

LISA CATHERINE PARTEE

Love
FROM THE
ASHES

POWER AND PASSION
BOOK ONE

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Kindle Edition

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CHAPTER 1

The Interview

I BRUSHED A wisp of hair from my cheek as I dashed down the sidewalk, my toes painfully pinched in my thrift store pair of high heels. I misstepped while dodging past a group of people blocking my path, a briefcase nailing me in the knee, and I fought to move forward. Of all days to screw up, today was not the day to take the wrong bus in Boston. But I had, and I was paying for it—my interview with the software development company was in ten minutes.

“Thank...God,” I muttered between gasping breaths, spotting the multistoried office building on the opposite corner. Relieved, I darted into the intersection, noticing a car on my left as soon as my foot left the curb. I abruptly halted, my feet stopping on the asphalt while my upper body and arms shot forward. Pain spread through my hand as it hit the front quarter panel of a black Mercedes sedan.

The driver slammed on his brakes, and a second later, a man in a dark business suit scrambled from the back seat. He rushed toward me, a mixture of irritation and concern darkening his face. Taller than average, he loomed over me while I stood there waiting for his comments, unsure whether I’d scared him or ticked him off.

“That was stupidly reckless. You’re lucky you didn’t cause an accident. The light in your direction was red. Didn’t you bother to look, or were you trying to get yourself killed?” The man glared down at me, his jaw rigid and his gray-blue eyes glimmering with annoyance.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and shook my head. He’d undoubtedly kicked any concern he might have had for me to the curb as soon as he’d seen I didn’t appear hurt. The man was a jerk. And one I didn’t have time to deal with right now.

“Look. It wasn’t intentional, and if I were trying to kill myself, I’d be lying underneath your car. And thanks for your concern. I appreciate it.” I flipped a wayward strand of mahogany hair over my shoulder and marched across the street, my stoplight green and the walk sign lit.

Entering the tiled lobby with its cream-and-white wallpaper, I glanced at my watch. That was it. I was officially late for my interview. After reading the signs on the wall behind the stone-topped reception counter, I hurried into the elevator lobby on my right, which serviced the second through tenth floors. I stood there, waiting, while I tried not to cry. Couldn’t one tiny moment of my life be a plus instead of a minus?

Reaching the second floor, I cautiously exited the elevator. Finding the corridor empty, I leaned against the wall and took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. As ready as I was going to be for my interrogation, I opened the door to the human resources department and approached the reception desk. Although it was a tremendous effort, I managed a sweet smile.

“Good morning. I’m Sofie Fletcher. I have an interview with Mr. Kingsley.”

“I’m sorry. Mr. Kingsley is in an unscheduled management meeting. I expect him back anytime now. Please take a seat, and I’ll call you when he’s available. We have a watercooler in the corner if you’d like something to drink.” The gray-haired woman in the bright pink sweater with pearl buttons motioned toward the adjacent wall before answering the phone.

I hung my head as I walked across the lobby. All my panic and worry had been for nothing. Mr. Kingsley wasn’t even here. After adjusting my dark gray skirt, I sat in one of the upholstered guest chairs against the wall. My outfit was a size too big, and the skirt had shifted with all my running, the back zipper becoming off-center. I couldn’t complain. These clothes were the best Ms. Walker could find at the last minute. She had sprung the interview on me late yesterday after Mr.

Kingsley had informed her that the candidate she'd sent from the women's shelter that morning was unsuitable for the position. He'd requested Ms. Walker send someone else, and after reviewing my work history and background, she'd chosen me for the coveted spot.

Sighing, I leaned back in the chair, wondering what questions he'd ask. That thought made my stomach turn. I didn't want to talk about my past. Regardless of what I wanted, though, if Mr. Kingsley asked a question, he'd expect a decent answer from me in response. If I failed, it could mean missing out on this job, which I desperately needed to turn my life around.

It was the beginning of May, and after two months of counseling following the house fire, I still felt numb. I was told my conscious mind was blocking my emotions, burying them underneath the surface while I hid behind a false front. My therapist encouraged me to discuss my feelings to help bring those bits and pieces to the surface. I preferred to stay silent, erecting a wall around myself and getting back on my feet. This strategy was something I had perfected, having done it repeatedly throughout my twenty-eight years.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

I stared at the clock on the wall, the sound driving me crazy. I imagined Mr. Kingsley asking one of those feared questions and the clock ticking away as I struggled for an answer. Then a buzzer would go off, and he'd yell, "Nope. That's the wrong answer," before deeming me unfit to work here and sending me away. Struggling with my thoughts, I turned my attention to a middle-aged couple entering the lobby. The man had a neatly trimmed beard and wore a light gray business suit. The woman was tall and sophisticated looking, dressed in tan slacks and a blazer with her red hair pulled back into a meticulous bun. The man waved a badge over a security device and opened the door next to it. The couple disappeared through the opening.

I shifted in my seat as the door opened again a few minutes later, the man with the beard standing there looking at me.

“Sofie Fletcher?” the man said, smiling.

I nodded, a lump forming in my throat as I got up and stepped across the threshold into the area I labeled the discomfort zone. Glancing around the nondescript hallway with its gray-patterned industrial carpeting and white walls, I followed the man to a small conference room. He directed me to sit at an eight-person table, the woman in the tan outfit seated across from me. Her face was expressionless as she watched me slide the chair backward and take a seat.

“Good morning. I’m Armand Kingsley, the company’s human resources manager. With me today is Virginia Morgan. Virginia runs our employment assistance program with the women’s shelter. She’s also an owner of the company.”

I tried to swallow the boulder-sized lump in my throat. Mr. Kingsley’s identification of the woman across from me as one of the company’s owners made me even more uncomfortable.

“Did you find our office all right this morning? I see from your employment application you recently moved here from Quincy and lived in New York before that,” Mr. Kingsley said.

“Yes. It was easy to find,” I lied, unwilling to admit my failure at navigating the local bus system.

“Well, let’s get started, then.” Mr. Kingsley divided the paperwork in front of him into two neat stacks. He then peered at me from across the table. “Morgan Systems designs and develops artificial intelligence solutions across a wide array of industries. We are an innovator in the field, having been at the forefront of the industry for over twenty years. At present, we are hiring an office assistant for our marketing division. It’s a temporary-to-permanent placement, meaning if the candidate successfully completes the six-month probationary period, we may offer a permanent position based on our hiring needs at that time. The job entails sorting and distributing the mail, ordering office supplies, filing, miscellaneous general office

duties, and setting up the conference room for meetings and presentations. The hours are eight to five with an hour lunch, Monday through Friday, and the position reports directly to the marketing manager. Virginia, did you have anything to add?”

“No. You summarized the company and position well. Please continue,” Ms. Morgan said without looking at Mr. Kingsley, focusing on the paperwork in front of her as she scanned through the pages.

“Ms. Walker sent us your employment application, reference checks, and some notes about the skills assessment test you took when you arrived at the shelter. According to her, you scored extremely well on the test, especially in math and science. Ms. Walker felt you’d be a good fit for the company. Sofie, we’d like you to tell us why you think you’d be a good candidate for this position.”

I cleared my throat, then recited my preprogrammed answer. This question was the standard one asked right off the bat in every interview I’d ever had. Besides the commonality of the question, I’d had more jobs than I could easily count and a ton more interviews than that, making me an unofficial expert on the process. Trying to steel my nerves and remain calm, I answered question after question as Mr. Kingsley went down the prepared list in front of him.

Finished with his questions, Mr. Kingsley turned to Ms. Morgan. “Virginia, did you have any questions you’d like to ask?”

“I do.” Ms. Morgan’s gray-blue eyes intently scrutinized me from across the table. Their similarity to the man’s eyes as he’d berated me at the street corner earlier caught me off guard. “Sofie, you checked the box on the application asking if an employer had ever fired you, but you didn’t fill in the box below it with an explanation. Can you please tell me the reason the company fired you?”

I looked down at my lap, my fingers pulling at my skirt. This question was the one I feared most. Uncomfortable, I

shifted in my seat as I prepared to recite another preprogrammed answer.

“Sofie. We need you to answer the question,” Ms. Morgan said, her voice softening. “I understand you’re at the women’s shelter because you’ve suffered some hardship. I designed our program to help those women who want to overcome those obstacles and get back on their feet. But to do that, I need a partnership of honesty and trust. We offer our temporary employees an opportunity to gain experience, responsibility, and growth. We expect them to give us their time and commitment and promise to be a valuable employee in return. To give you that opportunity, I need you to provide me with an explanation. The firing must have been longer than five years ago since that was all the history we asked for on the application. All the jobs you listed on the form and attached sheets show you quit those positions.”

I looked up from my lap, my eyes imploring Ms. Morgan to give me a break. I closed them for a moment and then said, “The company fired me for the theft of a digital camera.”

Ms. Morgan sat there staring at me. She had her fingers steepled together with her hands resting on the table, the quiet in the room becoming more suffocating with each passing second.

Finally, giving in, I offered more information. “I was working as a bagger at Conrad Mercantile, the small retail chain. Someone was stealing electronics, and the store manager suspected my husband, who was my boyfriend at the time. He was the warehouse manager. They searched our lockers and found a digital camera in mine.”

Mr. Kingsley straightened in his chair, a disappointed look on his face. “I’m sorry, Sofie, but...”

...we can’t overlook the fact the store fired you for theft, and your work history is unacceptable. You haven’t managed to stay at a job for more than six months. Mr. Kingsley was going to tell me what so many employers had said before him. My firing and unstable history made me a poor candidate for

the job. I bent down to pick up my purse from the floor and realized Mr. Kingsley hadn't finished speaking. Surprised, I studied them from across the table. Ms. Morgan had her hand in the air to stop him from talking, the two of them sharing some unspoken communication.

"Sofie." Ms. Morgan turned to look at me with the same intensity as before. "Did you take the digital camera?"

Mr. Kingsley gasped, his eyes wide, an incredulous look on his face as he stared at Ms. Morgan. Based on his response, I assumed the question was taboo and Ms. Morgan shouldn't have asked it. Either that, or he felt the question unnecessary since I'd already explained that the company had fired me for theft and, in his mind, they wouldn't do that without cause.

Whatever Mr. Kingsley's reason, the question surprised me. No one had cared enough to ask me that before. I raised my head and looked directly at Ms. Morgan, matching the intensity in her gaze. "No. I did not. My husband, who is no longer in the picture, put it there. Although the store was able to prove he was stealing the electronics, I couldn't prove I wasn't involved. There were no security cameras in the area, and the mere fact that the store's head of security found the camera in my locker was cause enough to fire me."

"Can you start on Monday morning?" Ms. Morgan said after a long pause. "I'd like to give you the opportunity to be a member of our team and prove you can be a valuable and trusted employee."

"I...umm. I can. Of course." I was nothing short of shocked. Ms. Morgan's offer wasn't what I'd expected to hear. It wasn't what Mr. Kingsley had expected either, based on the way his mouth was gaping open.

"Good. I'd like you here at eight o'clock. Mr. Kingsley will have some paperwork for you to fill out. Now, let me walk you to the lobby." Ms. Morgan got up from the table and walked to the door, holding it open.

“Thank you,” I said to Mr. Kingsley, still sitting with his mouth open. I followed Ms. Morgan to the exit.

“We’ll see you Monday morning, Sofie.”

“Thank you. I’ll see you Monday.” I stepped into the lobby, expelling a deep breath as soon as the door closed behind me. It was difficult to believe that something good had happened, especially since the score still felt like a thousand to one against me.

I checked my watch when I reached the elevator. It was a quarter to ten, and my bus would be here in fifteen minutes. I didn’t need to rush this time since my stop, which I had passed this morning while sitting on the wrong bus, was across the street. Reaching the ground floor, I walked across the lobby. A voice was suddenly behind me.

“Try looking at the stoplight this time. It might keep another car from almost hitting you. That is unless you truly do have a death wish.”

I swung around toward the condescending voice from earlier this morning. “Thanks for the advice. I wasn’t aware that’s what I was supposed to do.”

“I’m glad I could enlighten you.” The man smirked at me, his air of superiority obvious.

I stared at him, debating whether to make a snarky comment. Then I decided against it. The man wasn’t worth my time. Now that I took a good look at him, his striking physique, short sandy-blond hair, and gray-blue eyes were highly appealing. The mythical Norse god Thor quickly came to my mind. Amused, I realized I had missed that when I’d seen him this morning, and I was sure it must have pissed him off. A man who looked that good had to have a huge ego and be horribly annoying, which explained his attitude now and on the street corner earlier.

“You’re staring. You must see something you like.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t.” I straightened my shoulders, offended by the forwardness of his question.

“Excuse me. I have a bus to catch.” I spun around, catching his look of confusion, before dashing out the door toward the bus stop. I would be back on Monday and hoped working here didn’t include a daily dose of his arrogance.

CHAPTER 2

The First Day

MR. KINGSLEY ESCORTED me from the elevator lobby to a set of double doors. “The sales and marketing divisions are in this office. Finance and our customer service team are further down the corridor, and our engineering, design, and IT departments are on the floor above us.” He opened the door and approached the counter built into the far wall of the reception area, smiling at the young woman sitting there. “Good morning, Connie. I’m here to see Krista.”

“She’s expecting you. You can go in,” the woman said.

Mr. Kingsley scanned his badge and opened the door to the left of the counter. He held it open for me. “I’ll introduce you to our marketing manager, Krista George, and leave you in her capable hands.”

