

Chapter 1

“They’re naked.”

“And—your point?”

“I said, ‘they’re naked.’”

“And—your point?”

“Dammit, Ivan, quit saying ‘point’! There’s enough stuff pointing already without you emphasizing the fact. Can we just leave now? Head for a bar and drink heavily and try to forget this ghastly night?”

Ivan merely smiled. I tried to avoid staring at the sight twenty feet from where we stood. Fourteen naked people had formed a receiving line. I watched as men in Armani suits accompanied by women in gowns designed by Vera Wang and Donatella Versace walked through that line shaking hands. Greeting the fourteen naked people with nary a blush.

I muttered, “I can’t do it. I cannot go over there and greet someone who has more showing than I do in the bath.”

Ivan nodded sympathetically, but pushed me off my stool. “Sorry, Abby, but this is obligatory. Aside from Colette getting tickets for you, two of those guys were extras in *Endless Time* last year. One of the girls was, too, and at I’m pretty sure the short blonde with the *Little Mermaid* tat on her shoulder takes the same dance class you do because it says in the program that she is a devotee of musical theatre jazz with my best beloved Barry Springfield and you are as well. They know you’re here. They’ll feel slighted if you don’t say ‘*Hello, dahlings, you were sooo wonderful and I’m so terribly delighted to have seen your show!*’”

I groaned. “That’s another thing. How can I tell them with any sort of sincerity that I enjoyed this thing? Yeah, yeah, fine, it was okay when they were all singing in little clumps during that “*Just Feelin’ Loose*” number. But the volleyball dance was too much. I’m sorry. Did you notice Tracey? I was afraid she was going to mistake a boob for the ball and lob one over the net. And that guy! Oh my. I mean. He, uh, his, uh . . .”

Ivan interrupted. “Oh yeah. Him. I noticed him. I want him. I want to bear his children.”

I glared at him. Ivan has only been my agent for a month (I fired my previous agent Angela for being a blabbermouth about my personal life and a few other infractions) but we already had one of those “friends from the cradle” relationships so I figured I could let loose. “You, Ivan Ialovskaia, want to bear everyone’s children. You have yet to learn that you are biologically ill equipped to do so. I swear you have more of an active baby clock than any female over the age of puberty in the city of New York, including me. It’s why you’ve gone through four ‘let-me-debate-about-commitment’ ceremonies searching for Mr. Who-Can-Be-A-Good-Daddy-If-We-Can-Find-A-Surrogate.’ Or, ‘xcuse me—I lost count. Did you tell me Barry was number three or four? And that reminds me, when do Shay and I get to announce the banns?”

He glared back. “I’m not sure. As to the how many? It’s been over four years since I did the honest walk down the aisle bit—*once*, mind you—and since it’s still not considered legal in the state where I did the walking, it didn’t matter and if you’re going to be my maid of honor I expect you to keep track so I don’t have to. And yes, Barry and I will do the real thing soon.” He grabbed my arm. “Hush and uh oh. I told you we needed to get over there. Colette’s headed our way and she’s going to want to know why you haven’t as yet started schmoozing it up with the cast.”

I looked in the direction his head was tilting. A tall, brown-haired, devastatingly beautiful lady was trotting toward us. Fully clothed. Naked bodies on display everywhere in this Off-Off

Broadway production of a new musical called *Hangin'*, yet Colette Currie, the stage manager, was hiding what was probably the best body in the bunch.

We hugged each other with genuine affection (as opposed to the 'we're theatre people; we hug everyone' hug.)

"Abby! Ivan! I'm so glad you could make it!"

"Me too," I lied.

She grinned at me. "Abby Fouchet. I'm well aware the show sucks worse than quicksand in the Sahara. Which is why I really, really do appreciate you being here. And hopefully, I won't be stage managing much longer."

"Oh?"

"Yep. I got a callback from my agent. I'm up to play Deena Jones. New national tour of *Dreamgirls*. I'm stoked! I love that show and love that role and I wouldn't have to deal with herding naked divas every night! Anyway, would you please do the 'hi' bit to everyone? They all loved the episodes you did on *Endless Time* and they're dying to meet Vanessa Manilow with or without Supercop Gregory Noble in tow. Where is he anyway?" She didn't wait for an answer, just squeezed my arm then stated, "I have to run backstage for a sec, then I'll pop back out for hugs all around. Abby, seriously, I need to ask you something about researching. Meantime, go shake some hands and I'll be back in a few. Get a drink at the bar if you want. It's on me. But you've got to meet and greet because they'll all get ticked at me if you don't."

Another quick hug and she took off for the backstage area.

I blinked. A Dumas vision had just drifted through my brain. I could see myself holding my beret, which was soaked in blood. I shuddered. I don't get these visions very often and when I do I tend to curse Great (or Great-Great) Granny Dumas who passed them down through the generations. I also tend to pay attention because they nearly always come true. I pushed this one aside. Maybe it wasn't blood. Maybe it was paint. The set for this

ghastly show had boasted more than one red flat on stage so maybe I was about to toss my beret into a can and use that as an excuse to leave the *Cameo Theatre* to its nude occupants. All of whom were expecting Abby Fouchet to say “Howdy.” Insane. I hadn’t played Vanessa Manilow since Christmas, which was a little over five months ago, but apparently folks remembered the character. Maybe because she’d been spectacularly kidnapped by a band of roving Samoan Olympian-athlete water-skiers?

