

## One Cinderella Night

©2022 Linore Rose Burkard

### Chapter One

May, 2015

Flushing, Queens, New York

Emma Benson took a last quick look into the full-length mirror, fixed her lipstick, and turned to Nadia Haseltine, her best friend.

Nadia smiled. “You look great. Even Ricky’s gonna wish—.”

“No, he’s not!” Emma’s sharp tone silenced her friend. “He’s not gonna wish anything except that I behave precisely as he says.”

“If he doesn’t tell you you’re beautiful...” Her voice trailed off.

“He won’t notice.”

“He’s a guy, isn’t he?”

“He’s a devil.”

Nadia sighed. Riccardo Gotti was good-looking to a fault. Who would have thought he would turn out to be...well, like Emma said, a devil. “Anyway, you’ll be a hit.”

They’d spent three hours doing Emma’s nails, makeup and hair. Emma had bought new white, slim-heeled pumps at a bargain basement to go with the fancy dress she’d found on sale. Her slim frame made her look taller than her five feet, five inches, and her dark hair against the pale dress—thanks to the deep conditioning treatment from Nadia—shone luxuriantly. Nadia was only 5’1 and blonde. She was a hairstylist by trade and a powerhouse of emotional support as a friend.

Emma grabbed the present for Ricky’s sister Maria that she’d agonized over, finally settling upon a loosely woven, peach-colored summer shawl. Something Maria might need on a warm summer night in Sicily, where she was soon headed. It would go well against her dark hair. Emma hadn’t met Maria yet, but judging by Ricky’s jet-black locks, she figured Maria had the same. The party tonight was in honor of her coming wedding and departure to Italy—or so Ricky said. These days, she didn’t believe anything Ricky said. Why she’d even bothered to pick something nice for Maria, she wasn’t sure. Maria probably wasn’t even Ricky’s sister. She was probably his wife! *The lying, scheming devil...*

They started up the steps from her finished-basement apartment. Nadia said, “I’m sorry, Em—I wish you didn’t have to do this.”

Emma locked the door behind them. “Me, too.” She stopped and stared at Nadia. “I don’t think I can! I know what it will take for this to work, and I can’t!”

Nadia took her arm. “I know. The idea frightens you. And it stinks, that he wants you to do this! But think about it. You’ll survive, and you know what’s at stake!”

Emma looked tragic. “How could I forget?” They started down the walkway to the street.

Nadia shook her head. “You know, I think you should work on Ricky, soften him up. I saw how he looks at you.”

“How he *used* to look at me.”

“Still, he’s got feelings. I think you could reach him.”

“I don’t want to reach him,” said Emma. “Not anymore.”

Nadia gave Emma an impulsive hug, her face scrunched in a frown. “You’ll do great tonight. And pretty soon it will all be over, and he’ll be out of your life forever. You can put all this behind you and get a guy who wants and appreciates you.”

Emma turned distraught eyes to her friend. “Soon it will be over? Yeah, after the mob shoots me and my family in the head and dumps us in the Hudson.”

“Don’t say that! You’re going to make this work!” Nadia’s eyes filled with tears. “You have to, Em. You have to!”

Emma nodded and squeezed Nadia’s hand. “I know. I’ll do my best.”

The young women traversed the short walkway to the pavement, stopping for traffic before crossing the street to where Nadia’s boyfriend Chris sat waiting in his car.

Twenty minutes later, the car came to a stop before a long and stately white brick house with a porch and three Greek columns. Malverne was a swanky area of Queens. Bushes trimmed to razor neatness flanked the edge of the property, while large footed urns at the entrance, filled with gorgeous greens and sprays of flowers, added to the manicured look. *Neat as a pin—like Ricky*, thought Emma. A long black limo sat off to one side at the curb.

Chris gave a low whistle. “These guys got all the money, don’t they?”

“I’m sure most of the residents are perfectly respectable,” Emma said, peering around at the Jewish New York neighborhood of upper-class professionals. “Doctor’s Row, they call it.” Ricky Gotti was assuredly not Hebraic, nor was he a doctor or engineer like his neighbors. The house and grounds, however, gave no indication that he was only a high school teacher at a public school, and the limo at the curb belied it. Emma wasn’t surprised because now she knew where Ricky’s money came from.

“That’s some limo,” Chris said. He turned jovially to Emma. “Maybe you can get Ricky to take you home in it.”

“I’m supposed to try and get someone else to take me home, remember?” Both faces in the front seat sobered. Emma grabbed her evening purse and the gift, stuck one leg out of the car but stopped to thank her friends. She added, “Wish me luck. Here I start my life of crime.”

“No!” Nadia cried fiercely. “You are doing this to battle crime! You are doing this to make wrong things right!”