Ready for my first day on the job, I nodded at him as I entered the office and looked around. It was modern looking and not much different from what I’d expected except for the layout. A reception desk occupied the corner to my right, framed on two sides by a tall counter. There was a conference room on my left, the glass-paneled front revealing a small oblong-shaped table. A larger conference room butted against it, the rectangular space running along the office’s side wall with a bank of windows on its far end, overlooking the street. The wall directly opposite us had a line of windows that allowed an abundance of light to flood the office. Their bottom half was obscured from where I stood by a row of cubicles that disappeared behind the wall backing the reception desk.

I’d spent my morning in human resources, filling out paperwork, getting my employee badge, and receiving a brief orientation. Now that I was here, my stomach was in knots. I had stopped at the public library yesterday to do online research on Morgan Systems, stumbling across a photo of the

marketing manager in the process. The information the company made available on its web page was limited, covering the basics of what they did, their location, and a listing of available jobs. There were no blurbs about the owners, and I suspected the company had only posted the photo of the marketing manager online because she'd been a speaker at a recent conference. All I could do at this point was hope she'd be nice. Spotting a tall blonde woman in a crisp white pantsuit beelining it toward us, I could feel my hope crumbling. She had a snobbish air about her and seemed to look right past me as she smiled at Mr. Kingsley.

"Armand. Good morning. I see you have my new employee with you," the woman said.

"I do. This is Sofie Fletcher. Sofie, this is our marketing manager, Krista George." Mr. Kingsley nodded toward Ms. George.

"It's nice to meet you," I said, crossing my fingers I wasn't going to regret my words.

"Same here," Ms. George said, giving me a tight smile, her true feelings seemingly displayed by the cold look in her eyes.

Mr. Kingsley loudly cleared his throat, gaining Ms. George's attention. "I have a meeting in a few minutes, so I'll leave Sofie with you. Sofie, feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns." With that said, Mr. Kingsley turned on his heels and exited through the same door we entered.

"Ms. George, where would you like me to sit?" I said, breaking the silence between us.

"Sofie, I prefer you call me Krista. Ms. George makes me sound old. Seeing how Armand sprung your presence on me on Friday, my schedule is already full, and I have no time for you today. I'll assign Della to get you settled and show you what to do. Della, where are you?" Krista called out.

"I'm here." A woman with pink hair swept up into a ponytail appeared from around the corner. "What do you want

her to work on?”

“Have her sort the mail. I have some phone calls to make. She’s in your hands.” Krista abruptly strode away, disappearing around the corner without saying goodbye.

I stood there staring at the space where she had stood, stunned by her urgency to push me off on someone else. “I know I just got here, but did I do something wrong?” I whispered, turning to Della.

“No, you didn’t. It’s not about you. It’s the way management filled the position,” Della said as she scratched the back of her neck. “I heard from someone in sales that Krista’s upset the company’s owner went to whatever placement service you’re with and brought you on board without her input or approval. Krista wanted to snag Alice from human resources for the position, but the owner didn’t let her. Just ignore her. She’ll get over it.”

“That might be hard to do if my new boss doesn’t even want me here.”

“Don’t worry about it. Krista can be a witch anyway. Just stay away from her, and you’ll do fine.”

Now my head was reeling. This whole scenario was a nightmare. A coworker I hadn’t officially met had just labeled my new boss a witch and recommended that I stay away from her. That was on top of informing me I’d taken a job that was supposed to go to someone else. If things didn’t turn around for the better, I doubted I would last the week, and at this point, my immediate hope was to get through the day in one piece. Thinking these people were odd, I eyed the woman next to me. She was dressed in orange pants and a bright flower-patterned blouse and wore neon purple nail polish and plum lipstick. Her rose-scented perfume smelled unexpectedly fresh, which was the opposite of the cheap and overpowering floral fragrances my mother always wore. If I had to guess, I’d say the woman in front of me liked to stand out in a crowd.

“Wow. I didn’t even introduce myself. That was rude,” the woman said with a cackle. She stuck her hand out. “I’m Della Nash. I’m one of Krista’s marketing analysts. There’s two of us, me and Chad.”

I shook Della’s hand, eyeing her warily. “I’m Sofie Fletcher, but you probably already know that. So where is my workstation?”

“Behind you. You’ll be working at this desk.”

I walked around the counter and sat in the chair, stashing my purse and lunch bag in one of the drawers. My workspace had a computer, printer, adding machine, and a variety of office supplies. An inbox sat on the counter, and a row of cabinets was against the wall behind my desk. “So, where do I start?”

“With the mail. That task will be one of the easiest parts of your job,” Della said, standing on the other side of the counter. “The girl that had this job before you moved out of state. She created an SOP for each of her duties before she left.”

“What’s an SOP?” I’d heard the term but wasn’t sure what it stood for, especially since this was my first office job. All my earlier positions had been in the retail or hospitality industries. I’d gotten my first job watering plants at a nursery when I was fourteen. After that, I’d bagged groceries and miscellaneous merchandise, moving up to stocking shelves and eventually cashiering. When I couldn’t get one of those jobs, I’d worked in restaurants, bussing tables or waiting on customers. Although I’d had more jobs than I could quickly count, I had managed to stay employed most of the time, with my only periods of unemployment being when I moved from one place to another, which my husband and I did abnormally often.

“SOP stands for standard operating procedure. It’s a document that outlines the step-by-step instructions for a task. That white binder next to your phone is the manual Trudy created before she left. It’s pretty detailed, so you shouldn’t have any problems. Krista wants you to process the mail. That

pile to your left is what's left over from Friday. With no one at this desk, staff steps in when they can to do the tasks. Now that you're here, everything should get back to normal."

I grabbed the binder and leafed through it, seeing that the SOPs placed inside were in alphabetical order. Flipping to the M tab, I found the instructions for the mail. Trudy's instructions were clear and easy to follow, so I was sure I'd manage just fine.

"So, are you from around here?" Della said, leaning against the counter and appearing eager to chat. "Krista didn't tell us anything about you."

"No. I recently moved here."

"From where?"

"A couple of different places. I moved a few times."

"Are you married? I'm single and still looking for Mr. Right."

Now Della was getting too personal. Since I had moved so often, I'd never had a close friend or confidant. And I wasn't about to feed my private information to a gossipy chatterbox because she was curious.

Della glanced down at my hand. "You're not wearing a ring, so I assume you're not married."

Annoyed at her prying chitchat, I closed the binder and placed it on the desk. "I'm not in a relationship. Now, if you don't mind, I should work on the mail. I want to keep from making Krista more irritated than she already is." I could imagine the direction our conversation would go if I mentioned my husband had died tragically in a house fire. It would be even worse if I told her my marriage had been far from stable or happy.

"You're right. I need to get back to work and leave you alone. Knowing Krista, she'll check on you and expect you to have some of the work already done."

“Oh, one thing before you go. You said the mail was one of the easiest parts of my job. What’s the hardest part?”

“Dealing with Krista, but I’ll help you with that.” Della suddenly turned and disappeared around the corner.

With a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, I returned to my work. Following Trudy’s step-by-step instructions on processing the mail, I managed to complete my first task. The challenging part was figuring out where everyone sat since no one had given me a tour of the office. I had to walk around with my mail basket while I read everyone’s nameplates. My presence surprised some employees, their expressions telling me they were unaware the company had hired me. Others smiled pleasantly and uttered a short greeting, and on occasion, one of the employees would comment that I must be the new hire and welcome me to the team. Whatever the mode of communication was between the staff, not everyone was on the same channel.

“It’s lunchtime,” Della said two hours later, standing at my counter. “You should join Adam and me. He’s one of the company’s software engineers and works on the floor above us. We meet downstairs and get lunch at one of the restaurants in the area.”

“I brought my lunch.”

“That’s okay. You can still join us. It’ll be fun. Come on.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. I’m trying to work through Trudy’s SOP on the filing system, so I’m not ready to go to lunch yet.” Although I was starving, I didn’t want to go through another round of questioning, which I was sure Della would do if I joined her.

“You’ll have to join us tomorrow. Adam’s a kick. You’ll like him.”

I nodded my head without uttering a commitment. It was better that way. After Della left the office, I waited a few minutes, grabbed my lunch bag and purse from the drawer, and headed downstairs. Finding an empty table on the

outskirts of the large courtyard between the back of our building and the one next door, I took a seat. A bakery and café, fast-food Mexican restaurant, and pizza place fronted the courtyard. Hungry, I devoured my peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwich. Finished with my lunch, I leaned back in my chair and glanced across the plaza, spotting Della and a man I assumed to be Adam walking toward me.

“Hey, Sofie. This is Adam.”

I eyed the man standing next to Della. Tall and thin, he wore a yellow-and-tan tailored button-down shirt and a brown pair of slacks. Tortoiseshell-framed eyeglasses adorned his lightly freckled face, and he had meticulously styled short strawberry-blond hair. The two of them were quite an eye-catching pair.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sofie. Della told me today was your first day with the company,” Adam said, taking a seat in the chair across from me. He suddenly made a face and reached down, pulling something from underneath his leg. After examining the underside of the table, he placed a small screw next to my lunch bag. “It must have come loose. There’s a screw missing from the bottom of the table. Speaking of screws, do you know how many rivets the builders used on the Eiffel Tower?”

“What?” I frowned, my eyes darting back and forth between Adam and Della. Had I somehow entered the Twilight Zone, where my coworkers were a bunch of crazy people? Why would I know the answer, and why would I care?

“Ignore Adam. He’s full of useless trivia. I keep telling him he should be a contestant on *Jeopardy!* It would be an easy win for him.”

“It’s not all useless, and just so you know, there are two and a half million rivets in the Eiffel Tower,” Adam said smugly.

“Great. I’ll remember that in case you ask that ridiculous question again.” Della shook her head at Adam as she pulled

out the chair next to him and plopped herself down.

“So, what do you think so far?” Adam said, eyeing me curiously.

“About what?”

“About the company. I heard Krista was her typical rude self, but other than her, everyone is pretty nice. It’s a great company to work for, although we’ll have to see what direction it goes now that the old man passed away and the son is running the place.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I could feel a scowl building, and I did my best to hide it. I had never been interested in gossip and didn’t care to partake in it now.

“Ooh, you don’t know anything about the company. Adam and I can fill you in,” Della said conspiratorially. “I’ve been with the company for six years, and Adam has been here for eight. The old owner, Wallace Morgan, was a software engineer and created Morgan Systems a little over twenty years ago after working his way up to an executive position with another company. He was a nice guy and super intelligent. His wife, Virginia Morgan, still has a hand in running the business. Although she appears more comfortable with the human resources side of it.”

“We lost the old man a year ago when he had a heart attack and died,” Adam said, jumping into the conversation. “The son, Reid Morgan, stepped in to help his mother run the company after his death. He was rarely around when his dad was alive and always seemed disinterested in the business. So, we’re all waiting to see whether he can continue to move the company forward as his father did or if he’ll be a failure and drag it into the dirt.”

“So why wasn’t the son involved in the company before Mr. Morgan died?” I said, pretending to be interested, although I had only listened to half of what the two of them had said.

“That’s the juicy part.” Della scooted to the edge of her chair, appearing eager to continue. “The son is a player and didn’t stick around much, and I heard he used to jet-set all over the world. There are supposedly several pictures in his office where he’s posing with different women. He even had a brief affair with Krista a couple of years ago. I heard she didn’t want to break up and still wants him back.” Della had lowered her voice, which was now a little more than a whisper.

“Sounds messy.” I gave a disinterested shrug of my shoulder, causing a look of disappointment to transform Della’s face. It was as if she’d expected me to take the bait and excitedly ask a bunch of questions, eager to hear their stories. “Well, my lunch is over. I better get back to work. I’ll see you later.” I stood and walked away, leaving them to wallow in their gossip.



“KRISTA HAS A presentation meeting and wants me to show you how to set up the large conference room,” Della said later that afternoon. She was standing at my counter, watching me.

“That must mean now.” Feeling defeated, I tossed the stack of notes I was holding in my hand onto my desk and got up from my chair. I’d carefully followed the instructions in the SOP binder on processing an office supply order. Now I was stuck trying to decipher the scribbled notes staff had left in my inbox listing what they needed. Besides the fact that I was unfamiliar with the terminology, most of their requests were no better than chicken scratch.

“It does mean now, and we have to hurry. Krista’s presentation is in twenty minutes.”

“Does Krista always give such short notice?” I said, exasperated.

“Not usually. The last thing Krista wants is some screwup to happen because we rushed and forgot something. It’s weird, but I think she’s more upset about your getting hired instead of Alice than everybody thought.”

“What’s with this Alice person? Who is she?”

“Alice is the office assistant in human resources. Rumor has it she’s Krista’s eyes and ears in the company. Some call her Krista’s rat.”

That was great. I had one more person to worry about besides Krista. Shaking my head, I followed Della to the large conference room. A laptop was at the head of the table, and a stack of stapled packets sat next to it.

“I already photocopied the PowerPoint presentation. Next time you’ll have to do it. Krista said she expects twelve people in here besides her, so put six packets in front of the chairs on the left side of the table and the rest on the other side. After that, take the stack of coasters on the cabinet underneath the television monitor and lay them on the table where you’ve left the packets. Then you’ll have to use the cart in the supply room to bring bottles of water in here to place on the coasters. Get me when you’re ready, and I’ll show you how to set up the presentation on the laptop.”

