

# **Chloe's Rescue Mission**

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## Chapter 1

My entrance into the Green Room at *Wake-Up!* television studio was overly dramatic – and I was only there for an interview. Tripping on the hem of my trousers, I staggered haphazardly towards a brown leatherette couch. ‘Shi-sh-ugar! Sorry, so sorry,’ I whispered to the other occupant, who was peering at me over the top of his newspaper.

I settled on the edge of the couch and looked around the room. There was a tray of pastries on the slate-green coffee table, along with two vacuum flasks of tea and coffee. My stomach was in knots. No way could I swallow anything, never mind keep it down.

This morning’s programme was visible on a monitor in the corner. Just twelve minutes from now, I’d be on the other side of that screen – grabbing my four minutes of nationwide exposure. I drew a deep breath.

This was just live television not death row, I reminded myself. Only a few million people to worry about. I rotated the ring on my finger, first one way then the other. I studied my silent companion, who was engrossed in the *Financial Times*. He wore a charcoal grey suit, a white shirt with gold cufflinks and lavender blue tie. His dark hair was cut short and he looked just on the stern side of grumpy.

Hmmm, I thought, must be a politician. What a pity I didn’t pay more attention to current affairs, I might have had some idea of what to say to him. A small groove dug in between his brows as he read. I was just judging his age to be mid-thirties when his eyes shifted from the newspaper and, with the precision of a marksman, settled immediately and disconcertingly on mine.

‘Morning,’ he said in a deep, rich voice.

I beamed back with relief. ‘Morning. Didn’t mean to make such a dramatic entrance. Got my heel caught in the hem of my trousers. Awful trousers.’

His eyes flicked down to the offending garment. They might even be considered offensive, having been an impulse buy, encouraged by my sister, Beth. She was adamant they would be exactly right for TV. ‘Make an impact. You don’t want to look like some wish-washy do-gooder in navy slacks and a beige cardie,’ she’d said. I didn’t think I ever looked wishy-washy although, compared with Beth who dressed in Psychedelic Jumble Sale Chic, I didn’t usually look quite this bizarre either. The

trousers were from a designer shopping outlet, and were deep amber velvet with random, purple stripes. I wore the matching plain amber sweater which had purple buttons along the neckline. Such a mistake; I was already warm and the studio would be even warmer. The trousers were too long and my spike-heeled boots were inadequate.

When the man's eyes flicked back up, I considered how unusually blue they were for someone with such dark hair. His only comment was to lift one eyebrow, fractionally.

'Sorry, I'm a bit jittery. First time on live TV.' I pressed my palms down onto my knees, and lifted them immediately before the sweat could upset the pile of the velvet.

'It'll be over before you know it.' He said. I noticed a Scottish accent.

'You sound like you speak from experience.'

He shook the newspaper out and folded it. 'Some. It won't feel so bad once you get started.' He placed the paper on the table and looked up at me, a vague smile softening his eyes. 'Once you sit down, all you'll think about are the presenters.' His voice became quiet and conspiratorial. 'And despite what you might have heard...they don't bite.'

'Why? Are they vegetarians?' I gave a nervous grin. He chuckled.

The door opened and a girl with a clipboard appeared. 'Okay, Duncan, we're just about to go to commercials. You're on next.'

He nodded, stood, buttoned his jacket and shot his cuffs with all the practice of a professional. He looked back at me before he left. 'Don't dread it – enjoy it.' His smile was surprising and ever so slightly wicked – completely contradicting my initial impression of him. I smiled back and then he was gone.

At least he'd distracted me momentarily from my bowel-twisting anxiety.

As the commercials were coming to an end, and I was wondering who Duncan was, another assistant came into the room. 'Let me take you over to make-up. Nothing much – just want to take the shine off and settle your hair down,' she said briskly, unaware of my accelerating anxiety.

Settle my hair down? That would be a first. If you can imagine a tin of exploding springs, that was the kind of hair I was born with. I grew it long to weigh it down but it stayed resolutely wiggly.

By the time I reached the studio, there was no sign of Duncan and my curiosity had been eclipsed by the task ahead. I lurked amongst the cameras and cables, watching

the presenters. I felt like a deer in the woods surveying a pair of hunters. I breathed in to the count of four, held it and breathed out to the count of six. As attention switched to the weather girl, I was guided through to the famous *Wake-Up!* sofa where I waited, with a galloping heart, for my cue.

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Duncan unbuttoned his jacket and loosened his tie as he settled into the back of the car. His driver glanced at him in the mirror before pulling into the traffic. 'Did it go well?'

'I think so.' He picked up a remote control and flicked on the small television behind the driver's seat, selected the station on which he'd just appeared, and gave his attention to the next segment of the show.