Emma’s troubled eyes grew large. “But is it the right thing to do? Bringing in an innocent guy...”

“Billionaires are never innocent,” Nadia said firmly. “They can’t be. They’re compromised, and they become megalomaniacs and want to rule the world.”

“And what choice do you got?” asked Chris. “You need to do this.”

Emma nodded but sighed heavily.

Nadia said, “How is Ricky gonna get a billionaire to his party, anyway?”

Emma shrugged. “No idea. I guess he’ll come up with some story. More lies.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe I have to meet his family and pretend like we’re still a thing. And that’s the least of it!”

“Don’t worry; you can do this!” Nadia smiled encouragingly.

“Hey—if you end up needing a ride—give us a ring,” added Chris. Both friends looked back from the front seat with sympathetic eyes.

“Thanks, you guys.” Emma stepped out of the car and swallowed the lump that rose in her throat as they drove off. The lump threatened to turn into full-fledged panic. *She ought to run away right now. She couldn’t do this. And it wasn’t right!* But the image of Adam, her younger brother, crossed her mind, and it washed away the panic. How could she *not* do this? It wasn’t only about her. Their father had died owing a hundred grand to a mob boss and now it was on Emma—according to Ricky—to pay it back. Or else.

Neither she, her younger brother Adam, nor their stepsister or stepmother had known about the debt. It was as if her father lived a secret life. But whatever he’d done, it was over; it was who he was, and nothing would change that. She raised her head and took a deep breath. Nadia was right. She could do this. She would soon have to find a different way to get out of this mess, because Ricky’s plan was asking too much. But she hadn’t found it yet. In the meantime, she could do tonight. Meet the guy. Keep Ricky happy.

If only for Adam’s sake, she had to.

## Chapter Two

*February, three months earlier*

*New York City*

Peter Bentsen, the young owner and CEO of Bentsen Global Associates, took his place at the head of a long conference room table when his emergency cell beeped. It was his secretary, Kim. “I said it had to wait.” His voice was terse.

“I’m sorry, sir, it’s Lila, and she sounds *frantic*.”

Peter frowned. He’d been going out with Lila for two months, and he was hoping to get serious. But the meeting concerned a 760-million-dollar deal, and it was on him to make it happen. Acquiring companies—getting deals signed, making mergers happen—that’s what he was good at. He hadn’t become CEO of a multi-billion-dollar business by putting his personal life first. “Tell her I’ll call as soon as I’m done here.”

Ninety minutes later, he tried calling but she didn’t pick up. As he and Sy Goldberg, his right-hand man, headed for Peter’s office, he stopped by Kim’s desk. “Did Lila leave a message?”

Kim cleared her throat. “She was upset. She said she left a message on your office line because you miss the ones on your cell.” Kim cleared her throat again. “And...and she said I may need to find a new job soon?” Kim’s eyes were large and uncertain as she searched Peter’s.

“What?” Peter gave Sy a look of incredulity. “Does she want Kim’s job?”

Sy shrugged. “She came by the house this morning looking for Sofia, but Sofe’s at her mother’s in Massachusetts. She didn’t say anything to me about Kim’s job.” Peter turned back to Kim. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t know what she’s talking about, but you’re not going anywhere.”

Kim took a deep breath and visibly relaxed. “That’s what I thought. Thank you, sir.”

Peter turned to Sy. “C’mon,” motioning with his head for Sy to follow him into his office. He sat down while Sy marched to the bar and helped himself to a drink. Catching Peter’s eye, he motioned to his drink, though he knew it would be turned down. Peter didn’t drink. The bar was for clientele.

While Peter found the message on his phone, Sy plopped a bottle of vitamin water before him, then sat a few feet away on a leather sofa. Behind them, tall windows overlooked New York City, a heady view from the 39<sup>th</sup> floor.

Peter said, “What?!” He sat there looking stunned.

Surprised, Sy asked, “What’s up?”

Peter stared at his friend. “She broke up with me.”

Sy’s mouth hung open. Suddenly he remembered something from his encounter with her that morning. He bit his lip, thinking, then looked back at Peter guiltily. In a slow, strange tone he asked, “Did she say why?”

Peter had the cell phone to his ear, waiting for Lila to pick up. “Something crazy! She thinks I’m broke. Or our companies are broke. Something like that. I have no idea why.” He met Sy’s gaze with a pained expression. “How the heck could that even happen? What was she thinking?”

Sy jumped to his feet. “Wait, wait, don’t talk to her! Wait a second.”

“Lila—” Peter said heavily into the phone.

Sy grabbed the phone from his hand and thumbed off before Peter could stop him.

Peter jumped to his feet and lunged for the phone. “Are you crazy? She just picked up!”