“Got it.” I rushed to get the room set up. As soon as I set the last bottle of water on the table, Della poked her head into the room.

“It looks like you’re ready. I’ll show you how to set up the laptop.” Della went to the head of the table and waited for me to join her. “We use a wireless system here. That thing plugged into the side of the laptop is a transmitter. There’s a receiver connected to the television monitor pairing the two pieces of equipment together. Our tech people have the laptop connected to the network, so once you log on, you’ll have access to our department’s folders. Go ahead and log in, and I’ll show you where to find the presentation. It’ll be the same username and password you use for the computer at your desk.”

I logged in as instructed and stepped back so Della could show me what to do next.

“Okay. You’ll need to click on the folder at the bottom of the laptop’s screen to open up our network directory. See all

the drives? Now you'll need to click on the J drive and then click on the folder labeled 'Marketing.' Only our department has access to this folder. Find the subfolder labeled 'Krista's Presentations' and open it. See? There's the presentation with today's date in the subject line. We'll open it to make sure it loads properly and is ready to go for Krista when she begins her meeting. And that's all there is to it. Easy-peasy."

"Huh. I thought it would be more complicated than that. I better put the cart away before everyone gets here. Thanks for the help."

"No problem." Della left the conference room and headed toward her office.

I had just put the cart back in the supply room and was returning to my desk when our office door opened, and a group of people entered. I stood frozen in place when I recognized a familiar face. My human irritant, otherwise known as my mythical Norse god, Thor, was standing by my desk, staring at me.

"It's you," the man said, smirking at me. He turned to the gentleman next to him. "Ryan, can you take Jody and Brian into the conference room? I'll be in there in a minute."

"No problem. Okay, if you could follow me, please. The conference room is this way." Ryan extended his arm toward the back corner of the office. He quickly followed the other two as they headed in that direction.

"Well, aren't you a surprise," the man said as he casually leaned against my desk, his arms folded across his chest. "You're like my shadow."

"Hardly. You're like mine," I said, feeling annoyed. I stepped behind my desk and rifled through my in-basket, trying my best to ignore the man.

"You don't like me much, do you?" The man said, his body stiffening.

"I can't say that I do. Based on your more than memorable comments on Friday, I'd say you're arrogant and think you're

above everyone else.”

“Hmm. Let me get this straight. You don’t know me, but you just called me arrogant and, in summary, a conceited snob. Is that correct?” The man pursed his lips as he stared at me with his stunning gray-blue eyes.

“What’s going on here?” Krista’s voice was sharp as she came around the corner and spotted the two of us at my desk, an entourage of sales and marketing staff behind her. She waved the group toward the conference room.

“It looks like you have a new employee. I was about to introduce myself and ask her name,” the man said without missing a beat.

“This is Sofie Fletcher. She started with us today.” Krista turned and scowled at me. “Sofie, you need to get back to work.”

“Of course.” I quickly obeyed, taking a seat at my desk and opening my email.

“Shall we?” Krista said, her voice overly sweet as she motioned the man toward the conference room.

I glanced at him as he walked away, surprised to see him watching me over his shoulder. I lifted my chin and gave him a defiant look. Yes, he was a conceited snob. His words sounded much better than mine. I’d have to remember them.

“What are you doing? Are you trying to get yourself fired?” Della said, sounding incredulous as she rushed toward my desk from the smaller conference room. “I was putting back the chair I had borrowed and heard everything. You’re crazy to talk to him like that.”

“I know I shouldn’t have said anything, but I couldn’t help it. I’d accidentally stepped in front of his car on Friday, and he was a bit of a jerk about it.”

Della threw her head back and stared at the ceiling. Then she looked at me and shook her head. “You have no idea who he is, do you?”

“No.” I looked at her warily, waiting for the bomb to drop.

“That was the owner’s son, Reid Morgan. He’s the man who now runs the company. I’d be shocked if he didn’t fire you.” Della walked away, muttering something under her breath.

I leaned my head into my palm. I’d been threatened and looked down on my entire life. I fought like a starved wolf to survive and knew it had made me sarcastic and bitter. But it was no excuse for what I had done. Why couldn’t I learn to curb my tongue for once? I desperately needed this job, and my rude behavior was about to get me fired. Devastated, I wiped my cheek as I glanced toward the conference room. Reid Morgan was watching me through the glass. I put my head down, not wanting him to look at me, and sorted the mail that had come in this afternoon.

I was sitting at my desk an hour later when the conference room door opened, and the attendees exited the meeting. I looked away, pretending not to notice, while I sorted a stack of documents that needed filing. Sensing someone standing by my desk, I looked up, meeting Reid Morgan’s eyes.

“Well, Sofie Fletcher, I can’t say it was a pleasure, but it was certainly interesting to meet you. I look forward to our next conversation.” Mr. Morgan tipped his head at me. Then he briskly walked toward the door.

Confused by his words, I turned to stare at him, catching a glimpse of Krista watching us from across the office. He’d said he looked forward to our next conversation. Did that mean I wasn’t getting fired?

CHAPTER 3

Reid Morgan

I TOOK THE stack of mail from my in-basket on the counter and placed it next to my computer. I figured I'd sort and distribute it right after lunch. I'd been with the company for two weeks, and with the help of Trudy's SOP manual, I was doing fine, or at least I thought I was. Nearing the noon hour, I figured I'd leave for lunch a minute or two early so I could avoid Della. She and Adam had intruded on my lunch hour every day since I'd been here. Rather than eat my sandwich in the courtyard, where I was an easy target, I was going to splurge for once and have lunch at Beck's Bakery and Café. Although I couldn't afford it, my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches had become unappealing, and I needed a break from Della and Adam.

Reaching the restaurant fronting the courtyard, I got in line to order. The place was busy with several people in front of me, the line quickly growing until it reached the door. I was browsing the menu written in chalk on the giant board above the counter when the person standing behind me took several steps forward. Whoever it was had taken one step too close for my comfort. I was about to turn around and say something snarky when I heard the person's voice behind me.

"The rotisserie chicken pita is good. That's what I'm getting."

I recognized the man's voice. It was the one I couldn't seem to avoid. I spun around and arched my brow at Mr. Morgan. "In that case, I'll get the barbeque beef sandwich."

"What? You don't trust me?"

"No, I don't. You tried to run me down at the street corner, remember? Thankfully, you had someone driving you. Otherwise, I might be dead. Your driving is probably as bad as your manners."

Mr. Morgan narrowed his eyes, his face darkening. “Considering you’re the one who stepped into the street against a red light, your comment is hardly justified.” After a short pause, the corner of his mouth visibly twitched. “You know what, stick your tongue out.”

“Excuse me?” I stared at him, shocked at his request. He had to be slightly crazy.

“I want to see if your tongue is as pointed as your words.” He chuckled when he heard me suck in my breath.

“I’m not sure if anyone has told you, but you’re not funny.”

“Hmm. I could have sworn I was,” Mr. Morgan said, a tinge of sarcasm in his tone.

I held my tongue and spun around. I had a whole vocabulary of words that were dying to come flying out of my mouth. I tapped my foot on the floor while I waited in line. I needed the two people in front of me to speed it up. I wanted to get away from the arrogant jerk.

The man in front of me finished ordering his lunch, and I stepped to the counter.

“Hi, can I get the barbeque beef sandwich and water?”

“Sure.” The young man placed a cup on the counter. “You can get water from the beverage dispenser. Your order comes to fifteen dollars and sixty-five cents.”

“I’ll pay for her order. You can add it to mine,” Mr. Morgan said from behind me.

“Could you ignore his request, please? I’m perfectly capable of paying for my lunch.”

The employee nodded at me before taking the twenty-dollar bill I handed him.

“Hang on. I want to pay for your lunch. Consider it my olive branch for, as you so nicely put it, trying to run you down.”

“More like poison ivy,” I said under my breath. I turned to Mr. Morgan. “I’d prefer not to owe you or anyone else any favors. It keeps misunderstandings from happening.”

“Fine. I was trying to be nice.”

“Thank you.” I took my change and a numbered stand from the employee and grabbed my cup from the counter. “Excuse me.” I walked past Mr. Morgan and searched for a table. Seeing a gentleman getting up from a prime spot by the window, I hurried toward him, intending to snag it before someone else could. I had just gotten settled when Mr. Morgan was standing there, looming over me.

“Since you wouldn’t allow me to buy your lunch, may I join you at your table?”

“Why?”

Mr. Morgan stared at me with the most incredulous look on his face. I silently chuckled. It seemed he wasn’t used to people turning him down.

“Is it solely me you find so disagreeable, or are you always this cynical?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m simply trying to enjoy a quiet lunch by myself. Is that a problem?”

“Of course not, Ms. Fletcher.” Mr. Morgan opened his mouth to say something else and then closed it, apparently changing his mind.

One of the café employees came to the table, effectively ending our awkward moment. She placed a tray in front of me containing my sandwich and picked up my numbered stand. She turned to walk away, her eyes blatantly raking Mr. Morgan from head to foot, an appreciative smile spreading across her face.

He ignored her and turned back to face me, interrupted for a second time when Krista called out his name.

“I’m glad I ran into you,” Krista said, reaching the table. She smiled at Mr. Morgan and ignored me as if I didn’t exist.

“I had a couple of ideas I wanted to bounce off you. Could we discuss it during lunch since we’re both here?”

“Sure,” Mr. Morgan said. He turned and looked at me. “Maybe we can try this another time Ms. Fletcher.”

“Or not.” I gave Mr. Morgan an exaggeratedly sweet smile.

An amused grin lit up his face, and he shook his head. “You certainly are blunt and one of a kind. Enjoy your lunch, Ms. Fletcher.” He turned to walk away and nearly ran over the café employee standing there with his lunch tray in her hand. He took the tray and handed her his stand. Then he walked away, Krista following him toward a table against the wall.

The café employee stood there for a second, gazing hungrily at Mr. Morgan’s backside.

I frowned, her ogling bothering me for some odd reason. Shrugging it off, I got up to fill my cup. I had just set it under the ice dispenser when Mr. Morgan walked up next to me. I pushed the button for the ice, and the chunks launched from the machine like a rocket, knocking my cup over. Mr. Morgan and I both reached for my cup, his hand landing on mine. I nervously looked up, meeting his gray-blue gaze.

“Let me help you with that,” Mr. Morgan said, pulling his hand away.

“I’ve got it, thank you.” I silently filled my cup with water and walked back to my table, sensing a pair of eyes on my back. I stared out the window as I ate my lunch, mindlessly watching the scores of people in the courtyard. A string of fragmented thoughts came and went as I sat there, shifting from wondering what they’d have for dinner at the shelter tonight and when I’d get a new roommate to visualizing the work sitting on my desk and analyzing how long it would take for me to get back on my feet. Through it all, I was more than aware of my mythical Norse god sitting at the table against the wall. At one point, I even wondered if I should have let him

join me. Then I scoffed at my ridiculousness at entertaining the thought.

Finished with my lunch, I headed back to the office. I hadn't been at my desk long when I heard a sound and looked up. Della was standing at my counter, looking puzzled.

"Adam and I looked for you at lunch. Where did you go?" Della said.

"I went to the café and bakery next to the courtyard. I needed a change of pace from my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

"I don't blame you. I couldn't eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every day. But that's me. Anyway, Adam and I are going to see a movie tonight, and you're welcome to join us. It'll be fun. We're going to see *Prey*. It's an action thriller that's supposed to be a prequel to that old movie *Predator*."

"I'll pass, but thanks for the invitation. I need to take care of a couple of things after work." I felt terrible fibbing like that, but I didn't want to hang out with them after work. Their presence during the day was more than enough, and I preferred to keep any socializing with my coworkers to a minimum. There were fewer issues that way.

"No problem. Next time, then." Della seemed to skip away, her demeanor easygoing as usual.

I returned to my project, which entailed reorganizing the files in the cabinet behind my desk. After Chad and I had spent a solid hour trying to find a document he was looking for yesterday, we realized the label on its folder made no sense. Although she had meticulously created the SOP binder, Trudy's filing system was sorely lacking. I wanted to change it so staff could easily find the documents they needed.

Glancing at the clock a while later, I was surprised to see the time, the afternoon flying by. I'd spent the last several hours laboring on my project, but it was only partially complete. I'd have to finish it on Monday since it was five o'clock and time for me to go home. I shut down my computer

and grabbed my belongings, heading out the office door a minute later.

I was watching the traffic go by while I waited for my bus at the stop across the street when I noticed a black Mercedes drive past. The man in the back seat made eye contact with me. It was Mr. Morgan.

The car made a sudden and seemingly unplanned left turn and disappeared around the corner. Surprised by the driver's careless maneuver, I couldn't help but wonder what he was doing. I shrugged and turned my attention to the bus, which had stopped at the light. The signal turned green, and the bus came through the intersection and pulled up to the curb. Then I saw the black Mercedes behind it, the driver circling the block and now pulling over.

Was Mr. Morgan looking for me? If so, why? I couldn't imagine any reason he'd have to talk to me. Unwilling to find out if I was his target, I dashed to the door of the bus and hurriedly climbed the steps. Taking a seat in the back, I looked out the window as the bus pulled away from the curb. Mr. Morgan had exited the car and was standing on the sidewalk, staring at the departing bus. I leaned back, feeling confused and relieved, his curious action far too close for comfort.

