

## Chapter One

While yakking into her cell phone with her massage therapist, my sister Libby walked out into traffic and got herself hit by a Rolls-Royce.

It happened during a heat wave so unbearable a dozen water mains had burst all over Philadelphia, and cabdrivers reverted to their native languages to scream at one another. Libby decided her recovery depended on her moving from the hospital into the peace and quiet of a luxury suite at the Ritz-Carlton. The mysterious owner of the Rolls insisted upon paying, and the suite was full of flowers and restorative chocolate when we arrived.

“Nora, you’ll take care of my children while I recover, won’t you? I’m sure they’ll be no trouble at all.”

Struck dumb by the terror her hyperactive monsters could cause during a heat wave, I watched while Libby stripped off most of her clothes, slipped into the fluffy

white robe provided by the hotel and arranged herself on the king-sized bed like a determined Vegas gold digger awaiting a randy billionaire.

She looked nothing like a woman with a head injury. In fact, I still wasn't sure she'd actually suffered any injuries at all. I had arrived at the hospital too late to hear an official diagnosis, but she seemed indecently robust at the moment.

She poufed her auburn hair, opened the first box of chocolate truffles and deeply inhaled their seductive aroma. "You don't mind babysitting, right? I need serenity. The charming neurologist was adamant about that. You heard him, didn't you?"

I had indeed heard rest prescribed for my sister by a doctor who seemed interested in palpating more of her as soon as his shift ended. But perhaps I was the one who needed to have my head examined, because I agreed that her five children could stay with me at Blackbird Farm until she felt better.

"But only until Friday," I said firmly. "I'm supposed to cover the Chocolate Festival Gala that night, not to mention four parties for the Fourth of July on Saturday. I can't miss any of them. I'm serious, Lib. I'm still on probation at the newspaper. If I blow these assignments, I could lose my job once and for all."

"That awful job! It was so much more convenient when you were unemployed, Nora."

"And broke, you mean?"

"Details, details!" She caught sight of my expression. "Oh, all right. I'll be good as new by Friday."

"Promise?"

She looked good as new already. Maybe better. Being half-naked always gave her a glow. She said, "I promise."

I checked my watch. "I was supposed to meet with my editor an hour ago. Maybe he's still in his office."

"Yes, run along." She yawned prettily. "Just remember, Maximus is at a crucial developmental stage. So keep the binky out of his mouth and practice his language skills. Even though I'm opposed to formal education, it can't hurt if he gets into Yale someday."

"Libby, he's eight months old. His favorite toy is his own penis. He's a long way from Yale."

"I know several Yale graduates, and their favorite toys are still their penises. Just sing the ABC song once in a while, please? Or conjugate some verbs." She collapsed against the mound of pillows. "I need a nap. It's impossible to get any rest in a hospital. Before you go, will you slip down the hall and bring me some ice, darling? And pull those curtains? Do you think this hotel has a masseur on staff?"

Because I was actually happy to see her alive after the Rolls-Royce scare, I drew the draperies, filled the ice bucket and gave Libby a cool cloth to press to her not-so-fevered brow. When I slipped out the door, I distinctly heard her pick up the phone and say, "Room service? Will you send up a bottle of chilled champagne right away? And two glasses, please!"

Only Libby could find a date in a psych ward.

I took the elevator down to the sweltering street and pulled out my cell phone to contact my editor. He was out until three, I was told. A slight reprieve. So I tried calling

our sister Emma for the third time since I'd been summoned to spring Libby from the hospital. But Emma didn't answer her phone. Again.

I hadn't seen my little sister in ages, and such an extended absence didn't bode well. Left unsupervised a few weeks ago, she had run off to Atlantic City with Jon Bon Jovi's roadies. Heaven only knew what kind of trouble she could get into during a heat wave.

With Emma on my mind, I began the arduous trek back to the Pendergast building and my job at the Philadelphia *Intelligencer*. I had my weekly column to finish and phone calls to make to finalize arrangements for all those Fourth of July parties. But the intense heat that radiated up from the sidewalk nearly melted the soles of my Kate Spade sandals, and after four blocks I lost my determination. The city smelled of hot asphalt and garbage, and the howling of horns and enraged drivers started my head pounding. I was wilting faster than cheesesteaks on a griddle.

And besides, I suddenly had an idea where I might find Emma.

So I stopped at a trendy Broad Street oasis.

It was an upscale restaurant, popular with theater-goers in the evening, but crowded with bankers and lawyers from the financial district during the lunch hour. A sizable contingent of reporters hung out there, too, ears to the ground. Several tables hummed with the low-pitched rumble of wheeling and dealing.