Sy put the phone behind his back. With Peter coming at him, he backed up until he was at the window. “Don’t talk to her yet! Listen to me. Don’t talk to her. I have to tell you something.” He wore a guilty expression that made Peter back off just enough for Sy to stand straight without leaning into the glass.

“What do you know about this?” Peter asked, his voice edged with anger.

“I spoke to Lila this morning,” he said, his eyes large and apologetic. He shook his head. “I was kidding! It was a joke! I thought she knew!”

“What did you say to her?” Peter glared down at him, his hands on his hips.

“I told her you made a disastrous business deal and lost your money.” When all Peter did was stare at him for a moment, he shrugged. “That’s all.”

Peter grimaced. “That’s ALL? Why would you tell her that?”

Sy shrugged again. “I don’t know, she’s always bragging about how much money you have. You and I know you can’t lose billions that are spread out in all kinds of assets in a single deal.” He held his hands up. “I never dreamed she’d believe me, honest!”

Looking supremely annoyed, Peter held out his hand for his phone. Sy slowly handed it back, but he said, “You’re not gonna call her, are you?” Peter was already on it. “Yes, I’m gonna call her.”

Sy grabbed the phone again and darted away. This time Peter scuffled with him and both men fell onto the sofa. Muttering an oath under his breath, Peter finally managed to grab the phone and he climbed back to his feet. Staring down at Sy he cried, “Have you lost your mind? Have you lost your freakin’ mind? What is it with you? It’s MY phone! I want to talk to MY girlfriend!”

Sy stared, wide-eyed, and swallowed. “Just listen, you moron!”

“This moron could fire you in a heartbeat.”

Sy’s lips firmed. “Listen to me. I’m your friend. She *broke up with you* because she thinks you’re *broke*! Think about it. Do you want a woman who drops you the moment she thinks you’re not rolling in dough? Is that what you want?”

Peter stared. Sy had a point. He circled the office, then paced back and forth. Hurt and anger twisted together into an ugly knot he didn’t know how to release. He circled again, then stopped at the window and stared out. At this height the skyscrapers shone with late morning sun, their windows gleaming like sheets of gold and platinum. How could he be so blind as to have missed what Lila really was?

Sy knew Peter well enough to keep his mouth shut as he watched.

Peter could understand Lila being upset by the loss, had it been real. Dating a billionaire carried certain assumptions about the lifestyle she could anticipate enjoying if they got married. But to break up with him by voicemail! She’d said, ‘I’m sorry, but this is too much. You should have told me.’ Not even a word about how Peter would feel, must

feel, at such a loss. It was all about her. In a cold wave of reality, he saw that the money meant more to her than he did. He shook his head. Fortunately, he wasn't in love. Lila was vibrantly pretty, red-headed, but spoiled.

Sy came and stood beside him. Together they stared at the city, at the people and cars far below, small as ants. They stood in silence for a full minute. Peter turned to Sy.

"We're through," he said, in a grim tone.

Sy, with a look of deep regret, watched his friend walking back to this desk. "Look, I'm sorry!" he cried. "I didn't mean to cause bad blood between you two—"

Peter turned sharply. "Not with *you*; I'm through with her. You're right. She was crying, but she didn't even ask me about it, didn't say she was sorry for my sake." He shook his head, his lips pursed. "I thought she was crying for me. But you know what? It wasn't about me. She was crying for the money."

## Chapter Three

*May, 2015, three months later*

Lying on a beach towel on his stomach at a tropical beach with his wife Sofia by his side, Sy called Peter at his office at 12:30. The man seldom left the building to eat.

Peter swallowed a bite of sushi—his favorite lunch—and picked up. "Why aren't you here?" he asked.

"Did you forget I'm on vacation?"

"No. Um. Yes. So what's up?"

"I need a favor for an old friend. A fellow teacher from back when I was teaching."

"What does he need?" Peter continued eating.

"Well, here's the thing. He's going out with this beautiful girl, Emma. Her last name's Benson, by the way, but it's spelled differently than yours. Anyway, we like Emma."

Behind him, Sofia cried, "I *love* Emma! She's so sweet!"

"Sofe loves Emma," Sy said.

"I heard," Peter said. "So what's the problem?"

"Well, Ricky—he's my friend—he's suspicious."

"He thinks she's cheating?"

"No, not that." He smiled at Sofia over his shoulder as she rubbed a fresh coat of suntan lotion on his back. "See, he's a high school teacher, and teachers aren't usually rich. But this guy is loaded. His co-workers don't know it. His students don't know it. But he thinks his girlfriend is after it."

"After his money?"

"Yeah."

Peter huffed into the phone. “So why are you calling me?” His tone hardened. “Am I, um, the neighborhood expert in money-hungry women because of Lila?”

