

CHAPTER ONE

PLEASE SAY SHE was not watching her boyfriend hit on another customer.

Okay, perhaps *boyfriend* was too strong a word. After all, she and Aiden had never said they were exclusive. Still, Chloe Abrams figured they were, at the very least, serious enough that he wouldn't pass his number to other women *while she was standing six feet away!*

Wasn't as though he couldn't see her. Last time Chloe checked, between her height, her heels and her hair, she stood above the crowd by a good couple inches. Yet there he was, flashing his heavy lidded smile at some blonde on the other side of the coffee bar, and Chloe would bet it wasn't because the woman had asked for an extra shot of syrup.

From behind her, she heard a chuckle. "I wondered when you'd catch on."

Great. As if the moment wasn't humiliating enough, the resident slacker decided to chime in.

"You know she's not the first one, right? Dude gives out his number more than directory assistance."

Chloe dug her nails into the strap of her designer handbag and pretended not to listen. A difficult task, since the slacker's voice had a silk-over-sandpaper quality that made him hard to ignore.

"Funny, he always gives out his number. He never asks the women for theirs. I can't figure out if it's because he thinks his company is that desirable or if it's because by having them call him, he gets off the hook for paying. You wouldn't want to weigh in, would you, Curlilocks?"

The strap on her bag crumpled, Chloe was squeezing so tightly. Problem with narrow city coffee shops was that it was hard to escape the crowd. In this case, the owner had crammed tables along the brightly colored walls, which meant that during the morning rush the patrons in line stood on top of those sitting down. The slacker had first appeared shortly after the new year. If she was being honest, *slacker* wasn't the right word, but she couldn't come up with anything better. Every time Chloe came in—which was obscenely often—she would see him nursing a cup of coffee. A permanent ginger-haired fixture. Sometimes he read. Other times, she'd spy him bent over a pile of paper, scribbling away. Rugged, unshaven, bundled in a worn leather jacket, his no-nonsense presence jarred with Café Mondu's trendy atmosphere. Usually he kept to himself. Until today, anyway.

"If you ask me," he continued in his quiet growl, "a woman like you could do a lot better."

Not really, Chloe thought, but she didn't feel like arguing the point.

“Your iced coffee is ready.” In an obvious show of female solidarity, the other barista called out Chloe’s order in an overly loud voice. First the slacker, now Aiden’s coworkers. Was there anyone who hadn’t noticed her humiliation?

“Thanks,” she replied. If the slacker wanted to assume the acknowledgment was for his comment, too, let him. Stepping toward the counter, she loosened her grip on her strap, the motion causing the leather satchel to slide downward slightly and brush the blonde’s hip. The woman stopped flirting long enough to glance over her shoulder. *That* got Aiden’s attention. He immediately looked in Chloe’s direction. And winked.

Winked! Un-freaking-believable. He could have at least looked embarrassed over getting caught. No, the jerk winked, as if she was in on the joke.

“You okay, Curlilocks?” the slacker asked.

Okay? Try furious. Discovering Prince Charming was a jerk, she could handle. She was used to jerks. But to have him make a fool of her in front of the slacker and everyone else in the place? No way.

“Excuse me,” she said, tapping the blonde on the shoulder, “but you’re going to want stand back.”

“Why?” the woman asked.

“Because of this.” She raised her drink over Aiden’s head and poured.

“What the—?” Coffee and ice streamed down the sides of the barista’s face, plastering his shiny black mane to his cheeks. He looked like a longhaired dog after a bath. Satisfaction gave a way better jolt than caffeine.

“He’s all yours, sweetie,” Chloe said, tossing a smile to the blonde. “I’ve got better things to do.” Turning on her heels, she marched to the front door.

The slacker rewarded her with a slow clap as she passed. “Well played, Curlilocks. Very well played.”

At least someone enjoyed the performance.

* * *

“You did not.” Larissa Boyd stared at her with wide-eyed admiration. “The entire iced coffee?”

“All twenty ounces,” Chloe replied. “I’ve got to tell you, those bangs don’t look nearly as sexy when dripping wet.” She sat back in her office chair, smiling with a boldness she didn’t truly feel.

“What did he do?”

“Nothing. He and his new friend were too stunned to speak. I think everyone in the shop was.”

Except, that is, for the slacker. She could still hear his applause.