A very married news anchor sat at the bar, sucking down his first scotch and water of the day. Beside him, a pretty summer intern spun on the barstool, showing off her legs. A tableful of bankers leaned their heads together as if plotting a financial coup.

I ordered an iced tea and snagged a seat at the end of the bar, near the window so I could keep an eagle eye out for Emma.

“Nora? Is that you?”

Crewe Dearborne got up from a secluded table and came over to the bar.

Rich enough to be a dilettante, Crewe had instead turned an appreciation for the finer things in life into a career as the restaurant critic for the city’s most respected newspaper. His opinions on food and drink made him a tastemaker for readers and restaurateurs alike. Today he had a sheaf of notes in his breast pocket and a dish of mixed berries in one hand. His thinning fair hair spilled over an aristocratic forehead and the regal Dearborne nose.

He also wore a false mustache, wire-rimmed glasses and a light seersucker suit.

“Good heavens, Crewe, you look like a nephew of Colonel Sanders.”

“I’m in disguise. I understand the chef has my picture on the refrigerator with a target drawn on my forehead. Mind if I join you?”

He set his dish on the bar. The berries were drizzled with a vintage balsamic vinegar, dark as chocolate. It was the sort of piquant treat enjoyed by sophisticated palates on a hot afternoon.

I avoided contact with his bristly moustache as I gave Crewe a kiss on the cheek. “Your identity is safe with me. How on earth can you look so cool on a day like this?”

“Restaurants are the new theater, Nora, and I’ve got a front row seat. I’ve been here in the air-conditioning for hours. You look lovely today, by the way. You have quite a glow.”

Desperate to dig something cool out of my closet that morning, I had slipped into a Lilly Pulitzer sheath printed with ladybugs---inappropriate dress for the workplace, but infinitely more comfortable than a business suit during a heat wave. “That’s sweat, darling.” Using a cocktail napkin, I dabbed my forehead. “I thought my sister Emma might be hiding out here this afternoon. Have you seen her?”

“Quite a bit of her, in fact. Emma just stepped into the ladies room.”

“Good. That gives me time to cool off before we have a public fight.”

Crewe’s brows rose. “What’s going on?”

“A lack of family communication, that’s all. She bought several ponies to teach riding lessons at Blackbird Farm, then disappeared and left me the keeper of the animal kingdom.” As the bartender arrived with my iced tea, I said, “Thank you.”

While I drank deeply from the glass, Crewe watched me with his smile fading to concern. “How are you, Nora? Besides riding herd on the pony farm. Tell the truth.”

He kept his tone casual, but I knew his question was genuine. The two of us had been embroiled in an unfortunate business just a few weeks ago, and I still hadn’t quite recovered. I took a sip of my drink and forced my voice to sound steady. “I’m fine. Or giving my best impression, at least. I’m focusing on work. If only I can hike back to the office through all this heat.”

He smiled down at me. “Isn’t the Pendergast three blocks from here?”

“Today it feels like twenty miles. I’m thinking of hiring a camel.”

He laughed as he leaned against the bar beside my stool. “You’ll have to fight the tourists. With the Chocolate Festival going on, it’s gridlock all over the city—with or without camels.”

Although Crewe made small talk, he rested his hand on mine for an instant and squeezed, communicating how he sympathized with my rocky mental state. Between a couple of restrained blue bloods, his gesture was tantamount to a violent emotional display. My throat tightened abruptly.

I squeezed him back, then slipped my hand from Crewe's touch and took another thirsty gulp of the cold drink. "How's Lexie?"

I expected Crewe to smile. He had been dating my best friend Lexie Paine for over a month, and I thought their relationship had blossomed despite her long avowed reluctance to venture into a meaningful affair with any man. Lexie was happiest when dealing with financial transactions, not matters of the heart, but Crewe seemed to have melted her reserve. I thought they were on their way to becoming a blissful couple.

But Crewe's expression clouded.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Crewe said slowly. "You've known her longer than I have, Nora. Maybe you can tell me."

Lexie and I had met while still in diapers, and we'd grown up together. Our parents shared a Hamptons summer house, and we spent several hot Julys roaming the dunes and playing dress-up in her mother's closet. If I closed my eyes, I could still conjure up the mental image of skinny Lexie racing barefoot across the sand in her mother's best Vionnet nightie. We'd been playmates first, then roommates in boarding school, confidants for years ever since. I knew Lexie better than my own sisters, really. And for Lexie, I was the sibling she never had.