The camera closed in on Kerry, the lead presenter. 'Now, we're going to talk to someone who's putting herself on the line for a project very close to her heart. Nearly fifty years ago, that dearly loved and sadly missed English actor – Joshua Steele – established the Joshua Steele Theatre in Barnworth, Gloucestershire. But today, there's a very great risk that it will be forced to close. His granddaughter, Chloe Steele, who joins us today, is determined to see that doesn't happen. Chloe, welcome to *Wake-Up!*'

The camera switched to Chloe, who beamed back at Kerry with no apparent sign of nerves. 'Thank you for having me.'

'Now, your grandfather's theatre has seen many an ambitious actor strive for his dreams, and even helped launch the careers of stars like Morgan Ash and Alicia-May Golding. So tell us what's happened to put it at risk of closure?'

Chloe's hair was a tumble of dark brown curls, which gathered around her shoulders. Her long legs, in the most bizarre trousers Duncan had ever seen outside of a circus tent, were crossed neatly at the ankles. She nodded and smiled. 'Well, it's fallen very badly into debt, due to some rather unscrupulous management in the past, which is something we had hoped to try and reverse. But then, we discovered a building company wants to buy the theatre and bulldoze it to make room for an apartment block which, of course, would completely destroy my grandfather's legacy.'

'And it's not just the debts, is it Chloe, the theatre needs a lot of money spending on it, doesn't it?' Kerry asked, nodding encouragingly.

'Unfortunately, yes. When it was built, it seems some of the materials were sub-

standard, so the dressing rooms and costume store virtually need rebuilding.’

‘Gosh, and how much money does that mean?’

‘Conservative estimates are close on a million.’

Kerry pulled an earnest, sympathetic face. ‘So you’ve got quite a challenge on your hands. What are you hoping to do?’

‘It’s really a race against time. The longer it goes on, the bigger the debts will become and the more likelihood we’ll have to sell it to developers.’ She pushed her hair back behind both ears, and edged forward. ‘But I have been promised the support of Morgan Ash, and we’re really hoping Alicia-May will fly over from LA to help out.’

‘When you say, we, that’s your mother, Jennifer Dawson, isn’t it? Many of us remember her from that series in the eighties, Mad Dogs and Englishmen, don’t we? How is she?’

‘She’s great; busy teaching performing arts. And there’s my sister, Beth, too.’

‘But you’re planning on doing something quite significant yourself, aren’t you?’

Chloe smiled broadly. ‘Yes. I’ve just come back from a year in Central America, so I have no job at the moment. And whilst I do intend to give a lot of my energy to raising funds for the theatre, I’m also looking for a company that is prepared to employ me and – more importantly – sponsor me to help the theatre. And, because we need to raise so much money, I’m looking for the job that pays the best.’ She gave a cheeky smile directly at the camera. And the camera loved her, which was exactly what Duncan had suspected.

Kerry leaned forward. ‘So, not to put too fine a point on it, you’re selling yourself for the theatre.’

‘Yes.’ Chloe laughed. ‘But seriously, my professional background is in events, I speak Spanish and French and I’m a hard-worker. If I had money, I’d invest it but I don’t, I’ve only got myself. Plus – we’re really hoping a TV production company will show an interest in the theatre’s progress...’

‘You mean, make a documentary?’

‘Yes, or broadcast weekly updates on a magazine programme.’ She grinned, clearly hoping *Wake-Up!* TV might take up the challenge.

‘And you’re obviously pretty optimistic this initiative will do the trick, or you wouldn’t be here, right?’

‘Well, Joshua had a saying: Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible and

achieves the impossible.'

'So, you're harnessing hope. Good for you. And if anyone's interested in employing Chloe or helping the theatre, you'll find all the details on our website...'

Duncan pressed the remote control and the television went black.

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I was trembling but euphoric as I returned to the Green Room and sank a cup of coffee, an apple pastry and two cherry pinwheels. As I sucked icing from my fingers, I focused on the discarded Financial Times. I was recording the show at home so I could watch Duncan's interview later. The time indicated on the TV screen said eight-seventeen. I'd been awake since three, and had caught the five-twenty train to London. Now, I could finally drop my head back with relief. My next meeting in Hounslow wasn't for another couple of hours. Perhaps, if I nodded off here, the kind people at *Wake-Up!* would tiptoe round me and let me sleep.

I felt the interview had gone well. Just two weeks ago, my family had conjured up this mad idea, as we sat poring over a very sorry set of theatre accounts. It was Beth who'd suggested harnessing the power of TV. 'Shame Simon Cowell doesn't do a Britain's Got Business show,' she'd said. 'It's amazing the crap acts that get signed after two minutes in front of Simon.'

'Are you suggesting we're a crap act?' I'd asked.

'No, babe. But audiences love a sad back-story.'