“Well, okay, I told him what happened to you. But he doesn’t want you because of that, but because you’re a billionaire,” Sy said smugly. “Ricky knows I work for you, says he can find out super quick about his girlfriend if you’ll help. He thinks she’s fishing for money. So he’s looking for a bigger fish.”

“I see where this is going. I’m not interested.”

“Wait, just think about it! You were hurt by Lila. Wouldn’t you want to help another guy avoid a Lila?”

Peter took a deep breath. He rubbed his temple. He wasn’t exactly fuming over Lila’s betrayal, but her behavior since discovering her mistake had turned him off even more. She’d pleaded with him to take her back until he blocked her calls. Then she pestered Kim until Kim blocked her calls. She was persistent, he’d grant that. She’d attracted him in the beginning because of that strong personality. He wanted nothing to do with her or anyone like her. “I don’t have time for this.”

“ONE night, Pete, that’s all I’m asking. One night.” He winked at Sofia, who grinned.

“Sy—” in a warning tone. “A. Don’t call me Pete. B. What are you talking about? What’s one night?”

“My friend—he’s throwing a big bash for his sister. It’s a big family affair, the last party before she leaves for Italy.”

“So?”

“So, Emma will be there. All you need to do is show up. I’ll introduce you to her—”

“The fortune hunter?”

“Well—we don’t think so, but Ricky says he has reasons. All you have to do is be yourself, the bigger fish.”

“And let her know it.” Peter sighed. “I don’t know. Look, not to sound conceited or anything, but a lot of women go out with me before they know about my money. How do you know she just won’t *like* me more than him?”

Sy hesitated. At 29, Peter was tall, Nordic blond, and good-looking. “You got a point. Don’t be likable. Be obnoxious.”

Peter practically snorted. “Obnoxious? Really?”

“That way we’ll know it’s the money she’s going for if she goes for you.” Slowly he added, “Just—be—rich.”

“When is this party?”

“Friday night.” There was silence on the line and Sy met Sofia’s eyes. He shook his head as if to say it wasn’t gonna work, when suddenly Peter said, “Fine. I’ll do it in protest of all the Lilas in the world. Get me an invite. I’ll be there. Uh, where is there?”

“In Queens, good neighborhood. The invite will have the address. Thanks!” Sy said hurriedly, giving Sofia a smile and a thumbs up. “Leave it to me.”

As he thumbed to end the call, Sofia’s mouth pursed and her brows knit. “It seems unfair to Emma. She’s sweet. She’s ...uh... authentic. I don’t think she’s after Ricky’s money. How would she even know he has any?”

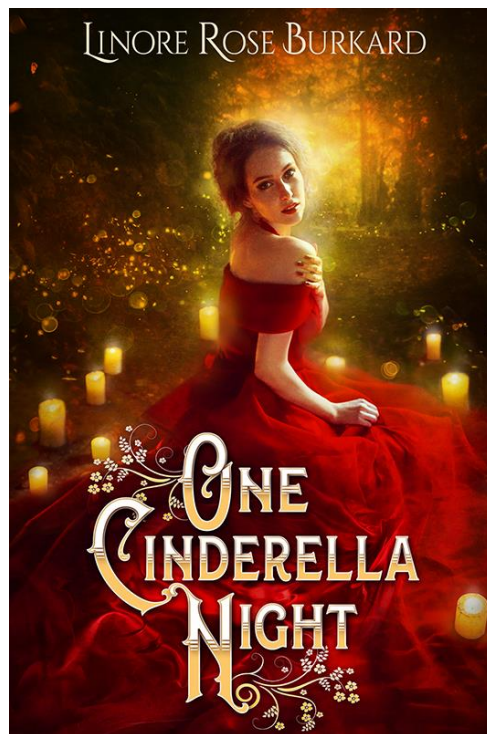
“I know, she’s a good kid,” Sy said. “I told Ricky he’s being paranoid, but he can’t get rid of the idea.”

“That she somehow *divined* he’s got secret millions and is after it?”

Sy rolled over on his beach towel. “I guess it has more to do with him than her. He’s insecure, if you ask me.”

“Because she’s so pretty,” Sofia said.

Sy grinned. “She’s more than pretty.” He looked over to meet her eyes. “Like you.”



If you enjoyed the excerpt, please [pre-order your copy now!](#) You won’t be charged until launch day, and if the book goes on sale before or on that date, you will automatically only pay the sale price. Pre-ordering a book helps authors as it moves the title up on Amazon’s algorithm, at which point they help to get it before readers. *That help makes a huge difference in a book’s success.* I hope you enjoyed the excerpt, and thanks so much! Readers like you are what make it all worthwhile.

Love, Linore

PS: Got a comment about the excerpt? Share your thoughts with me at [Linore@LinoreBurkard.com](mailto:Linore@LinoreBurkard.com).