“Too stunned to speak about what?” Delilah St. Germain’s ponytailed head poked around the cubicle wall. “I got your text. What happened?”

“Chloe caught Aiden passing his number to another woman, and dumped an iced coffee on his head.”

Delilah’s eyes widened to match Larissa’s. “You did not.”
“Is there an echo in here? Yes, I did. Blame temporary insanity.”

“No, insane was when you started dating the jerk. This, on the other hand... I’m impressed. You’ve got guts.”

Guts or really poor judgment? Chloe’s rebellious high had started to fade in favor of foolishness. Based on her friends’ awestruck expressions, they disagreed, so she kept up the facade. She was good at that: pretending to be unaffected. “I prefer to say I struck a blow on behalf of misled females everywhere.”

“Use whatever term you want. If I had been in your shoes, I wouldn’t have had the nerve.”

“Me, neither,” Larissa said.

They needn’t worry; neither of them would ever be in her shoes, and that wasn’t simply because they were both engaged to be married. To begin with, her friends attracted a different kind of man. Nice men who believed in calling women back. Neither of them would be impulsive enough to dump a cup of coffee over a guy’s head, because neither of them would be involved with a man jerkoffish enough to warrant the behavior.

Not that Chloe resented her friends’ happiness. On the contrary. She couldn’t be more happy. From the moment the three of them met at CMT Advertising’s new employee orientation, Chloe had recognized her two best friends were different than her. They were soft and lovable, with a smiling optimism she couldn’t muster if she tried. The two of them deserved all the happiness in the world.

“When you think about it, Aiden’s the one with the nerve.” Larissa’s voice dragged her back to the present. “Giving his number out when you were standing right there? What kind of guy does that?”

The kind of guy Chloe dated. “Apparently it wasn’t the first time, either. The slacker told me he’s a regular directory assistance.”

“Wait, who?” Delilah asked. She had a habit of tucking her hair behind her ear, a motion that caused her sinfully large diamond to sparkle as it caught the fluorescent lighting.

“The slacker. You’ve seen him. He sits at the front table every day.” She was met with blank looks. “Leather jacket? Buzz cut?” How could they not have noticed him? “No matter. He’s the one who told me Aiden writes his number on a lot of coffee cups.”

“You believed him?”

Oddly enough, yes. “No reason for him to lie.”

Delilah ran a hand around her ear again. “All the better you dumped his sorry behind, then. We never did think he was good enough for you.”

“Delilah’s right. Any guy who doesn’t appreciate you is a jerk. You can do better.”

“The slacker said the same thing,” Chloe muttered.

“The slacker has good taste,” Delilah stated.

She smiled. Naturally, her friends would rush to her defense, same as they did whenever her latest relationship went belly-up. Only Chloe knew the truth. That the betrayal wasn’t all Aiden’s fault. How could it be when she was the one genetically programmed to pursue doomed relationships?

Short-term Chloe, good for a few laughs, but not worth sticking around for. Good thing she didn’t expect more, or she’d have serious depression issues.

“Jerk or not, he was also my date for your wedding, Del.” The brunette’s wedding was two weeks away. She was marrying the head of their advertising agency in a black tie ceremony that would be filled with colleagues and society people. All of whom would have plus ones now, except for Chloe. She sighed. “Damn, but he would have looked good in a tuxedo.”

“A tuxedo you were paying for,” Larissa pointed out, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry; we’ll find you a proper date. One who can afford to pay his own way. I’m sure Tom has a friend.”

“Or Simon...”

“Absolutely not.” She’d rather go solo than take a blind date. Scrambling to find some stranger to take simply so she had a dance partner? Thanks, but she didn’t need another short-term deal right now.

“In fact,” she said, thinking aloud, “not having a date is a good thing. Now I don’t have to worry about entertaining anybody, and can focus on being the maid of honor. What if you have a bridal emergency? I’m supposed to be at your beck and call for anything you need.”

“You’re not funny,” Larissa said, narrowing her eyes. “Beck and call” had been an inside joke for months. Ever since Larissa got engaged and turned planning her wedding into her life’s work.

“Actually,” Chloe replied with a grin, “I am very funny.”

“Wait till you start planning your own wedding.

You’re going to want my help, and I’m not going to give you any.”

“Oh come on, La-roo, you and I both know I plan on being one of those inappropriate cougars who dates your son’s friends.”