From that kernel of an idea, I'd ended up here. Beth was busy running her nursery and looking after her two-year old son, Tom, but willing to do anything time and Tom allowed. Our mother lectured full-time but the holidays were long so she would help out whenever she could.

For me, Costa Rica seemed a long way off now, yet I'd only been home six weeks. Costa Rica. Such a wonderful place to escape to. Not that I'd been running away, exactly. I'd come back, stronger and more positive about the future and about myself, and this project gave me something tangible to focus on.

The door creaked open and another production assistant appeared in the doorway. 'Hi, Chloe. There's a company been in touch. They want to see you this morning, if you can make it.' She handed me a piece of paper.

'Really?' I sat up and read the name, Marlean Goss of Thorsen Leisure, and a phone number. 'Wow! That was quick. I guess I should call her,' I said, but the assistant was already out of the door. I pulled my mobile from my bag.

Marlean was polite and efficient. 'Can you be at our offices by nine thirty?'

I glanced at my watch. 'Oh. Is there any other time?'

'I'm awfully sorry, Mr Thorsen has a full schedule, and then he's out of the country for a few days. I've just managed to squeeze you in as it is.'

Damn. 'Listen, perhaps I can move my other meeting.' It was only with a web development company, owned by an old school friend. 'Tell Mr Thorsen I'll be there.'

Minutes later, I was calling Owen to change our meeting time. His answering service clicked in, so I left a brief message and headed to the nearest tube station. I really wanted to google Thorsen Leisure on my phone but the battery was low. If I arrived early enough, there was bound to be some company information available for me to mug up on.

I trotted down the stairway, hardly believing my luck. We'd thought the programme would have some benefit but to get a response as quickly as this was fantastic. Fortune was on our side.

After nudging my way onto an overcrowded platform, I waited. I waited several minutes as, like a blocked drain, the platform filled up and everyone became packed more closely together. It might only be April but the temperature seemed to be increasing with my anxiety, and my wretched amber sweater was beginning to itch. A voice came over the loud speaker, announcing delays on the Bakerloo line due to an accident at Leicester Square.

No! I looked at my watch. I had just half an hour to make my way to our potential backer. The crowd on the platform began to edge its way slowly towards the exits. A few lingered but I was already amongst the movers.

'Anyone know the quickest route to Regent's Park station?' I asked, with theatrical projection.

Some joker suggested a rocket pack. Finally, a woman behind me said a taxi would be the most direct route as Regent's Park was only served by the Bakerloo line.

'Nah, you don't,' said a male voice with a cockney accent. 'Roads'll be chocker, right now.' He went on to describe the optimum journey in detail. Whilst they argued the toss, I made an executive decision to take the true-blue cockney's advice, and began wriggling through the crowds to find the right platform.

With only a couple of minutes to spare, I was sprinting down York Terrace, handbag over my shoulder and clutching my trousers at the knee to hoist them off the

floor. I could feel my stomach churning over the morning's pastries. Finally, I discovered Thorsen Leisure's offices in a very grand Georgian pile overlooking the park.

My heart was hammering, my back was damp with perspiration and my mind racing. If this meeting was right for the theatre then I really hoped I could pull it off. As I pushed the heavy front door closed, I was immediately aware of the contrast between the pandemonium of my world and the tranquillity of the office. Triple-glazing shut out the traffic noise and a sumptuous, burgundy carpet cushioned my feet. The air conditioning began to cool my glowing face. I approached the reception desk and was greeted by a petite, exotic looking girl who spoke with a broad Australian accent.

'Take a seat, please. I'll call Marlean for you.'

In the mirror behind reception I could see random corkscrews of hair sprouting from my head. I rammed my fingers through my thatch in the hope of calming them down. The lipstick needed reviving too. I perched on the edge of an aubergine coloured armchair and ran a seam of lippy over my mouth. On a nearby stand were some Thorsen Leisure brochures. Excellent.

I grabbed one and watched it trembling in my hands as I flipped through the glossy pages. Thorsen Leisure was a hotel company. Wow! Everything about their hotels suggested luxury, relaxation and money. Why, I wondered, would they be interested in our little theatre project?

'Good morning, Chloe. I'm Marlean.'

I looked up to see a woman in her mid-forties, with fair hair styled into a sleek bob. She wore a caramel-coloured shift dress over a perfect size eight figure.

I stood up and held out my hand. 'Hello, Marlean.'

She smiled as she shook it. 'Please, follow me.'

We walked along a short corridor, hung with stark, minimalist paintings in earth tones, to a large panelled door. Marlean tapped and pushed it open. Sunlight flooded through the doorway. 'Chloe Steele, for you.'

I was ushered through the door and face to face with Mr Thorsen.

So that's who Duncan was.