CHAPTER 4

Moving Forward

I TOOK ANOTHER bite of my oatmeal, enjoying the early-morning quiet of the dining room at the women's shelter. I usually came here before everyone else, wanting to have my breakfast and leave before most residents came downstairs. I needed to catch my bus in a half hour, preferring to get to work a little early. The next scheduled bus would get me to work right on time but leave no room for mishaps. And getting to work late wasn't an option, especially since Krista seemed to be keeping her eye on me. Hearing the click-clack of heels on the tile floor, I looked up and spotted Ms. Walker in the doorway.

"Good morning, Sofie. Could you please see me in my office after you finish your breakfast?" Ms. Walker said.

"Did I do something wrong?" I peered warily at her, feeling uneasy. I couldn't think of a reason why she'd need to talk to me.

"Of course not. I have good news, not bad, and I wanted to catch you before you left for work."

"Okay. I'm almost done. I'll be there in a minute."

"No rush. I'll be in my office when you're ready." Ms. Walker smiled as she turned away. She left the dining room and disappeared down the corridor to her office.

I finished my oatmeal and took my bowl and spoon into the kitchen, handing them to Nelda, who was preparing breakfast for the others. After smoothing the top of my hair and tucking a wayward strand that had slipped from my ponytail behind my ear, I trekked down the hallway to Ms. Walker's office. Reaching the end of the corridor, I stood silently in her doorway.

“You’re here. Please sit down.” Ms. Walker motioned to the chair in front of her desk.

I sat on the edge of the wooden seat, fidgeting with my blouse’s hem while I waited for her to speak.

“Our program coordinator told me yesterday that we have a vacant unit in one of the low-income apartment buildings affiliated with our shelter. The rent is on a sliding scale based on income, and our generous donors supplied a voucher for the first month’s rent. Since you’ve been at Morgan Systems for a month now, and Ms. Morgan reports you’re doing well in your job, I wanted to offer the apartment to you. It’s a small studio unit in a refurbished building in the North End. Are you interested?”

“Yes! Definitely, yes,” I said gleefully. I could feel myself smiling from ear to ear.

“Well, let’s procure it for you.” Ms. Walker pulled a folder from the cabinet behind her and opened it on her desk. “You’ll need to go there after work and talk to the apartment manager, Ms. Vasquez. I’ve made an appointment for you for six o’clock. Here’s the bus schedule and a map of the area. I circled the location of the apartment complex. You’ll have to walk a few blocks from your job to the bus stop and then switch buses at the halfway point to get there.” Ms. Walker pushed the paperwork toward me before grabbing two more documents from the folder. “Here’s the voucher for the first month’s rent and the application for the apartment. I’ve filled out most of it, but you’ll need to complete the rest and sign it. Do you have any questions?”

“None that I can think of right now.”

“If you think of anything later, get a hold of me. Good luck, Sofie. This move is a monumental step in getting back on your feet, and you more than deserve the chance.”

“Thank you, Ms. Walker. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” I picked up the application and the other paperwork and practically skipped down the hall.



IT HAD BEEN challenging to stay focused at work, my thoughts constantly flipping back to my appointment this evening. I'd spent the last two hours glancing at the clock on the wall behind my desk, wishing it would move faster. But the time had crept by, and I still had a few minutes to go. I couldn't wait to check out the studio apartment, reviewing the bus route and schedule several times to ensure I understood which bus to catch and when to be at my stop.

The minute hand on the clock finally struck the hour, and I felt relieved as I grabbed my purse and lunch bag from my drawer. I was about to head to the exit when Krista came out of the conference room and called my name.

"Sofie, I need you to scan my notes and email them to Jason since he couldn't make our meeting." Krista dropped her notepad on my counter and turned away without so much as a thank-you or goodbye.

Jason was our assistant marketing manager and Krista's right-hand person. He was far more skilled to run the department than she was, besides being an all-around better human being and a more inclusive supervisor. Krista had favorites and only shared information with those in her circle, which was why so few in the department knew the company had hired me. If you weren't privy to what was going on through direct communication from Krista, you had to learn about it through the gossip channels as Della did. Frowning at the notepad on my counter, I reached out to pick it up, knowing any delay would make me miss my bus.

"I'll take care of it," Della whispered. She had followed Krista from the conference room and stopped at my desk. "I saw the way you kept looking at the clock. You must have an appointment or something. I'll make sure Jason gets the notes."

"Are you sure?" I studied Della, wondering if I should trust her.

“Yes, I’m sure. Now go on. Krista has a meeting over in sales right now and won’t even know you’re gone.”

“Thanks.” I hurried to the door, hoping I wasn’t making a mistake. I caught the elevator in the hallway as the door was closing and squeezed inside, my body wedged between two men in business suits. Once I reached the lobby, I sprinted across the tile and trekked to the bus stop.

I stepped off the bus thirty-five minutes later, two blocks from the apartment complex. Although I still had time, I hurried down the street, eager for my appointment. When I got there, a woman buzzed me into the red brick building and met me in the hallway. She directed me into a small office.

“I’m Rosa Vasquez. You can call me Rosa. Go ahead and take a seat. Ms. Walker told me to expect you. Do you have the application and voucher with you?”

“I do.” I sat in the guest chair in front of Rosa’s desk and dug the paperwork from my purse. I handed it to her, studying her as she looked it over. Her face looked young, but she had streaks of gray in her dark hair. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t figure out her age.

“It looks like you have everything filled out appropriately. I have the references that Ms. Walker emailed to me this morning, so let’s have you take a look at the apartment before you sign the rental agreement.”

“That’s okay. I’ll go ahead and sign the agreement.”

“You don’t want to look at the apartment first? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. At this point, what it looks like doesn’t matter. I’m happy to have four walls around me that I can call home.”

Rosa smiled at me, and I got the impression she knew perfectly well how I felt. She placed a document and pen in front of me and patiently waited while I looked the paper over.

The agreement was pretty standard, listing what you could and couldn’t do while living here, along with the amount of

rent and the due date. I signed the document and pushed it across the desk to Rosa.

She looked it over and then grabbed a set of keys from her drawer. “Let’s go upstairs and see your new home. The apartment is directly above my office.”

I was excited, my steps light, as Rosa took me upstairs and led me down the corridor to the end apartment. She unlocked the door and stood back so I could enter the unit first. I walked inside and stopped in the middle of the room, where I slowly turned in a circle to check the place out. An alcove housing a small refrigerator, stove, kitchen sink, and cabinetry was to my left. The bathroom was in the far corner, the open door revealing a toilet, sink, and a combination bathtub and shower. A floor-to-ceiling open bookshelf separated an area in front of the windows from the rest of the room—the space intended to be a makeshift bedroom.

I turned to Rosa, more than happy with my new home. “I love it. Thank you.”

“Then I’ll leave you alone to enjoy it.” Rosa pulled a business card from her pocket and handed it to me. “My apartment is downstairs, attached to the office. If you need anything, my phone number is on the card. Have a good night.”

“Thank you. Good night.” I walked Rosa to the door, closing it after she walked out. Overcome with a feeling of hope, which had eluded me for so long I could barely remember what it felt like, I lay down on the worn carpet and closed my eyes.

It had seemed so out of reach, but I now had my own place. It was the first time I was by myself rather than sharing a room with others or living with someone who surrounded me with disreputable drama, a sordid lifestyle, or bouts of white-knuckled terror, causing me to hide. My childhood and teen years had been deplorable. My life improved after I met and moved in with my husband, Dean, who was fourteen years older than me. It was right after I had turned fifteen. Dean had

supplied an escape from what I could only describe as a living hell. Although better, my life with him hadn't been good, his gambling and drinking addictions destroying any chance we had at happiness. When his behavior progressed to lying and stealing to support his gambling habit, our marriage disintegrated to the point of no return. Dean lost job after job, and we constantly moved, his drinking worsening as he wallowed in self-pity.

It all ended when Dean caught our rental on fire. That was the night he left me with nothing except the clothes on my back and such an overload of emotional baggage that it was doubtful I'd ever crawl out of the hole he had dug for me.

Feeling tears spill, I rolled onto my side and curled into a ball. This apartment was my home, and I wasn't going to let anyone take it from me.



I HAD GOTTEN up early this morning, too excited to sleep and more than ready to move into my new home. After stuffing the last of my possessions into the gently used piece of luggage Ms. Walker gave me, I looked around the room I had shared with several different women over the last few months. Leaving the shelter opened up a slot for someone else, and I hoped that person found the support and opportunities to get back on her feet as I had. With mixed emotions, I went downstairs to say goodbye, toting everything I owned in the medium-sized hard-shell suitcase.

“I’m proud of you, Sofie,” Ms. Walker said, hugging me goodbye.

I smiled at her. She’d genuinely been my savior. God only knew what would have happened to me without her. “Thank you, Ms. Walker, for everything you’ve done for me.”

“You’re more than welcome, and I want you to remember you earned and deserved it.”

I left the shelter and walked to the bus stop, my body tingling and alive as I reflected on the possibilities ahead. But I

was also nervous. I was on a new path and taking a big step. Whichever way it curved and turned, the future had to be far better than the past.

Finally reaching my apartment, I took my suitcase upstairs to unpack. I laughed when I stared at it spread wide open on the floor. With no hangers or furniture, it would be my makeshift dresser for a while. Needing to find a store for the bare necessities, I reached into my purse for the map that Ms. Walker had given me. She'd circled key places and made notes all over it. There was a retail store southwest of me toward the Beacon Hill neighborhood. It didn't appear to be a terribly long walk, its location on the other side of the interstate.

Setting out on foot, I made it to the store in a little over ten minutes, its location closer than I had thought. I grabbed a cart and filled it with my most pressing needs, a small air mattress and a cheap sheet, blanket, pillow, and pillowcase topping my list. After paying for my items, I stashed them in the folding utility cart I had bought and headed back to the apartment.

Eyeing the donut shop on the corner, I stepped inside, my gaze settling on a chocolate-glazed crème-filled donut. I added the mouthwatering treat to my basket and headed home, satisfied I had what I needed. I hadn't gone far when a couple came up behind me. Acting like I had a disease, they skirted around me in a wide arc, the woman giving me a look of disgust when I met her gaze.

"That's nauseating. Now the homeless are hanging out over here. The city better do something about it and put those people somewhere else. Better yet, they need to get off their lazy butts and get a job," the woman loudly said to her companion.

The man turned and gave me a condescending look before wrinkling his nose as if my presence repulsed him.

I shook my head. The woman's words and the man's actions felt like barbs in my skin. Because I wore a faded pair of baggy sweatpants, which were the only pair I owned, and pushed a cart full of bags down the street, the couple

automatically labeled me homeless. So what if I was or had been? I was human and had feelings just like they did. Some of us couldn't help being born into disgustingly degenerate families who sucked the life out of others and did their best to squash our hopes and dreams. Few made it out of that environment unscathed. I was one of the lucky ones and riddled with scars.

Reaching my apartment, I took my cart and remaining shreds of dignity upstairs. It took a while, but I washed the few housewares I had bought, pumped up my mattress, and made up my new bed. I stepped back and surveyed my personal space. In my eyes, it was perfect.

Dinner consisted of a bottle of water and a bowl of chicken noodle soup, which I heated in the small pot I had bought, along with a glass bowl and some silverware. Finished with my gourmet meal, I placed my donut on the napkin spread across my lap and hummed "Happy Birthday" to myself. It didn't matter that no one knew or noticed that it was my special day. Tonight I was the queen; this was my castle, and the world was mine to conquer.

CHAPTER 5

That's What Friends Are For

I RUSHED INTO the supply room to photocopy the presentation that Krista had tossed on my desk while informing me she needed ten stapled copies, and her meeting was in fifteen minutes. Her requests always irritated me. She could just as easily send the file to the network printer and program the print job to sort and staple the presentation. But, no, she had to do it the hard way, slapping the original document on my desk and informing me to make copies. I chalked it up to her sadistic pleasure in tormenting me. I'd already prepared the conference room but was running out of time to make the copies. Spinning around to shove the stack of paper in the document feeder, I somehow managed to trip over the step stool that was on the floor behind me. I stumbled backward as the presentation shot from my hand, the papers landing in a mess all over the floor.

"Oh, no," Della gasped as her hand came up to cover her mouth. She looked at me wide-eyed and shook her head. "Krista sent me in here to check on you. People are arriving for the meeting, and Mr. Morgan is one of the attendees. He's been out of town for the last two weeks and just got back. Shit, Sofie. You don't want to screw up in front of him, especially after what you said to him last time."

"Help me pick this up, then," I snapped as I scrambled to pick up the papers. I'd already run into Mr. Morgan since our infamous first meeting, although Della was unaware of that fact. I wasn't about to tell her, either.

Della was on her hands and knees next to me when Krista barged into the room.

"What the hell happened?" she yelled, her face contorting and turning red.

“I’m sorry, Krista. I was trying to help Sofie, and I dropped the presentation on the floor,” Della said, shooting a glance in my direction.

“Hurry up and pick the damn thing up. I’ll delay the meeting for a few minutes, but I want those copies as soon as you’re finished.” Krista marched from the room, looking pissed.

“Why did you cover for me like that?” I said, eyeing Della.

“Because Krista would have made a bigger deal out of what happened if she’d known you did it. Besides, that’s what friends do. They cover for each other. Haven’t you had anyone do that for you?”

I sat back on my heels and stared at her. “No, I haven’t.”