Larissa folded her arms across her chest. “You would, too, just to get me, wouldn’t you?”

“You know it,” Chloe said with a cheeky grin. When discussing her love life, she was very good at playing the irreverent, cavalier friend. Only after Delilah and Larissa returned to their desks did she let herself give in to the hollowness plaguing her chest. She’d liked Aiden, dammit. So what if their relationship consisted mostly of meeting up at parties and clubs? Enough time had gone by that she’d started to think maybe he might be a guy who stuck around awhile. She should have known better.

Sooner or later all men left. After all, a person had to be worth sticking around for.

* * *

“Well, well, well, look who’s back. Should I grab my umbrella?”

The slacker’s gravelly greeting seemed to inch its way up Chloe’s spine, causing her to stiffen. Looking over at the front table, she saw him leaning back in his chair, a smile on his ginger-stubbled face. *You really need to find a better nickname*, she thought to herself. Smug Bastard might work today.

“I wouldn’t want to waste a good coffee,” she told him.

“Again,” he replied.

“Excuse me?”

“You mean you wouldn’t want to waste a good cup of coffee again. Though now that I think about it, you didn’t really waste yesterday’s drink, did you?”

Chloe narrowed her eyes. She was so not in the mood.

“Not a morning person, are we, Curlilocks?”

“Depends on the company.”

“Ouch.” He clutched his chest. “You wound.”

If only. She looked away, hoping he’d get the hint and stop talking. Being here was awkward enough without the commentary.\

He didn’t. “I’ve got to admit, I’m impressed. I wasn’t sure you’d be back.”

Neither was she, until she’d walked through the door. In fact, she’d stood on the corner for a good ten minutes, debating the decision, convinced the manager would toss her on the sidewalk the second she entered. Or worse, Aiden would throw an iced coffee in her face.

In the end, pride won out. Stopping for her morning iced latte had been part of her routine long before Aiden came into the picture. No way was she letting some two-timing coffee jerk change that.

“Why wouldn’t I come back?” she asked Slacker. He didn’t need to know about her indecision. “Like I said, they’ve got good coffee here.”

“Better than good, if you ask me.” To prove his point, he took a sip. Chloe noticed the side of his left hand already had ink smudges. Today was a note writing day, apparently.

“Although,” he added, once he’d swallowed, “if I were you, I’d ask another barista to wait on me. In case.”

“I’m not you,” she reminded him.

He surprised her by raking his eyes up and down her entire length. “That you’re not, Curlilocks,” he said with a rough-sounding growl meant to make her insides take notice.

Chloe’s hand flew to her abdomen. Something about the man’s voice managed to get beneath her skin. He knew it, too; his eyes gleamed with cockiness.

Keeping her head high, she headed to the register, where Aiden waited. “Hey,” she greeted.

“Good morning. May I take your order?”

That was it? Where was the glare? The terse words? *The recognition*? Surely she was worth some kind of reaction beyond a bland, generic greeting? “About yesterday...”

“Did you want a coffee?” The bland smile didn’t slip. He was, for all intent and purposes, treating her like a complete stranger. As inconsequential as an out-of-state tourist. Punching her in the stomach would have hurt less. “The usual.”

“Which is?”

The cut deepened. Chloe’s eyes started to burn. She quickly blinked. He did not deserve the satisfaction.

“The lady drinks iced peppermint mocha latte.”

Looking over her shoulder, she got a shrug from the slacker. “You know my order?”

“What can I say? Sit here long enough, you hear things.”

“Don’t you mean eavesdrop?”

His lips curled into a crooked smile. “Only on the interesting customers.”

“No offense, but that’s a little creepy.” Even if her stomach did flutter at the idea that she qualified as interesting.

“You say creepy; I say observant. Sort of a potato-potahto kind of thing. I like people watching.”

“Let me guess. You’re a writer.”

“If I am, then literature as we know it is in trouble,” he said, punctuating the remark with a low chuckle.

How on earth did Del and La-roo not notice him sitting there every day? Even as possibly crazy slackers went, the man stood out in a crowd. What, at first glance, looked like street scruff was really very controlled. His hair was shortly cropped, and his not quite red, not quite blond stubble looked more like he simply couldn’t be bothered with pulling out the razor than a lack of grooming. His battered jacket was similarly deceptive. Looking closer, she recognized what had been a very expensive piece of leather that had been worn till the thing molded to his broad shoulders. It reminded her of the basketball sneakers she couldn’t give up even after she could afford better ones.