“Let’s see. I last spoke to her—oh, dear, it’s been over a week,” I said. “Come to think of it, she seemed a little distracted then.”

“She’s more than distracted now. She had her assistant cancel our dinner date last evening—couldn’t even make the call herself because of a problem at work. And when I telephoned later to say good-night, Lexie acted like I was a telemarketer trying to sell time shares.”

That was a surprise. Even on dire days when the stock market behaved like an Alpine skier plunging off an icy slope, Lexie always took the extra second to be unfailingly polite. I asked, “What kind of problem at work?”

“She didn’t say. She’s very secretive.”

“That comes with the territory, you know.”

Lexie had inherited a vast financial empire from her father and his various curmudgeonly business associates. Now she was the controlling partner in a firm that represented more billionaires than some of the biggest houses in New York. Wall Street bulls stopped snorting and listened carefully when she spoke. Her clients included ruthless tycoons, a handful of peripatetic European royals and a fair number of idiotic heiresses, who all depended on Lexie’s know-how to keep their investments secure and growing.

Crewe pushed his dish of berries away. “Yes, I know discretion is part of her job, but she seems genuinely upset. I thought the two of us had reached the point where we could confide in each other, but . . .”

“You’ve been very patient, Crewe.”

He allowed a rueful smile. “It hasn’t been easy.”

No, I was sure it had been excruciatingly difficult to convince Lexie to trust him. Their relationship had grown only in tiny increments. Lexie was too skittish to enter into an impulsive love affair. As a young teenager, she had been sexually assaulted by a cousin, and since then she had been unwilling---unable, really—to have a man in her life. Only Crewe’s gentle persistence had nudged Lexie toward a relationship that could be considered almost normal for her age.

“If something’s wrong at her office,” I said, “she’ll find a way to fix it. Then she’ll get back to you. Don’t give up on her. She’s worth it, you know.”

“I’ve been in love with her for ten years, Nora. I’m not quitting now, not when I’m this close.”

I raised my glass to him. “Good for you.”

“And how are you? Now that you and Mick are . . . ?”

“As good as can be expected. I’ve had my heart ripped out and handed back to me. So I’m a free woman. If you have a scholarly cousin, Crewe, or a friend who has a spare theater ticket, or maybe just a nice man with a few boring habits, why don’t you fix me up?”

“Nora.”

“I’m not kidding. I’m looking for a man who’s as dull as beans, please. Someone dependable and quiet. A Mr. Nice Guy.”

Quietly, Crewe said, “Mick’s not exactly a knight in shining Armani, but he’s good for you.”

I had fallen head over heels with the most unlikely man my friends could imagine. In fact, I’d taken a stroll down lover’s lane and gotten myself mugged by Michael

Abruzzo, the son of a New Jersey crime boss. He maneuvered his way into my life and made a wreck of it. No---that wasn't quite true. It had taken two of us to do the wrecking. I'd managed to live through my husband's murder, but even that emotional upheaval didn't compare with the earthquake Michael had caused.

"I can't be with Michael," I said.

"Baloney," Crewe said just as gently as before.

I drew my fingertips through the cool condensation created by my glass on the surface of the bar. "He's not like us, Crewe. His opinion of what's right and wrong . . . isn't mine."

"Are you worried that he's some kind of criminal?"

"I know he's a criminal. It's in his blood. And even though he fights it, it's like cocaine was to Todd." Seductive. And eventually all-consuming.

My first husband had gotten himself addicted to drugs while working in a research hospital, and his death—he'd been shot one horrible winter night by his coke dealer—had rocked my world. If it hadn't been for good friends like Lexie and Crewe, I might still be wallowing in the aftermath.

And then I allowed myself to get involved with Michael, whose addiction was different. And yet the same.

I said, "Anyway, he's the one who broke things off this time. Usually, he does that when there's something going on in his family."

"I heard his brother got arrested for stealing a tractor trailer."

"Really? That hardly seems terrible enough, but how would I know?"

"I'm sorry, Nora." Crewe looked genuinely dismayed. "I like Mick."

I gave up pretending. “I do, too.”

Most of the time, I loved him with all my heart. At other times I wondered along with a lot of people if perhaps Michael wasn’t some kind of psychopath—a man who could be charming one minute and a cold-blooded crook the next.

All I knew for certain was he kept many secrets.

From the back of the restaurant, we heard a door bang, and seconds later my little sister sauntered into the bar, blowing I-don’t-give-a-damn cigarette smoke.

One of the bankers sitting at the corner table stiffened at her approach, prepared to be electrocuted if she came too close. The rest of the men at his table suddenly quieted, as if a scene had already taken place before I arrived. I saw frowns cast my sister’s way.