“Then you better get used to it, because I consider you a friend.” Della handed me the last of the papers and smiled. “I wish I could see Krista’s face as she tries to explain we had a malfunction. But that’s what she gets for always trying to set you up to fail. There has to be some reason Krista doesn’t like you aside from Alice. We need to figure it out.”

“Fine. We can do that later. I need to get these pages in order. Dammit, where’s page twelve?” I scanned the floor, spotting the page behind me. “Okay, they’re in order. I have to make the copies.” I jumped up and shoved the presentation into the document feeder without dropping them this time.

“Hurry up. I’ll tell Krista it’ll be a few more minutes.” Della got up and dashed from the room.

Finished with my task, I ran down the hallway with the packets in my hand and stopped outside the conference room door. After taking a few seconds to catch my breath and compose myself, I entered the room. Mr. Morgan’s eyes were instantly on me, his gaze so intense it seemed as if he were burning a hole right through me. Faking a smile, I walked around the table and handed out the packets, trying to pretend I didn’t notice.

“Thank you, Sofie. You can go,” Krista said icily, her eyes glued on Mr. Morgan as he watched me.

Thankful for her dismissal, I returned to my desk. Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes. Why were all my interactions with her so intense? That woman obviously hated me. It was Mr. Morgan. It had to be. Krista already disliked me because of Alice, but he had to be the icing on the cake. She became irritated whenever he was near me and even more upset when she caught him looking at me or talking to me. As I thought about it, considering how much of a conceited snob I thought he was, her irritation was amusing.

The hour must have flown by because the next thing I knew, the conference room door was opening, and people were exiting the meeting. I turned around to file paperwork away in the cabinet behind me and heard someone clear their throat. I swiveled in my chair and found Mr. Morgan standing at my counter, staring at me.

“Well, Ms. Fletcher, if I’ve calculated correctly, you’ve been with the company for a month. Personally, I’m surprised you’re still working here,” he said with mock astonishment while placing an elbow on the counter.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I gave him a demure smile, remembering to hold my tongue this time.

“Oh, no reason other than your habit of offering pointed comments.”

“Mr. Morgan, I can assure you I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Why don’t you call me Reid? We hurdled past the Mr. Morgan part when you told me what you thought of me. And you adeptly followed it up during our last encounter with a wonderful comment about my manners and driving.”

“Reid is a little inappropriate, don’t you think? And I would never be so forward as to voice my opinion to my employer like that.” I gave him a wide-eyed look of denial, my voice sounding shocked.

“Really? Since when?”

“Since I’m on the company’s clock.”

“Ah, I get it. You’d like to say something but are holding your tongue instead.”

“Mr. Morgan! Now you’re making stuff up. I’m feeling offended.”

“Somehow, I doubt that. You truly are an enigma, Sofie Fletcher.” Mr. Morgan leaned forward and grinned.

“I beg your pardon,” I said curtly.

“That’s it. There’s the snappy attitude I remember.”

“What’s going on here? Is Sofie bothering you?” Krista said, walking toward my desk. After flashing a smile at Mr. Morgan, she turned and glared at me.

“Sofie was telling me about her job and how much she likes it. Isn’t that right, Ms. Fletcher?”

I stared at Mr. Morgan, trying to decide whether the twitching at the corner of his mouth was an attempt to suppress a grin. Based on the glint in his eyes, I assumed so. “Yes, that’s correct. I was telling Mr. Morgan how happy I am here and how polite and well-mannered most everyone seems.”

Mr. Morgan laughed, and I was sure he caught my private dig insinuating he was one of the people who were not.

He cleared his throat and directed his attention to Krista. “I better get going. That was a great presentation. After making the changes we discussed, you can send the presentation out. The earlier the better, since Rob will be waiting to see it.”

“Did you want to review it after the revisions?” Krista said.

“It’s not necessary. Besides, I don’t want to hold it up since we already have a tentative contract for the new product we’re showcasing.”

“All right. I’ll send it out first thing in the morning so Rob can pitch it.” Krista watched Mr. Morgan walk out the door, and then she unleashed her wrath on me. “What was really going on between you two?”

“Nothing. It was like Mr. Morgan said. I was telling him about my job.”

“Really? I highly doubt that. I’ve seen the way he’s looked at you ever since the morning of your interview.”

“Excuse me? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t give me that. I saw you on the street corner that morning when you stepped in front of Reid’s car.”

“You were watching me?”

“You might want to close that gaping mouth of yours. It’s quite unbecoming. And, yes, I saw you. I was coming back from the coffee shop down the street and was several yards behind you when you stepped off the curb. I saw the lust on Reid’s face when you marched away and how he’s had his eye on you ever since. I have to say, I was quite surprised Monday morning when my new hire turned out to be you. Stay away from him, Sofie.”

“I’m just trying to do my job, that’s all.”

“Then you can make all the revisions the group decided on in my meeting. Here’s the marked-up PowerPoint, and I want it done by eight o’clock tomorrow morning.” Krista slapped the packet of marked-up slides on my counter and stormed off.

If that wasn’t proof enough that Mr. Morgan was the main problem, then I didn’t know what was. Krista’s anger toward me on my first day on the job wasn’t solely because of Alice. She didn’t want Mr. Morgan near me, which was ridiculous. He was the boss, and nothing was going on between us, regardless of what she thought. So, I didn’t understand what her issue could be. Sighing, I snatched the presentation from my counter and tossed it on my desk. It was four o’clock, and I was off in an hour with some of my work still undone. There was no possible way I could update the file before I left,

especially since I didn't know how to use the software program.

"You don't look happy. What's going on?" Della said, striding up to my desk.

"Krista just ordered me to make all the revisions to her presentation, and she wants it first thing in the morning."

"So, what's the problem?"

"I don't know how to use the software, and I still have some work to do."

"Take it home and work on it. That's better than making Krista mad. Besides, there are tons of videos on the internet on how to use the program."

"I don't have a computer," I snapped.

"Oh, that's a problem." Della's face lit up a second later. "Hang on. Let me talk to Jason and see if you can take one of the laptops home." Della dashed off before I could say another word.

I had just finished the office supply order when Della returned to my desk with a black canvas bag in her hand.

"Jason said you can take this laptop home. It's fully charged, and I saved Krista's presentation on the desktop. You shouldn't have any problems. Oh, and I found this book in the library." Della placed a textbook on my counter along with the bag.

I looked at the book and laughed. "Great choice, *PowerPoint for Dummies*. That'll get me through a slide or two. It looks like this book will be my best friend tonight." I picked up the yellow-and-black book and scanned through the pages.

"Think positive thoughts. You're going to do fine. I better go since I'm meeting Adam for dinner. I'll see you in the morning."

“Yep, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Turning back to my desk, I shut my computer down and gathered my belongings to go home. After stashing the book and marked-up presentation in the canvas bag, I threw my purse strap across my shoulders. I picked up the laptop in one hand and my box of leftover pizza from my lunch in the other. Hoping I didn’t drop anything, I headed to the elevator.

Reaching the lobby downstairs, I strode toward the exit, stopping halfway there. It was pouring rain outside. Hanging my head, I continued toward the door, knowing the next half hour would be miserable between my walk to the bus stop, midpoint transfer, and two-block walk home. The pouring rain would have me cold and soaked to the skin by the time I got there.

I was hurrying down the sidewalk a few minutes later, using my pizza box as protection, when I heard a car honk behind me. I stopped, swiveling in place while I squinted through my wet eyelashes at the black Mercedes-Benz at the curb, the rain pelting down on me while I tried to protect my face. The back window rolled down, and a man poked his head out. It was Mr. Morgan.

“Get in the car. You’re getting soaked,” he called out, the rain drenching his upper body.

“I don’t need a ride. I take the bus,” I yelled back.

“Not today. Get in. I’ll take you home.”

“I don’t need a ride.” I turned and walked away with my head bent in the rain. I felt a hand on my shoulder, spinning me around several seconds later.

“Dammit, Sofie. You don’t always need to have the last word. Now, get in the car. The rain has already saturated your clothes, and you’re not even wearing a decent coat for this weather.” Mr. Morgan put his hand on my back and guided me to the car.

At this point, continuing to argue seemed futile. Mr. Morgan wasn’t going to take no for an answer. He took the

laptop and pizza box from me, jockeying them in one hand while he helped me into the back seat. I scooted as far away as possible, my thigh pressed against the door. Mr. Morgan climbed in beside me and placed my belongings on the seat between us, the inside of the car smelling of wet leather and a hint of his cologne.

“I thought your bus stop was across the street from the office.” He brushed the raindrops from his face and ran his hand through his hair, the water causing it to look darker as he slicked it backward.

“I moved. I have to take a different bus.”

“Where do you live? I need to tell Lawrence where to take you.”

“The bus stop at North Washington and Cooper in the North End is fine. My apartment isn’t far from there.” I looked down at the seat, trying to increase the distance between us. There was nowhere to go—my entire left side was crammed against the car’s door.

“I’m not dropping you off at a bus stop.”

“It’ll be fine. I stop there every day. You don’t need to take me home.”

“Okay, we can play this game. We’ll sit here at the curb until you tell me where to go.” He leaned back in the seat and crossed his arms over his chest, arching an eyebrow at me.

We were at a stalemate, and I knew we couldn’t sit here forever. I reluctantly gave in, even though the last thing I wanted was for Mr. Morgan to take me home.

“I live on Endicott, around the corner from the bus stop.”

“Lawrence, did you catch that?” Mr. Morgan said to the man in the driver’s seat.

“Yes, sir.” The man pulled away from the curb.

“Why do you have a laptop? You’re not taking work home, are you?” Mr. Morgan unzipped the case and peeked inside.

Feeling cornered, I figured I had no choice but to tell him the truth. “Krista told me to make all the revisions on the presentation from this afternoon.”

“Why didn’t you do it at work?”

“Because I’ve never used PowerPoint before. It’ll take me all night to figure it out since I don’t know how to use it.”

“Wonderful. Krista gave you an assignment without checking to see if you could do it.” He looked upset, his head tipping down as he rubbed his forehead. After a long pause, he turned toward me. “I’d override her instructions and tell you to work on it tomorrow, except I know she needs the revised presentation first thing in the morning. That leaves only one choice—the two of us working on it together this evening.”

“Excuse me?” I stared at him, thinking he was insane. “There’s no way I’m working on this with you.”

“You’re working on it with me because you don’t have much choice, and don’t even think about arguing with me. What do you eat?”

“What?”

“If that pizza was your dinner, it’s now a soggy mess. So, what do you like to eat? We can stop and pick something up.”

“Food.”

“I swear, you act like I’m torturing you. Is being nice that difficult?”

“Yes.” I sat there feeling flustered. Tonight wasn’t going as I had planned. I pressed my teeth into my bottom lip as I stared out the window. Unnerved by the silence, I finally decided to talk. “There’s an Italian place down the street from my apartment.”

“Okay. That’ll work.”

We drove in silence once again until we got to my street. I pointed to my building. “I live in those apartments. The Italian place is a couple of doors down.”

“Lawrence, can you park in front of the restaurant and run in and get us something to eat? I’m afraid Ms. Fletcher will disappear if I leave her alone.”

“Yes, sir. What should I get?”

“See if they have some shrimp scampi. Sofie, what do you want?”

I stared out my window, staying silent.

“Sofie? Would you care to answer? I’d prefer not to sit here.”

“Chicken ziti with broccoli.”

“Good, now we’re getting somewhere. Lawrence, if they don’t have shrimp scampi, you can get two orders of chicken ziti.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be right back.” Lawrence got out of the car and dashed toward the restaurant.

I watched him through the windshield. Even through the rain, I could tell he was built like a bodyguard with his tall and brawny physique. He wasn’t what I expected for a chauffeur. Shrugging my thoughts aside, I stared out my window, feeling Mr. Morgan watching me. Lawrence returned to the car, and after turning around in the street, he parked in front of my building. I grabbed my soggy pizza box and climbed out of the car while Mr. Morgan held the door open for me. He took the laptop from the back seat and the bag with our dinner from Lawrence after saying something to the man.

I was entering my code in the keypad at the front entry when I heard the car drive away. Surprised, I glanced at Mr. Morgan. “Where’s he going?”

“I told him I’d call him when I needed him to come back,” he said while shielding me from the rain with the laptop case.

Finally gaining entry to the lobby, I led the way to the elevator, waiting for him to comment about my apartment building since it had to be far below his standard. Surprisingly, he said nothing. My nervousness and embarrassment grew as

we walked down the corridor to my door. He'd held back from making any comments so far, but I doubted he'd be able to continue with his silence when he saw the size of my place and my lack of furniture.

"This is my apartment." I unlocked the door and stepped inside, with Mr. Morgan entering behind me. I steeled myself for the comments I expected to spill from his mouth, but he still said nothing. Puzzled, I couldn't resist watching him as he placed the laptop and our food on the lonely-looking coffee table sitting in the middle of the otherwise-empty floor. My apartment manager had given me the used piece of furniture which had become my combination dining table, reading table, and desk. Although I could tell he was surprised, especially with how his eyes darted around the room, he didn't appear the slightest bit disturbed. His reaction was far different from what I'd expected from a conceited snob.

"Do you have somewhere I can hang my wet coat?" he said, turning in a circle as he scanned my studio apartment.

"You can hang it over the shower curtain in the bathroom. That's the only place I have."