“See anything you like, Curlilocks?”

Crap. Chloe turned back to the register, hoping she didn’t look too flustered. “I was admiring your jacket.”

His chuckle was low and raspy. "This old thing? I've had her for years."

Her? Much as she knew she shouldn't, Chloe took the bait. "You gave your jacket a gender?"

"Sure. Why let the big ticket items have all the fun?"

"Interesting point," she conceded. "I supposed you named her, too."

"Don't be silly. That would be crazy."

As opposed to this whole conversation.

Fortunately, Aiden chose that moment to return with her drink. "No need," he said, when Chloe reached for her wallet. "It's on the house."

"Seriously?" Didn't she feel like a heel now. Maybe she'd misjudged him *and* yesterday's situation. "That's really sweet of you."

"Don't thank me. I didn't do anything."

Her smile fell. "You mean you're not trying to apologize for yesterday?"

"Why should I apologize? I'm not the one who acted like a raving lunatic for no good reason."

No good reason? Chloe tightened her grip on the cup. He was lucky she didn't give him a repeat performance. "Who did then?" she asked, forcing herself to step back from the counter before she could give in to impulse.

The barista raised and lowered a shoulder. "Beats me. Note on the register says the next time you came in, your drink was free. Apparently someone appreciates acts of lunacy."

Chloe took another step back. The only people who knew what had happened were Larissa and Delilah, and as of last night, they'd vowed to boycott the café until "Aiden came to his senses."

"Must have been one of those random acts of kindness."

No, it couldn't be. A glance at the front table showed a definite sparkle in the slacker's ice-blue eyes.

"Why would someone pick me?" Particularly when she'd been rude to him? Regret stole at her insides.

Slacker leaned back, letting the hood of his sweatshirt become a gray cotton cowl around his neck. “Maybe that someone enjoyed seeing Don Juanista there get his comeuppance. I hear it took a couple hours to get the peppermint smell out of his luscious locks.”

A snort escaped before she could stop herself. Aiden was so vain about his hair.

“Too bad I didn’t snap a photo for the front bulletin board. I’m guessing there’s an awful lot of women who wished they could have seen karma bite ole’ Aiden in the rear.”

“I’m guessing you’re right.” The realization brought back yesterday’s humiliation in force. Meanwhile, back at the register, Aiden had turned his sights to another woman in line, his grease pencil seconds away from marking his digits at the base of her cup. “Doesn’t look like karma bit all that hard,” Chloe noted.

“Oh, but it will. You just wait. Ten years from now, that suffering musician look will have morphed into a receding hairline and a beer gut. Let’s see how many women want him writing his number on their cup then.”

Chloe swallowed another snort. “You paint an interesting picture.”

“Interesting? Or Satisfying?”

“Maybe a little of both.”

“Then my work here is finished.” Slacker grinned broadly, revealing a row of bright perfect teeth. He had freckles, too, Chloe realized. The slightest dusting across the bridge of his nose, along with a couple of faint scar lines. Rugged, weather-hewn. He’d had a run-in with karma himself, hadn’t he? Did he win or lose? Chloe wasn’t sure why, but she had a feeling he would come out victorious in any battle.

A jostle from behind brought her back to reality. The gathering crowd meant eight-thirty was getting close. “I better get going,” she told him.

“Already? The conversation was just getting interesting. Sure you can’t stick around?”

“Unfortunately, some of us have to work for a living.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she winced. Man buys her a cup of coffee and she insults him. *Insensitive, thy name is Chloe.*

“Just as well. I’ve got a meeting myself.”

Chloe didn’t call him on the obvious lie. “Do me a favor and if you see the ‘stranger’ who bought me the coffee, thank him, okay?”

“Sure thing. Enjoy drinking it—this time.” He winked.

Chloe squeezed her cup. Why'd he have to go and spoil a perfectly pleasant moment with a comment like that? Worse, why did her insides have to tap dance in response? She'd retort, but the words didn't want to come out. Snapping her jaw shut, she marched to the door, barely avoiding a collision with a cashmere overcoat as she rushed past.

