

## CHAPTER 1

Like a recovering addict counting the days of sobriety, Ginger Walsh calculated the amount of time remaining until her triumphant return to financial independence: eighty-four days. If she were more like the woman she'd been before she was cast as an evil teenager on a television soap opera, she'd optimistically mark the time as *only* twelve weeks or *just* three short months. But Ginger had become as jaded as her alter ego. Real life had toughened her up. It was eighty-four days any way she looked at it.

Every morning, she gave herself a pep talk to mark the passing of another day. She blamed the economy, the industry, and her own stupid decisions for her current situation. But, she always told herself she'd find her way out. Her way back. If that didn't work, she blasted Kelly Clarkson on her iPod and went for a run.

Presently, Ginger's road to career redemption passed through a greasy diner in Chances Inlet, North Carolina; a small, historic coastal town situated at the junction of the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean. It might as well have been a million miles from Broadway.

"Is it possible to get turkey bacon on my BLT?" Ginger asked, her fingertips sticking to the laminated menu. She tried to infuse just the right amount of deference to her tone while pasting a gracious smile on her face. The tactic never failed her when requesting special orders.

Until now.

The waitress glanced up from her pad, a pained expression on her face. "This isn't the Carnegie Deli in New York, Destiny. You're in North Carolina and this is swine country." Her tone implied Ginger was either an idiot or traitor for requesting anything else.

Ginger tried not to cringe at the waitress' use of her soap opera character's name. Giving up on getting something a little healthier to eat, she let out an anguished sigh. "Well, is the mayonnaise at least fat free—owwh!"

Diesel Gold, her companion at the small, window table, kicked her in the shin. *Hard.* He raised his tattooed arms along with his eyebrows in either impatience or contempt, she wasn't exactly sure. Clearly, his blood sugar had dropped substantially because he was normally pretty laid back.

The waitress shifted from one sneaker clad foot to the other. Next to them, the table filled with gaffers and grips, boom operators, and the camera men who completed their production crew sat in silence, their faces shifting expectantly between the waitress and Ginger. Apparently their order wouldn't be filled until she had Ginger's.

"Just bring me wheat toast and put the mayo, the bacon, the lettuce, and tomato on the side." She handed over her menu in defeat.

"Do you want fries with that?"

"Ughh!" Diesel dropped his head in his hands.

Ginger shot him a withering look before pasting a polite smile on her face for the waitress. "No, thank you." It was always best to be kind to the wait staff, her mother taught her. Being nice ensured excellent service. In this case, Ginger figured it might ensure the woman didn't spit into her food. "You can give him my fries." She gestured at Diesel. The crew nearly broke out in applause as the waitress headed for the kitchen.

"I liked you better when you weren't such a food weenie," Diesel said.

“For your information, I’ve been a food weenie all my life. It’s the cornerstone of a dancer’s existence. And, I liked *you* better when you were Elliot Goldman and not some tattooed, spike-haired, wannabe, music video producer who took his name from a Chippendale dancer.”

“Shh!” Diesel quickly glanced around to see if any of the crew were listening, but the opposite table had gone back to discussing the logistics of their go-carting expedition planned for the evening.

“Oh please.” Ginger carefully inspected a lemon slice before squeezing it into her water glass. “They all know your dad owns the network. You’re twenty-six-years-old. You look like the lead singer for Maroon Five—aside from your glasses, of course—and suddenly you’re the producer of a network home improvement show when your only experience is creating a small indie film that never made it off *YouTube*. Face it, you’ve got nepotism written all over you. Maybe you should get it in a tattoo.”

Her friend of nearly a decade wasn’t amused. The two had met as teenagers when both were freshman at Julliard. He was the awkward, but musically gifted son of a television mogul, and she was the scholarship dance phenom living out her mother’s dream. Partnered up on a literature project—Plato’s *Allegory of a Cave*—they’d been best friends ever since. Their friendship survived not only the class, but the destruction of each of their dreams.

“This isn’t funny, Ginger.” Diesel leaned across the table, his gravelly voice a near whisper. “The crew has to respect me. I need this gig. My dad won’t give me another chance if I screw it up.” He gestured to the table next to them. “So far these guys have been pretty tolerant letting me call the shots, but we still have a few months to go.”

*Eighty-four days to be precise*, Ginger thought. She contemplated Diesel, taking in the stress lines bracketing his mouth and the weariness of his eyes. Marvin Goldman, Diesel’s

narcissistic jerk of a father, took great pleasure in bending his son to fit his own ideal. He was dangling a carrot on a string and would likely yank it away before giving it to his son. It was a frequent pattern between the two. But Diesel continued to hold out hope his father would reward his hard work by allowing him to produce the network's new music reality show. Ginger wanted to tell her friend not to count on his father, but it was difficult not to hope along with him. Because if Diesel got the job, he'd promised her the position of choreographer.

"Hey." Reaching for his hand, she gave it a squeeze. "It's gonna work out. These guys are really good at what they do. They won't let you down."

"You've been here one day and you already know the crew is made up of Emmy winners?" At least his face had begun to relax.

"What can I say? I know my way around a television production."

"It must be those seven months you spent on the soap opera set. I guess you noticed a lot during the ten weeks your character was in a coma."

"Very funny." She sat back as the waitress plunked down a bowl filled with what looked like fried egg rolls. Ginger picked one up between her thumb and forefinger and looked at it quizzically.