"Here, give me your jacket." Mr. Morgan reached for my sleeve, helping me remove the quilted cotton garment, which was completely soaked and sticking to my blouse. After peeling the material from my body, Mr. Morgan took our jackets into the bathroom and flipped them over the curtain rod. Then he came back to join me. "Shall we eat while it's still warm?" he suggested, motioning to the table.

"Good idea. Do you want something to drink? I have water."

"Water sounds great." Mr. Morgan sat on the floor in front of the coffee table.

After retrieving two bottles of water from the refrigerator, I joined him at the table, taking a seat on the opposite side.

"So, tell me about yourself," Mr. Morgan said before taking a bite of his shrimp scampi.

“I’d rather not.” Uncomfortable with the situation I’d found myself in, my response came out rather sharp.

“Why? Do you have a closet full of skeletons or something like that?” Mr. Morgan teased.

I did, and I wasn’t willing to divulge any snippets from my past. “If you don’t mind, Mr. Morgan, I’d prefer not to discuss my personal life.”

“Will you stop calling me Mr. Morgan? It’s Reid, all right?”

“I’ll call you Reid if you agree to keep our conversation focused on work.”

“Okay, fine, I agree. At least we’re getting somewhere.” Looking frustrated, Reid brusquely removed the laptop from the case and opened it up. “Where’s the presentation saved?”

“Della said she put it on the desktop.”

“I see it.”

I crawled to his side of the table and sat next to him, digging the packet of slides from the canvas bag and setting it on the table. “Here’s the hard copy of the presentation.”

“Thanks.”

The two of us nibbled on our food while I pointed out the revisions on the slides, and Reid made the changes on the computer. He was surprisingly patient, explaining how to use the program while giving me detailed step-by-step instructions as we went along.

Two hours later, I let out a massive yawn as Reid made the last few changes. Then it dawned on me that my head was leaning against his shoulder, his thigh pressed against mine. Sitting next to him had felt so natural and comfortable. I hadn’t realized we’d done that. And he’d never said a word. I snapped to attention, embarrassed by our bodily contact.

“It’s all right. I don’t mind,” Reid said, grinning at me.

I could feel my cheeks getting warm as I turned away. Reid might not have minded the contact, but I did, especially since he felt and smelled so wonderful. “Now that we’ve finished, it’s time for you to go,” I snapped, getting up from the floor.

“Wow. Our project finished, and you’re kicking me out. And you’re not even being nice about it.” He looked surprised as he stuffed the laptop back in the case.

“You’re right. I’m kicking you out. I still have some personal things to take care of, and I have to get up early for work. I don’t want to be late since the company’s owner might not like my tardiness, and I certainly don’t want to make him mad. Do I?”

“All right, I’m going. You might want to use a better excuse next time and stop making me the bad guy. I’m not an ogre, and my role in life isn’t to be your tormentor. So try being a little nice.”

“I am nice.”

“Really? If what I’ve seen is nice, I’d hate to see you when you’re being mean. I’ll take the laptop and leave it on your desk in the morning since I get to the office around seven o’clock. It’s supposed to rain again tomorrow, so it’ll be easier if I take it. That is unless you want to argue about that too.”

“No argument here. And thanks for helping me. I would have been at it all night without you.”

“Ahh, a compliment. I’m shocked. What a nice way to end the night. I’ll have to bask in your words all the way home.”

“Very funny. Just don’t expect it to happen again.” I held back a smile as I thought about the way we bantered back and forth. I enjoyed it, but I’d rather die than confess that to him.

Reid called his driver and directed the man to pick him up. Then he retrieved his jacket from the bathroom and slipped it on. “Thank you for an unforgettable evening. I’m going to wait downstairs for Lawrence. I’ll see you at the office. Good

night.” Reid walked out the door without another word, closing it quietly behind him.

I stood there staring at the wooden barrier, my hand touching my cheek. His shoulder had felt so warm and comfortable, I hated to admit it, but I liked it. That was another tidbit of information I preferred to keep secret.

CHAPTER 6

The Trio Is Born

I GLANCED AT my watch as I came around the corner of my desk. I was half an hour early for work, my day scheduled to begin at eight o'clock. Besides being unable to sleep since I couldn't get Reid off my mind, I wanted to finish the task Krista had assigned me late yesterday and send her the PowerPoint before she came asking for it. I couldn't do it last night since I had no internet service.

After getting situated at my desk, I reached for the laptop case Reid had left for me, just as he'd said he would. A folded piece of paper had been addressed to me and placed on top of it. It looked like someone had angrily crumpled the paper into a ball and then tried to smooth it back out, the note riddled with wrinkles and one of the edges torn. I opened it and read the message.

Good morning, Sofie. Thanks for an unforgettable evening. Reid.

The note made me smile. It was sweet, and Reid was slowly chipping away at the unflattering picture I had of him. Pushing the paper aside, I took the laptop from the case and hooked it up to the network in the small conference room. After logging on, I saved the file in its proper location on our shared drive and then returned to my desk after shutting the equipment down. Finished with that task, I emailed Krista the file and let her know the revision was available in her presentation folder. I spotted her storming toward me a moment later, the dark look on her face worse than anything she'd displayed so far.

"Why were you with Reid last night, and why did he leave you that note?" Krista's words shot from her mouth like venom from a viper.

“He helped me with the PowerPoint presentation you told me to revise.” I eyed her warily, unsure where she was going to strike.

“Are you so stupid you couldn’t do it yourself?”

“How dare you insult me like that. I’ve never used the program before, which doesn’t mean I’m stupid. And you’ve never given me training.”

“Why should I bother? You were unqualified for this job when they hired you. I’m not going to warn you again. Stay away from Reid.”

“Are you threatening me?” I said slowly, my words carefully measured. Krista had to be obsessed with Reid or just plain crazy. Either way, now she had me pissed, and there was no backing down.

“Of course not. That would be against company policy, wouldn’t it? I’ll call it friendly advice.” Krista gave me a mocking smile, her rigid jawline and the coldness of her eyes displaying her hatred toward me.

“Maybe I should share your friendly advice with Reid? He might be interested to know what you said to me.” I tipped my head up and jutted my jaw forward, daring her to threaten me again.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Krista breathed, her eyes wide.

“Try me. You can back off, or I can go to Reid.”

We stood staring at each other, neither of us making a move. Then the door opened, and a group of employees entered. Della was one of them. Krista spun around and briskly walked away, the two of us ending at a standoff.

“Shit, Sofie. What was that about?” Della said, looking confused as she stared at me.

“Nothing,” I said testily, still angered by the exchange.

“She’s not pissed because of the PowerPoint, is she? You did revise it, right?”

“It’s not the presentation. I made the revisions. Krista’s just being her witchy self.”

“Okay, I won’t pry, then.” Della shrugged her shoulders as if shutting the door on the incident. “Adam and I were talking at dinner last night about us getting together.”

“Us who?”

“You, me, and Adam. You keep turning us down when we invite you to join us after work. So, we have an idea you can’t refuse because it would mean a lot to Adam.”

“All right. I give up. What is it?” I wanted to slam my palm against my forehead. I didn’t have the patience or the time to play one of Della’s games.

“Adam has a date tomorrow night with a guy he’s been interested in for a while. The guy is a foodie, and Adam likes to cook, so Adam wants to impress him with a homecooked-meal. You and I will go to Adam’s tonight and let him try his meal out on us first. So, besides the fact that we’d finally be getting you to join us, you’ll be doing Adam a favor. How can you resist helping out a friend and fellow employee like that? Plus, I can attest that Adam’s dishes are mouthwatering delights. Come on, Sofie. It’s Friday, so there’s no work tomorrow. Please say you’ll go.”

“Fine. I’ll go. When and where?” I sighed and shook my head. I didn’t have the energy to argue with her.

“Yes!” Della threw her hands in the air and did a little dance in front of my desk. “Cool. Dinner is going to be fun. It’ll be at Adam’s apartment, and you’ll need to be there by seven o’clock.”

I had to smile at her excitement. Maybe I’d enjoy it.

My enthusiasm was short-lived. Krista suddenly appeared around the corner. She glared at me as she walked past, the office door slamming shut a moment later. Della and I made eye contact, and I shrugged my shoulders. Krista had managed to keep her mouth shut for once.



IT WAS TWENTY minutes to seven, and time for me to head to Adam's for dinner. Della had given me directions to his apartment in Boston's West End right after lunch. After checking the transit schedules, I found I couldn't take public transportation directly from my door to his. No matter which way I went, part of my route required walking. Since I had to walk anyway, I'd decided to make the entire journey on foot, which would only take fifteen minutes. Although the temperature would be a bit chilly, there was no forecast for rain tonight, so I figured I'd be fine.

Reaching Adam's apartment building, I was momentarily surprised when a man in a uniform opened the door and motioned me inside.

"Good evening. May I help you?" the man said.

"Umm...sure. I'm here to see Adam Barker. He's on the fourth floor."

"Certainly, one moment, please." The man walked over to a desk and checked what looked like a list. "I see he's expecting you. Please follow me. I'll send you up to his floor." The man led me to the elevator, and when the door opened, he motioned for me to enter. Then he flashed a key card over a security device inside the car and pressed the button for Adam's floor. He retreated from the car and nodded at me as the doors closed.

Arriving at my destination, I walked down the corridor, reading apartment numbers until I'd reached the right one. I knocked on the door, and Adam opened it.

"You're here. Perfect. Now the fun can begin," Adam said in a singsong voice. "Follow me. Oh, I'm so excited. You're going to love what I'm making." Adam was bubbling with energy as he led me past the entrance to the kitchen and sat me down on one of the barstools at the breakfast counter. "We are having chicken yakitori, steamed rice, and a garden salad. I've already made the salad, the rice is cooking, and the grill is

heating up. Are you ready for a fabulous dinner?” Adam excitedly rubbed his hands together and grinned at me.

“Yes, I’m starving.” Seeing his exuberance made me smile. It was catching, and I was looking forward to our dinner. I studied Adam when he turned around. He had dressed in a pair of pressed jeans with a turned-up cuff, a baby-blue button-down shirt that someone had ironed, and his hair was meticulously styled as always. I assumed he didn’t go anywhere unless his appearance was perfect. Since Della told me we’d be having a casual get-together, I had slipped on a pair of baggy jeans, a pullover sweater, and tennis shoes. My quilted jacket had dried out from the rain last night, so I wore it over my top and tied my hair into a ponytail. I looked too casual compared to Adam.

“Sofie! You made it,” Della called out, approaching me from a hallway and hugging me.

“I told you I would.” Eyeing Della’s outfit, I didn’t feel so bad. She had changed into a pair of olive-green overalls and a blouse that was brightly colored like most of her clothes and covered in cartoon characters.

“Yes, you did. Well, I’m sure our chef has already gone over the menu with you. He’s so excited. I swear he’s acting like a little kid.”

Adam placed his hand on his hip and made a weird face at Della, causing her to laugh. The two of them could be hysterical when they were together. Adam checked his rice and grabbed a dish full of chicken skewers from the opposite counter while I swung around in my chair to check out his apartment. The curtains in his living room were open, and I could see he had a corner unit with floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides. His place was modern looking and extremely tidy.

“How big is your apartment?” I said, unable to contain my curiosity.

“It’s a two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit.” Adam placed several skewers on the electric grill and turned off the rice cooker. “I have a roommate, Craig. He’s a flight attendant and works more often than he’s here, so it’s like I live alone. We dated a while back but now are just friends since he tends to freak out when he has to make a commitment.” Adam rolled his eyes and made another face.

“You’re better off without him. He’s a player, just like someone else we know.” Della turned and gave me a pointed look. “Speaking of players, I saw Reid Morgan talking to you after the meeting yesterday. How did that go?” Della arched her brow, her expression egging me to supply more than a one-word answer.

“It was fine, nothing special. Mr. Morgan was asking me how I liked my job.” I thought it best to keep to the story Reid had supplied to Krista. It was safer that way.

Adam grabbed a trio of flower-patterned porcelain cups from the counter behind him, their size reminding me of a large shot glass. He poured a liquid from an unusual-looking blue bottle with a black label into the cups and slid one to Della and one to me. He picked up the third glass and held it up. “How about a toast to our first dinner together?”

“Great idea, and I hope we have many more. To the Morgan Systems Trio.” Della raised her cup in the air.

I followed their lead and held up my cup, the three of us clinking our glasses together.

Adam took a drink from his. He closed his eyes as if savoring the liquid. “I love this stuff. It’s so much better than wine.”

I raised my cup to my lips, struck by a combination of fruity and floral scents. I didn’t know what I was drinking other than the label looked Japanese. I took a sip, my tastebuds teased by the flavors of cantaloupe and honeydew melon, the liquid smooth and creamy. Pleased with the drink, I took

another sip. Curious, I grabbed the bottle and looked at the label. “What are we drinking? I like it.”

“It’s called saké. It’s a Japanese drink made from rice. I picked this one because its flavors go well with yakitori.” Adam flipped the skewers over to cook the other side of the chicken. “I hate to be a spoilsport, but we have to think up a better name for our group. Sorry, Della, but the Morgan Systems Trio sounds pathetic.”

“Okay, let’s pick something creative that has to do with the number three,” Della said, refilling our cups with the saké.

“We can call ourselves the Bones since the human ear contains three of them. Or, how about the Lithium Trio since its chemical element has an atomic number of three?” Adam said.

“Where do you get this stuff?” I said, amazed. Adam was like a walking encyclopedia.