There was no hope. It was either be polite to the cast or run for the ladies room and pretend an attack of food poisoning. For a second I considered the latter, but had to dismiss it on grounds of “no effin’ believable way.” The snack bar had been less than elegant, but I didn’t think anyone was going to buy death by a Zagnut bar and diet Coke.

Ivan was right. Suck-it-up time. A thought I wished several of the cast members had considered. Personally, if I were ever stupid enough to appear naked in front of an audience on a nightly basis, I’d make damned sure my days were spent on a stair master with an abs-suction machine permanently attached to my obliques while a second one gathered any and all globs from my butt.

I silently sent up a prayer that a diversion would take place—like now— and keep me from having to stare into eighteen pairs of eyes to avoid glancing anywhere below chin-level.

I didn’t expect an immediate response from The Almighty so when I heard what I took to be a car backfiring I never imagined that the diversion was taking place backstage until a naked actor came running from the wings screaming, “It’s Colette! She’s been shot!”

Backtracking for a disclaimer. *Endless Time*. Vanessa Manilow. That’s me—or was until the Samoans showed up. Originally, nearly a year ago, I was just a romantic interest who caught the eye of supercop Gregory Noble, played by my real-life fiancé, Johnny Gerard. Yolanda Barrett, the occasionally insane head writer decided in March that Vanessa needed to be brought back on as a politician running for office in Staten Island. Last week

that changed when she and the producers decided it would be more fun to have Vanessa be some kind of federal or international agent. A spy with the CIA. NSA. YMCA. Something with initials. The concept was that Gregory Noble and Vanessa Manilow can investigate cases together and drive his current love interest, “Letitia” pretty nuts. And while I doubt that the CIA or NSA pops in to help out the detectives of the NYPD unless there’s something international involved, let me repeat—this *is* a soap opera. At any rate, last year when I was on the show and I heard the words, “She’s (or he’s) been shot!” (Or stabbed, smothered, drowned, poisoned, blasted out of a cannon, hung from a steeple or whatever the mode of death is for the week) I heard written lines right afterward. Usually, Johnny’s character, Gregory Noble was the one saying them. “*Hmmm. Chief, this mook appears to have been blasted out of a cannon. Is there a circus in town?*” or “*Holy Quasimodo! Our victim is hanging from the steeple of that bell tower!*” There have been a few times when Vanessa has been with Gregory bending over a body (determinedly keeping low-cut sweaters from showing what I’d just seen too much of in this production of “*Hangin’*”) pulling on latex gloves or magnifying glasses or whipping a gun just in case the villain is hanging around which isn’t really kosher having a supposed civilian at the crime scene but I repeat—soap opera. I did whatever business the script called for in a scene before Detective Noble and I either ended up in a clinch or provided back story about other characters, which happens a lot in daytime dramas so people can tune in anytime and pick up the plot without massive frustration or asking friends for summaries.

What I have not normally heard or witnessed after a shot is a general freeze by fourteen naked people and folks in formal dress, followed by pandemonium-squared. Actors running to the stage. Audience running toward the lobby. Actors and audience ducking under seats in the theatre house. Screaming, hollering, swearing and crying.

Ivan and I stayed where we were—in a quiet little niche close to the restrooms. He tapped me. “So, where’s Gregory Noble, Supercop, when we need him? Not that we really

need him. It's probably nothing. Some idiot probably fired a prop gun and now we have mass hysteria." His words were flippant but his voice was shaking and his face was pale.

My own words didn't come out with much stability. They did come out with a large croak." I can't tell for sure but that did not sound like a prop. Did you bring your cell? Why don't you do the 9-1-1 thing and I'll try to find out what's going on."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Ivan reached inside his shoulder bag and managed to get his cell into hands shaking worse than his voice. He dialed the emergency number and reported an alleged shooting at the *Cameo Theatre* on Theatre Row. Sixth theatre in. I barely registered this since I was heading backstage to find out if indeed Colette had been shot. Stupid, dangerous and foolhardy but I had to find out what was going on.

Sadly, the naked actor who'd been yelling about Colette was right. She lay on the ground backstage covered in old costumes, about six feet from a dressing room (and yes, the absurd thought "*Why do they need a dressing room when they're naked?*" did flash through my mind.) Lots of blood adorned Colette's head but it looked as though the bullet had only grazed her ear. That was good. My understanding from a long distant first aid course as a Girl Scout was that ear wounds (lobes, not inner) were non-lethal. Very bloody and doubtless painful but she should be okay in a day or so.

Colette motioned to me. "Abby"

"Hey, Colette." I leaned down. "Look, try and stay calm. The cops and EMTS are on their way. You're going to be fine. Looks like a bullet nicked your ear."

"Got . . . tell you . . . Move . . . clown . . ."

"Don't try to talk. Just rest." I took off my beret and tucked it under her head, hoping to stop the bleeding.

She lifted her hand and grabbed mine, holding me in a painful grip. "No. Important."
Blood suddenly dripped from her mouth. No fake capsule. The real thing. This shouldn't be
happening. Not from an ear wound.

"Colette? Hang in, there."

"Cold. Cold. Wind. Sin cinna man. Fill. . . ree-eel." She tried to smile. "First feem . . .
Clown. History ree-peets." She gasped, "She . . . ken see . . .move. ee . . ."

Then she stopped breathing.