"They're called hushpuppies and, no, I'm not going to tell you what's in them. Just eat one and enjoy." He popped two of them in his mouth.

Ginger pulled out her iPhone and searched for hush puppies. She really hoped the bowl didn't contain diced up shoes.

"Fried batter, yuck!" She placed it on the paper placemat, wiping her hands on her napkin.

"Food weenie," Diesel mumbled with a shake of his head.

Ginger sighed. No matter what she did or said, people always seemed to mistake her motives about her diet. Sure, she was diligent about what foods she put in her body, taking great pains to ensure that whatever she ate was clean and healthy. Years of her mother micro managing her diet so that Ginger could perform at her peak made her picky eating habits hard to break. Not if she wanted to work as a dancer again. For the millionth time in her life, Ginger marveled at the unjustness of her body's metabolism as Diesel devoured the bowl of deep fried calories.

“So, what exactly are my responsibilities here?” she asked. “I’ve done most of the research on the Dresden House and it’s fascinating. Imagine if those walls could talk. What sorts of stories could they tell about the last two hundred years the building has been standing? And the woman it was originally built for never lived to see it; such a tragic love story.” Ginger looked over at Diesel who had a finger to his head as he feigned shooting himself. “Okay, clearly, you don’t see the romance in the project at all. So let’s talk about me. What else besides research do I do as your production assistant?”

“Anything I ask you to do.” He gave her a wolfish wink just as the waitress set a plate of barbeque in front of him.

“We’ve already been there and we both know it wasn’t a success.” She carefully assembled her BLT with mostly lettuce, tomato, one slice of bacon, and a small smear of mayonnaise.

“Okay, if you’re not willing to sleep with me, my second choice is for you to handle makeup.”

Ginger nearly choked on her sandwich. “Excuse me? Did you say makeup? I thought this was a show about restoring a nineteenth century mansion. What do you need makeup for?”

“The hot contractor doing the renovations. And, lest you think I play for the other team, *hot* is the network’s term, not mine.”

Ginger rolled her eyes. “Why is it men always have to reinforce their masculinity?”

“Testosterone,” he said between bites of his sandwich. “Anyway, the suits in L.A. are hoping the *hottie* contractor will be a hit with the ladies and increase network viewership. Apparently, he was once *Cosmo*’s Bachelor of the Month, back in his days as a New York architect.”

“But doesn’t the network have a staff of makeup people?”

“Yes, but the one assigned to the show is having a problem with her pregnancy and just when I was about to hire another one,” he pointed a fry at her, “you called and said you were down to your last five hundred bucks. Now, you have a job—with all your expenses paid for the next three months, I might add.”

“But you said I was your assistant!”

“You are my assistant, Ginger. But you’re also gonna have to be the makeup artist. I can’t afford both. It’ll look good to my dad if I come in under budget, so before you ask, I’m not paying you both salaries. I’ve already earmarked that money for a couple of other upgrades to the show.”

“I don’t want both salaries, Diesel. And I’m very grateful for the job, but what makes you think I’m qualified to be a makeup artist?”

Diesel swallowed another bite of his sandwich. “You took two years of stage production at Julliard. And you did your own makeup all those years when you were in your mom’s ballet company. I’ve seen your work. It’s magical.”

*Magical, yeah, if they were filming Beauty and the Beast*, she thought to herself.

Somehow Ginger didn't think that was what the network had in mind. She stared at Diesel. His enthusiasm—like his confidence—was so fragile right now. She didn't dare let him down. Not when she owed him so much. She forced her lips into a tight smile meant to reassure him. At the same time, her mind whirled with fear. And possibilities. Her dad often said she was like a cat, graceful and fluid and always landing on her feet. Which, in a way, was true, Ginger Walsh did always land on her feet. Of course, at the rate she was going, she'd blow through the nine lives before she hit thirty.

“Okay.” She pushed her half eaten sandwich to the side. “The B&B has Internet access, right?”

“Sure.” Diesel dragged a fry through some ketchup before putting it in his mouth.

“Great.” She was still friends with several of the makeup artists from the soap. If she was lucky, she could Skype with one or two of them later that night to pick up some pointers. “I'm going to head back then.” Ginger hoisted her messenger bag off the floor and stood up from the table.

“Give me a minute to finish my lunch and I'll drive you,” Diesel said. “It's clear across town.”

He was right, the inn was clear across town. But since Chances Inlet boasted only one stop light, *clear across town* barely equaled three New York City blocks. Obviously, Diesel had gone soft in the six weeks he'd been in North Carolina for the show's pre-production.

“I think I can manage. Besides, it's a beautiful day for a walk.” It was early March and while slush still lingered on the sidewalks in Manhattan, a warm breeze blew along the Carolina

coast, with trees and flowers blooming in the bright spring sunshine. “I’ll see you back there later.” Ginger gave him a reassuring grin as she headed for the door.

“Don’t forget we have a full production meeting at the B&B this afternoon during tea time. They serve these awesome cupcakes with their tea.” Diesel’s voice took on a reverential tone as he mentioned the cupcakes. The man hadn’t even finished his ‘heart attack on a plate’ sandwich and he was thinking about dessert. Life was seriously unfair, she thought as she set a brisk pace toward the B&B.