“I told you he’s a trivia freak,” Della laughed.

“We could call our group the Three Little Pigs,” I said, the name sounding no worse than Adam’s suggestions.

“Oh God, that’s funny,” Adam roared. “We can oink as we pass each other.”

Della cackled and then accidentally snorted since she was laughing so hard. I joined in, unable to help myself. The name did sound ridiculous, and Della’s snort almost made me pee my pants.

“Okay, okay. Stop. I have to get serious here. I am trying to make a special dinner,” Adam said, trying to regain his composure as he picked up a bowl holding a dark brown liquid from the counter. He grabbed the brush lying next to it, dipped it in the bowl, and brushed the contents all over the meat. “This is a tare sauce. It’ll caramelize as it cooks.”

“Mmm, that looks good.” I eyed the chicken, my stomach growling.

Della and I finished our saké as we watched Adam. She refilled our glasses.

“Can you two take our cups and the bottle of saké to the table? I’m going to make our plates while the chicken finishes cooking.” Adam drank the last of his saké and handed Della his cup.

Della and I moved to the four-person table in the dining area and took a seat. Adam had it set with placemats, napkins, and silverware.

“See? Isn’t this more fun than staying home?” Della adjusted her chair and placed her napkin in her lap. “I told you Adam and I are harmless. You’ll have to hang out with us after work on Fridays. That way, we can introduce you to Boston’s nightlife.”

“We’re going to the club next month for my birthday, remember? That would be a perfect night for Sofie to join us.” Adam placed a plate in front of Della and another in front of me while he talked. Then he set his plate down and took a seat.

“Oh, that’s even better,” Della said, wiggling in her chair and sounding excited. “You can go dancing with us and help celebrate Adam’s birthday. We’re planning on going to one of the dance clubs in town after work.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. I’m not into clubs and dancing.”

“Why not? When was the last time you went to a dance club?” Adam looked offended, as if my refusal to join them for a night of dancing was a personal slight against him. His silence prodded me to answer.

“I’ve never been to a dance club, okay? It doesn’t sound appealing to me. I’m sure they’re loud, packed with people, and half of them are drunk.”

“So what? The clubs are fun. You won’t know if you like going to one unless you try it, so don’t be a snob. Besides, you’ll have to celebrate with us since it’ll be my birthday. Your presence can be my gift, although you’ll still have to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to me.”

“Come on, Sofie. Please. Pretty please. It’ll be fun,” Della said. She looked at me with sad puppy dog eyes and an exaggerated pout.

“Fine. I swear you two drive me crazy.”

“Yes!” Della shouted, shooting her arms into the air like a goalpost.

“All right, ladies, back to my dinner. I need you to taste the yakitori chicken before the suspense kills me. You can rate it fabulous, great, or just okay. So what do you think?” Adam swung his head back and forth between Della and me as we tasted the chicken. The wait had to be driving him crazy because now he was leaning forward on his elbow with his chin resting on his knuckles while he watched us.

“Oh God,” Della said, coughing. She wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out as if she couldn’t get rid of the horrid taste in her mouth. Then Della reached for her cup and took a quick drink. After a couple more coughs, she turned to Adam. “I’m so sorry to tell you this, but that was the best damn chicken I’ve ever tasted.” Della cackled with laughter at the confused look on Adam’s face.

“You little witch! How dare you tease me like that.” Adam threw his napkin at Della, making her laugh so hard she snorted.

I covered my face with my hands, unable to look at either one. They had me practically rolling on the floor, their antics toward each other hilarious.

“You are such a mean person,” Adam snapped, giving Della the evil eye. He turned his back on her and looked at me. “Since Della’s taste buds are confused and she isn’t sure whether she wants to spit my chicken out or enjoy it, tell me what you think.”

“Your chicken is fabulous. Your date will love it, I promise.”

“Thank you. That’s all I needed to hear.” Adam tossed a shoulder at Della and reached for the bottle of saké. “Oops,

we've polished this one off; bottle number two is coming up." Adam jumped up from the table, returning with another bottle. "This saké is sweet, so it's more of an after-dinner drink. Although it's so versatile, it'll go with anything." Adam poured some into my cup. "Tell me what it smells like to you."

"Okay," I said warily. I put the cup to my nose and smelled it. "I get a whiff of marshmallows and crème. Am I right, or imagining that smell?"

"You got it right. You have a good nose. Now taste it. You should be able to pick out the flavors of melon and vanilla ice cream."

"Oh, shit. That is good. It's light and sweet."

"I thought you'd like it. It's one of my favorites."

Adam filled our cups with the beverage and explained to me how a guy he was dating a few years ago had turned him on to saké. From there, our dinner conversation turned to Adam's cooking and then Della's art classes, which I didn't know she was taking. Adam teased us with several more trivia tidbits, and we talked about work. I asked far more questions than I answered, wanting to learn more about Della and Adam and preferring to keep the conversation away from my personal life. Overall, the evening was going smoothly and much better than I had envisioned.

We finished dinner, and Adam cleared our plates and returned to the table with another bottle of saké. "Here's bottle number three. This one is sweeter than the last. It has an aroma of ripe banana, vanilla, melon, strawberry, and creamy rice custard." He filled our cups and set the bottle on the table.

I gulped my drink. "Mmm, tasty." I grabbed the bottle and refilled my glass, downing that one too. I looked cross-eyed at Adam, suddenly feeling flushed and lightheaded. "The number...three. We're the saké. Wait...I mean...our name. We can...we can be...the Saké Trio," I said, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth.

"Ooh, Sofie is tipsy," Della said, laughing.

“I’m not...drunk.” I picked up my cup and took a sip, finding it empty. I held it out toward Adam.

“Nah, I don’t think so. You are a little drunk. I’m going to have to limit you to water or coffee.”

“I’m not. Wait...I hate...drunks. They’re...so...disgusting. They say mean things...make you feel...rotten...really rotten. Then...then they say sorry. They do it again...say it again. They lie...steal. Pigs...they’re pigs. Hehe...the Three Little Pigs. And they put their hands...both hands...all over you. Tell you to...to...do things. Bad. They make you...feel bad...really bad...if you say no.”

“Um, Sofie. How about if I take you to the couch to lie down?” Adam pushed his chair back to get up.

“I’m okay. I’m fun...having fun. My husband...he...he...wasn’t fun. He was...a drunk.”

“You were married?” Della said with a small gasp.

“Yep. Dean died. He burned...in a fire...house fire. My dad...he...he didn’t burn. He died in a car...on the freeway. Mean. He was...a...a...mean drunk. Asshole too. That’s okay. Mom...my mom. She was...a...druggie.”

Adam grabbed hold of my arm and pulled me up from my chair. “Let’s go to the couch. You can lie down, and Della and I will sit with you to finish our conversation.”

“Okay.” I sat where Adam placed me, lying down when he put a pillow on the couch’s arm for me. “Della can talk. I’m done.” I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes, my senses dull and my mind fading.

CHAPTER 7

The Hangover

I ROLLED ONTO my side, my eyes still closed. *Oh God, my head hurts. I don't want to get up. Just a bit more sleep, and then I'll get up.*

“Good morning, Miss Saké Sunshine.” The melodic voice seemed to drift above me.

Adam? My eyes flew open, and I gasped.

Adam was standing next to the couch, grinning down at me. “Good morning. You look the worse for wear. How about some breakfast? Della’s making banana pancakes.”

I shot into a sitting position, my eyes darting around the room. I was still at Adam’s, and it was daylight outside.

“You don’t drink, do you?”

“No.” I shook my head, wincing at the pain.

“If I had known, I would have warned you. Saké is stronger than both beer and wine. The bottles we polished off last night had an alcohol content of fifteen percent.”

“It was so smooth, I couldn’t tell.” I leaned forward, placing my head in my hands as I closed my eyes.

“I figured as much. Don’t worry about anything you said last night. Neither Della nor I will repeat a word of it.”

“What did I say?” I sat back up and stared at Adam, my heart pounding.

“It was a bit of a babble, but you said some stuff about your husband being a drunk and dying in a house fire. And then you rambled about your dad being a drunk and an asshole and your mom a drug addict. Oh yeah—you also said your dad died in a car accident, something about the freeway. You went on about hating drunk people and how they make you do

things you don't want to do. It sounded like you've had some unpleasant experiences along those lines."

I hung my head, not wanting to look at Adam. To say I was embarrassed was an understatement. And he was blunt, not even bothering to sugarcoat anything he'd heard. "I have to go." I got up and looked for my jacket, spotting it lying on the floor next to the couch. I hastily put it on.

"You don't need to rush off. Breakfast will make you feel better. That and a cup of coffee."

"I really need to go. Thank you for dinner last night." I grabbed my purse from the back of the barstool and hurried toward the door.

"Sofie, stop!" Della came rushing after me. "You really should stay until you feel better. Adam can drive you home."

"No, I have to go." I bolted out the door. If I could have jumped into a hole and pulled the dirt over me at that moment, I would have done it. I didn't want anyone to know about my past or hear my secrets, preferring that door stay closed.

The elevator dinged, and the doors opened. I rushed inside and turned around without bothering to look up, vaguely aware a man stood behind me. I jumped when he cleared his throat.

"May I ask what you're doing here?"

I held my breath. Besides being stern, the voice sounded like Reid's. I slowly turned, finding him staring at me, his arms crossed over his chest and a frown on his lips.

"You look like you just woke up."

"I did." I shifted my weight from foot to foot as I meekly turned away. Aside from being embarrassed once again, I hadn't bothered to use the bathroom before I ran out of Adam's apartment, and my bladder felt like it was going to burst.

The elevator dinged as it reached the ground floor. I bolted across the threshold when the doors opened, only to have Reid

pounce on me and grab my arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

I swung around to face him, surprised by the angry tone in his voice. “I have to pee, and if I don’t find a bathroom, I’m going to be standing in a puddle.”

“This way.” Reid led me through the resident lounge to a door in the far corner without letting go of my arm. “The bathrooms are in there.” He let go of me and opened the door, revealing an interior corridor.

I rushed into the ladies’ restroom and dashed into a stall, barely making it in time. As I sat there, I couldn’t help but wonder why he seemed so upset and whether he’d be waiting for me when I’d finished. Then it dawned on me. Based on his comment about my looking like I had just woken up, Reid must be thinking I’d had a sleepover with some male who lived in the building. That had to be the reason he seemed mad. But that would mean he was jealous, which seemed unlikely, especially if he was the player that Della made him out to be. Finished, I washed my hands and left the restroom. Reid was waiting for me in the lounge.

“I’ll drive you home. I parked my car down the street.”

“I can walk home. That’s how I got here.”

“When?”

“What?” I stared at Reid, not following what he meant.

“When did you get here?”

“Last night.”

“That’s what I thought,” Reid snapped. He looked disappointed, almost bitter.

“Hold on. It’s not what you think. I wasn’t hooking up with some guy. Adam lives here, and Della and I had dinner with him last night. We drank saké, and I guess I had too much to drink. I woke up on the couch. Della’s still here. She was making pancakes when I left.”

“Well, that explains why you look like you just crawled out of bed.”

“Did that thought bother you?” I teased.

“Maybe.” Reid grinned at me as he reached out and took my arm. “Come on. I’ll walk you to my car.”

I obeyed without saying a word, my mind replaying his answer. It wasn’t what I expected him to say, and I wondered if he was playing a game with me. Shoving that thought aside, I peeked at him as we walked down the sidewalk, intrigued to see him in casual clothes rather than a business suit.

“I can see you looking at me. Is there something wrong?”

“No, I’ve only seen you in a suit, and your jeans are... well, they’re nice. I mean, you look nice.” I could feel my cheeks burning as I thought about what I secretly meant. His jeans fit him nicely and showed off a sexy-looking butt, not to mention his drool-worthy package upfront.

“I’m glad you like my jeans.” Reid gave me an amused look, making me believe he knew perfectly well where my eyes were going.

I could feel my cheeks burning once again.

“Here’s my car.” Reid opened the passenger door and waited for me to get in the car.

“You’re driving? Where’s Lawrence?”

“I do know how to drive, you know. I don’t always use Lawrence’s services.”

“That’s good to know. Now I feel safer,” I teased.

“Good. I wouldn’t want you to be worried,” Reid teased back.

I got in the car, and Reid pulled away from the curb a minute later. We were near my apartment building when a thought occurred to me. I turned to look at Reid.

“Why were you at Adam’s apartment building?”

“Do you care?”

“Of course not. It doesn’t matter to me why you were there.” I shrugged and stared out the window, pretending not to care. But I did care, and I wasn’t sure why.

Reid suddenly broke the silence that had developed between us. “I was out with a friend last night, and he left his cell phone in my car. He lives in that apartment building, and I had just dropped the phone off to him when I ran into you in the elevator. Are you satisfied?”

“As I said, it doesn’t matter to me.” I kept staring out the window, not bothering to turn around. I could feel Reid watching me.

Reid turned onto my street and slowed down. “Where can I park so I can walk you to your apartment?”

“You can pull up in front and let me out.”

“I should park and walk you up, especially since you still don’t look so great, and I’d venture to guess you don’t feel great either.”

“Honestly, I’ll be fine. I want to take some ibuprofen and lie down. I don’t need an escort to take me to my door.”

“Have it your way.” Reid stopped the car in the street and waited for me to get out.