Emma wore flipflops, a black t-shirt and a schoolgirl’s plaid skirt with the hem ripped out—an outfit that somehow had a certain streetwise chic, but also conveyed how much more spectacular her naked body could be. Her long, lithe thighs—tickled by the fringe of her skirt—glistened with a golden tan no doubt acquired by nude sun-bathing.

She flicked the banker’s ear as she walked past him. He winced and ducked in case Emma decided to hit him with something more painful. But she caught sight of me and grinned.

Crewe said, “She looks amazingly like someone I saw behind a window in Amsterdam the summer I finished prep school.”

I said, “Don’t give her any ideas.”

Pushing through the patrons along the bar, Emma came toward us, running one hand through the stiff tufts of her short auburn hair. Her slate blue eyes flickered with humor and malice. “Hey, Sis. Long time no see. How’s life in the slow lane?”

“Faster than usual. I tried to telephone you earlier.”

She shrugged and reached past me to surrender her cigarette to the bartender, who pointed out the *no smoking* sign. She said, “I threw my phone off a bridge.”

“Along with the rest of your clothes, I see. Can that skirt get any shorter?”

Emma laughed. “Since when did you become part of the Puritan Patrol? Hey, Crewe. Have any luck selling ice cream in that getup?”

Crewe smiled, unfazed. “Hello, Emma.”

With a nod of my head, I indicated the group of men at the corner table. “Since when did you start hanging out with bankers?”

“I’m not hanging out.” She took my iced tea and slugged it all in three gulps. “I’m adding to the ambiance.” She used her fingers to fish the slice of lemon from my drink.

“I tried calling you. Libby was hit by a car last night. You’ll be relieved to hear she was discharged from the hospital this morning.”

“Into your capable custody?” Emma put the empty glass back on the bar and proceeded to suck on the lemon.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I checked her into the Ritz-Carlton just an hour ago.”

“Who’s paying that bill? You? Or has Libby met another rich nutcase to support her luxury living?”

“A mystery man,” I said. “I haven’t met him, but he’s obviously trying to keep her from suing him. He’s the one who hit her with his car.”

“She going to be okay?”

“She seems better than okay. The prospect of a new boyfriend always gives her a new outlook on life. I was hoping you might lend a hand with the kids for a few days, though. The twins listen to you. How about it?”

“Sorry.” She chewed the sour pulp of the lemon without flinching. “I have a new job.”

Knowing that she had recently found work as the bouncer in an S and M club, I asked cautiously, “Doing what? Training horses, I hope?”

Emma’s true gift was training and riding Grand Prix show jumpers. But she shook her head. “I’m working the Chocolate Festival. Temping as an industrial model.”

“A what?”

“Like that gig I had at the auto show last year. Except I stand around handing out candy instead of pointing out the anti-lock brakes. I’ve never made so many people happy at one time, believe me. Everybody loves chocolate.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m glad to hear you’re employed.”

“Yeah, it seems I need the money.” She tossed the lemon on the bar.

“You mean, to feed all those ponies I’m looking after?”

“That. And I’ve got another little problem I need to solve.”

“What kind of problem?”

She smirked. “I’m suing Trojan.”

I saw the mad gleam in her eye, but still didn’t understand. “What are you talking about?”

“The rabbit died. Except they don’t use rabbits anymore. I got a test kit from the Rite Aid. And guess what? There’s a bun in my oven. A—oh, hell, I’m knocked up. It

was bound to happen eventually, right?” She laughed at my expression and pulled a tiny paper strip from the waistband of her skirt. She threw it onto the bar. “I found out this morning. Don’t look so shocked. Even I slip up once in a while.”

“Emma,” I said, hardly able to speak at all. The idea that my feral little sister was pregnant made my head spin.

And so soon after my own miscarriage, it felt like a knife in my ribs, too.

“Yeah, big mistake, right? I mean, what am I going to do with a kid? So it’s off to the clinic for me as soon as I can raise some cash.” She grabbed my wrist to check my watch. “I gotta run, as a matter of fact, or I’ll be late.”

“Late for what? Oh, Em, please—“

“I gotta get to work.” She tweaked Crewe’s cheek. “Good to see you, Crewsie. Stop by the Chocolate Festival, Nora. I’ll hook you up with some nice desserts.”

She strolled out into the heat without a backward look, leaving me to stare at the crumpled strip of paper on the bar.

Crewe said, “Is she drunk?”

“Loaded, I imagine.” I picked up her test strip. Two pink lines.