucas and Ryan doing their best to capitalize on her ingrained desire to please. They roped her in to be their target in paintball wars, the ball girl in their tennis matches, and the fielder tasked with retrieving the ball. And then she hit high school and wised up and said that fetching their own balls would be good practice in growing some.

Unfortunately, the moment she hit high school she also transitioned into full-nerd mode, her frizzy hair, spotty skin, and studiousness all radiation-warning signs to classmates with no interest in exposure to contamination. To add to her social quarantine, she'd been acutely self-conscious about her developing body, hiding it in shapeless clothing that got her stuck with the nickname *Bag Lady*.

Lucas and Ryan had no such problems in high school. The two of them grew into teenagers with an appealing blend of good looks, intelligence, and athleticism that slotted them into the popular group at school. Mercifully, Ryan went out of his way to include and protect her, and Lucas automatically adopted the role of Brother Number Two. A role he'd never moved on from.

"Want to stay and watch a movie?" she asked, trying to stifle a yawn. "No chick flick, I promise."

"You're hitting a sugar low," he said. "You should go to bed."

"All I need is a cup of coffee and I'll get my second wind."

"Tonight's out. I'm meeting Sally for dinner."

Right. Sally. Blonde, leggy, beautiful, Taekwondo instructor, hopeful contender for a weighted ring finger and oblivious destroyer of Fantasy Number One.

“Enjoy,” Nina said brightly, tucking her disappointment away in small pieces to burn later in her bonfire of stupidity. Because she might not have her own restaurant or a husband or a luxurious apartment, but she did have the cold comfort of her pride. And there was no way she would ever let Lucas see how she hurt over him. “Where are you meeting her?”

“Lepilio’s.”

“Avoid the calamari. They always overcook it.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

“You could always invite Sally to the fundraiser,” Nina suggested, unashamedly fishing as she walked him to the door.

Lucas shot her a look that said she should know better. “That would give Sally the impression we’re in some sort of a relationship.”

“Which you’re not.”

“No.”

Alongside the rush of relief, there was a tug of pity for the woman. A minuscule tug, but still. “And you don’t think Sally is already under that assumption?”

“No,” he maintained, frowning, but she could see him warily circling that thought as he shrugged on his jacket. For a bodyguard trained to be observant, he was woefully blind when it came to matters of the heart. Exhibit A: Nina Sarah Abrahams.

“What’s the dress code for Saturday?” she asked. “Smart casual?”

“Uh,” Lucas said guiltily, opening her door and angling most of his body out, “the fundraiser is a black-tie gala. Knowing your closet, you probably need to shop for a dress.”

“What? WHAT!” Nina yelled, but it was too late. Lucas had already shut the door and made his escape.