* * *

Ian Black watched her exit with amusement. Kid was trying so hard not to look flustered. She had swagger, that's for sure, although Ian had known that long before she'd tipped coffee over the Irish Casanova's head. The way she strutted in here every morning with her high heels and that long curly hair every morning, as if she owned the damn shop... Bet she walked into the Empire State Building the same way. You had to admire her display of confidence, whether it was real or strictly for show.

Her cacophony of curls blew back from her face as she slipped through the front door, treating him to a glimpse of her tawny-skinned profile, a golden flash amid the early spring gray. For a tall woman, she had surprisingly delicate features. Like a Thoroughbred horse, she was lean and leggy. A damn attractive girl, and the barista was an idiot for not treating her better. Ian had been watching the two of them flirt for weeks, disappointed when he'd heard Aiden say they were "hooking up." Ian had hoped the swagger meant she knew better.

Thankfully, she'd come to her senses. Then again, let he who wasn't guilty of bad judgment cast the first stone. Sure wouldn't be him, that's for certain.

"One of these days, I'm going to insist on meeting somewhere less crowded," Jack Strauss grumbled as he unbuttoned his cashmere coat.

"Excuse me for frequenting my own business." Ian nodded at the girl behind the register, who immediately moved to get Jack a coffee. "And you're late."

"Stop confusing me with one of your employees. Traffic was a bear."

"Driving wouldn't be such a problem if you lived in the city."

"Not everyone can afford the rent."

"Good grief, you're a lawyer. Of course you can pay the rent."

"Okay, not everyone can afford your kind of rent. Did I say something funny?" he asked when Ian chuckled.

"Inside joke." He was wondering what Curlilocks would make of the conversation. She thought he was a bum. The color on her cheeks when she'd made the remark about working betrayed her. He would have corrected her if he didn't find her mistake so damn

amusing. Ian wondered if, when she did find out, he should duck for cover. She looked as if she had quite an arm.

“Must be a good joke, whatever it is. I haven’t seen you smile in a long time.”

Draping his coat along the back of the chair, the silver-haired man sat down in the chair opposite Ian just as his coffee and pastry arrived. He took a large drink, then let out a breath.

“Feeling better?” Ian asked.

“Aren’t I supposed to be asking you that question?”

Yes, he was. Much as Ian wanted to believe Jack’s concern was as much out of friendship as it was obligation as his sponsor, he knew better. “Same as always. One day at a time.

“You’re not…”

He shook his head. “No worries. These days I’m all about the coffee.”

“So I see.” Jack took another sip. “Although you didn’t have to go to such extremes. Most recovering addicts settle for buying cups of coffee, not coffee shops.”

“I’m not most guys in recovery.”

“No kidding. One of these days I expect to walk in here to find you bought a coffee plantation so you can grow your own beans.”

“Don’t think the thought hasn’t crossed my mind.” Ian never did believe in doing things halfway. Military service, business, alcohol abuse. Hurting people.

Jack nodded at the stack of stationery by his elbow. “Still writing letters, I see.”

“Told you when we first started meeting, I had a long list.” He ran a hand across the stack. Twenty years of being a rat bastard left a long tail. “Don’t suppose you have those addresses I wanted tracked down?”

“Again, stop confusing me with an employee.”

“Are you planning to bill me for your law firm’s time?”

When Jack’s look said “of course,” Ian stated, “Then technically, you are an employee. Now, do you have the names?”

“I’m beginning to see why your board of directors ousted you. You’re an impatient son of a gun.” The lawyer reached for his briefcase. “My investigator is still trying to locate a few people.”

He held up a hand before Ian could comment. “You gave him a pretty long list.”

“Could have been worse. Tell him to be glad I stuck to Ian Black, the business years.”

“Thank heaven for small favors. You do realize that when the program says you need to make amends, you don’t need to literally contact every single person who ever crossed your path.”

You did if you wanted to do things right. “You make amends your way, I’ll make amends mine,” Ian told him, snatching the papers. He didn’t have the heart to tell Jack the list didn’t begin to scratch the surface.

Quickly, he ran his eyes down the top sheet.

Three pages of ex-girlfriends, former friends, employees and associates, all deserving of apologies.

And one name that mattered most of all. He glanced up at his friend. “Is—”

“Last page. At the bottom.”

Of course. Save the worst offense for last. Flipping pages until he got to the last one, he found the name immediately. His biggest mistake.

And the hardest of all to make amends for.

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