“Thanks for the ride.” I closed his door and hurried to my building’s entrance. After entering the security code and going inside, I turned around and looked out the glass door. Reid was still there, waiting to leave until I was safely in the lobby. I waved at him, and he waved back, and then he took off down the street, my negative thoughts about him reduced by another notch.

CHAPTER 8

To Trust Or Lie

DELLA AND ADAM marched toward my table in the courtyard while I finished my peanut butter and blackberry jam sandwich. They stood on each side of me as if to block my path, appearing worried I'd try to run off. I frowned, preferring to be left alone.

"Don't you dare get up and leave," Della scolded. "You've avoided me all morning, and there's no reason for it. If you're embarrassed by what happened at Adam's apartment Friday night, stop it. Everyone has skeletons in their closet."

"Some just have thicker bones than the others," Adam said, chiming into the conversation.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Della turned and made a face at Adam before pulling out the chair across from me and taking a seat.

"Sorry, I was trying to make a joke. Thicker bones, more colorful stories...never mind. You don't get where I was going with it." Adam shrugged a shoulder and sat next to me.

"We're friends, Sofie. You don't need to hide because we heard something," Della said.

"Yes, I do. Experience proves it. People always treat me differently when they learn tidbits about my past. They act like I have the plague or something and can't run away from me fast enough. I'm human like everyone else, and it hurts. And yes, I was embarrassed. Besides that, the last thing I need is one of you telling somebody what I said." I eyed the two of them, frustrated they had found me. I had chosen a table in the courtyard that a row of planters hid from view, thinking it offered protection from their searching eyes. My effort was a waste of time.

“Della and I aren’t like that. We won’t repeat a word of what you said.” Adam pretended to lock his mouth with a key and toss it over his shoulder. “See, no worries. Your skeletons are safe with us.”

“You can trust us, I promise. And, if you need to talk, we’ll listen. It’s not healthy to keep the negative stuff to yourself,” Della said.

I studied Della and Adam’s faces. I didn’t see the pity in their eyes that I usually saw from others, and their demeanor wasn’t in line with someone who was deviously prying. But could I trust them? That was the big question. They’d already proven themselves to be friends, Della more so than Adam. If I were to trust them, I had to create limits; some of my past was too dark to share. Dean’s drinking, gambling, and constant loss of jobs were all right to talk about with a close friend. My parents’ drug and alcohol addictions were borderline appropriate. But the rest wasn’t to be spoken of, and I had to be careful.

“I’m serious. If you want to talk, Adam and I are here for you. No judgment and no unsolicited advice,” Della said.

“You’re concerned, and I get it. But honestly, my life hasn’t been that bad.” I cringed as I made the statement, knowing it was a complete lie. “I met my husband, Dean, when I was in my teens, and we married a few years later. He had drinking and gambling problems, which caused us to move a lot. That’s all.”

“You made it sound much worse than that Friday night. I got the impression his drinking was pretty ugly at times,” Della said.

“Alcoholics aren’t always the nicest people when they’re drunk.” I shrugged my shoulders, trying to downplay Dean’s drinking. In truth, he was more of a sloppy, whiny, hands-all-over-me drunk. He’d be verbally mean occasionally, but that wasn’t the norm. His gambling, lying, and stealing had been the more significant problems.

“You mentioned he died in a house fire. What happened?” Della’s voice was low, and she sounded hesitant. It was like she wanted to ask the question but was afraid to pry. Either that or she was uncomfortable talking about it, which seemed less likely.

I sat there for a moment, debating whether I should tell the truth or fabricate a response. I planned to make Boston my permanent home, which meant I could finally build relationships and have friends. For my relationship with Della and Adam to be meaningful and thrive, we had to have a level of trust between us. I decided to tell the truth, at least part of it.

“Can you talk about it?” Adam said, breaking the silence.

I nodded and put my hands in my lap. “It was four and a half months ago, right after I told my husband I wanted a divorce. I’d reached the breaking point where my health and sanity had become more important than our marriage. Dean’s response had been to bury himself in a bottle, which was his typical reaction to our arguments, and I left the house. I returned home later in the evening to find Dean in his recliner with the living room in flames. I found out later he’d started the fire with a lit cigarette that had slipped from his fingers after he’d passed out.”

“Where was the fire department?” Adam said, his pinkish complexion now white.

“They weren’t there yet. The owner of our rental had let all the trees and shrubs in the yard become completely overgrown, blocking the view of the house from the street. None of the neighbors had realized the house was on fire until it was too late.”

“What did you do when you saw the fire?” Della whispered, her face crumbling.

“I didn’t even stop to think and rushed into the house to save him. It was pointless by then, but I had panicked and didn’t know what I was doing. Dean, the chair, curtains, wallpaper, and ceiling were all on fire, and I had difficulty

seeing through the smoke and trying to breathe. I was struggling to get out of the house when the fire department arrived. One of the firefighters found me and pulled me from the flames.”

“I’m sorry. That’s horrible,” Della said, looking pained. She reached across the table and grabbed my hand. “It sounds like your marriage was never that great. What made you finally ask for a divorce?”

“We didn’t love each other, for one thing. Ours was a marriage of convenience, and the reason for it no longer mattered. But it was my husband’s lying and stealing and our constant moving that finally made me want to end it.” I sighed and pulled my hand back from Della. “After moving from place to place in Pennsylvania and then New York, we came to Massachusetts and settled in Quincy. I’d gotten a job that I liked and was working tons of overtime, saving money and trying to get us back on our feet. Then Dean’s boss caught him drinking on the job and discovered he was stealing from the company. He fired Dean, and things went downhill from there. Rather than pay our bills, Dean had been using the money for gambling. By the time I found out, it was too late. He’d emptied our savings account, the finance company was repossessing our car, and we’d received an eviction notice for nonpayment of the rent. It was at that point I told Dean I was divorcing him.”

“Shit, Sofie. I don’t blame you. That’s too much for anybody. What happened after the fire?” Della scooted forward in her chair, her eyes fixed on me.

“I had to go to a women’s shelter since I’d lost everything I owned when the house burned, and I had no money or job. I was a contract employee, and my employer let me go, saying they couldn’t hold my job while they waited for me to heal from the fire. Morgan Systems has an employment assistance program that partners with the women’s shelter where I was staying. That’s how I got the job here. Virginia Morgan is the administrator, and she hired me.”

“I’ve never heard of the program. Morgan Systems must keep it a secret or something. That must be why Krista had no idea the company had hired you until it was a done deal,” Della said, looking wide-eyed. “Now it all makes sense.”

“What about your parents? You mentioned them a couple of times Friday night,” Adam said, his expression somber. He was leaning forward on his elbows with his hands clasped together and pressed against his mouth.

“My dad was an alcoholic and killed himself while driving drunk on the freeway. He plowed into the concrete center divider. I was nine years old at the time. I don’t remember much about him except that he was mean and always scared me. My mom drank and had a drug problem.” I looked down at my hands, realizing that after all these years, I still hated her.

“I’m sorry your parents weren’t so great. Is your mom still alive?” Della said.

“No,” I said, which was a lie. I’d closed the door on my mother long ago, pretending she didn’t exist. The reality was I’d moved in with Dean to get out of her and her supposed boyfriend’s grasp and had hidden from her for several years. She had no clue I was living in Massachusetts and that Dean had died. At least, I didn’t think she did. Otherwise, she would have hunted me down. My cell phone suddenly rang, and I pulled it from my jacket pocket, the interruption ending our conversation. I tapped the button to ignore the call.

“You have a cell phone. When did that happen?” Adam said, sounding surprised.

“I got it yesterday, and I keep getting calls for the person who had this number before me. I lost my last phone in the house fire when it fell out of my pocket, and I didn’t have insurance. Even if I did, I couldn’t have afforded the monthly bill until now.”

“Do you want our cell numbers?” Adam said. He sounded eager for me to say I did.

“Sure, you can add them to my contact list.” I slid my phone over to Adam.

“I’ll do it.” Della reached out and picked up my phone. “I’ll send a text to myself and one to Adam from your phone. That way, you’ll have our numbers, and we’ll have yours.” Della typed out the messages and sent them. “There, easy-peasy. Now we can contact each other.”

I took my phone back from Della and stashed it in my purse. When I looked up, I noticed her staring at something behind me with a strange expression distorting her face.

“Sofie, why is Reid Morgan walking toward us? He doesn’t normally give Adam or me the time of day.”

I froze in my seat, unsure what to say.

“Good afternoon,” Reid said, glancing at the three of us. Then his eyes locked on mine. “You look much better than you did Saturday morning.”

I looked across the table at Della and Adam, finding them wide-eyed and staring at me. “Umm, I should explain. I ran into Reid, I mean Mr. Morgan, in the elevator when I left Adam’s apartment. He was kind enough to drive me home.”

Della raised a brow at me, the corner of her mouth turning up into a partial smile. Adam sat there with his mouth gaping open.

“I thought it best to make sure Sofie made it home safely. I understand she was feeling ill after consuming too much saké. Adam, you’ll have to give me the name of the brand you were drinking when you get a chance. It must have been pretty smooth since Sofie had no idea how much she’d had to drink.” Reid grinned at me with a glint in his eyes, clearly enjoying his little tease fest.

I was about to make a snarky reply when I heard Krista’s voice behind me.

“There you are. I was hoping to talk to you. How about joining me for lunch?”

I turned, spotting Krista standing next to me, smiling at Reid, a tray containing her lunch from the café in her hands.

“You’ll have to catch me later this afternoon. I’ve got to run off to a meeting in a couple of minutes. If you want to schedule a time to talk, I’m free between three and four o’clock,” Reid said.

“It’s all right. I can catch you later. What I wanted to discuss wasn’t urgent.” Krista’s voice was tight, and she shot me a scathing look when I glanced at her. She turned to walk away, her lunch tray tipping in her hands.

“Shit!” I shrieked, jumping up from my chair, the front of my blouse soaked from Krista’s large cup of water.

“Oh my. I can’t believe I did that. How clumsy of me,” Krista said in an exaggerated tone.

I glared at her, catching the remnants of her smirk before she hid it behind a veil of fake concern. I turned to look at Reid and realized he was staring at my chest. Looking down, I understood why. My thin lacy bra and white cotton blouse were sticking to my skin, my nipples protruding from the fabric. I met Reid’s gaze when he looked up, and he blushed, confirming where he was looking.

Reid slipped off his suit jacket and stepped in front of me. “Here, take my jacket. You can wear it until you can get yourself cleaned up.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your concern.” My voice was tight as I peeked at Krista while I slipped my arms into Reid’s jacket. I wanted to boldly accuse her of dumping her water on me on purpose but held my tongue.

Krista made a low growling sound and stormed away, apparently irritated that her little maneuver had backfired.

“I better get to my meeting. I’ll get my jacket from you later.” Reid took off across the courtyard and disappeared around the corner.

“Oh my God! He likes you,” Della said, her voice shrill.

“He does not. You’re crazy,” I shot back.

“I agree with Della,” Adam said. He appeared amused as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Reid Morgan came over to our table, which he’s never done before, to make his presence known to you. And I’d swear he marked you as his when he handed you his jacket.”

“You’re crazy. Reid Morgan is a player. Della said so herself, so there’s no way he cares about me.” Although I repeated what Della had said about Reid, I didn’t believe it. He didn’t act like a man whose goal was to get into a woman’s pants. He’d never been inappropriate with me, even when he’d been in my apartment. And his reaction when I’d caught him staring at my wet blouse was in line with embarrassment rather than ogling. I suspected his reputation as a player was an exaggeration or an outright lie. The problem was that meant Della might be correct, and Reid Morgan could be interested in me. If he was, it would be short-lived once he learned about my past. My world and his were complete opposites. And if he was like most people, he wouldn’t be able to stomach mine.

“You’re wrong, and you know it,” Della laughed. “You’ve broken through his barrier. Reid Morgan likes you.”

I hoped not.



I GLANCED AT my watch for the third time. It was a quarter to four, and Reid hadn’t come by to pick up his suit jacket. I didn’t want to leave it at my desk or take it home, so I decided to take it to his office on the second floor. Since I’d be on the same floor as human resources, I decided to stop there first and give our department liaison my cell phone number in case they needed to reach me during off hours.

“Hello, can I help you?” Wanda said, perched at the reception window in human resources. She was the same woman who had helped me the day I’d come for my interview, and I only knew her name because of her employee badge.

“Hi. I’m Sofie Fletcher. I work in marketing and need to update my contact information.”

“Your liaison will need to help you. Give me a minute, and I’ll see if Lydia is available.” Wanda left her desk and disappeared around the corner. She returned a few minutes later. “Lydia is in a meeting, but Alice will be able to help you. She’ll be right up. You can take a seat if you like while you wait.”

“Thank you.” I took several steps backward, preferring to wait by the reception window. I’d been there several minutes when a sandy-haired woman approached the counter. She was thin, and her complexion so pasty, she looked borderline sickly. She was younger than me, but I couldn’t tell her age. So this was the infamous Alice. The one who wanted my job. I stepped up to the counter. “You must be Alice.”

“I am. I understand you need to update your contact information. Is it a change in your address or a phone number?” Alice eyed the suit jacket draped over my arm as she spoke. “Nice jacket.”

“Thanks. It’s way too big on me but nice and warm.” I smiled at the puzzled look on her face. It was best to keep her confused, especially since she was Krista’s rat. “It’s a phone number. I didn’t have one on file, so I need to add one. I wrote it down.” I pulled the sticky note I’d written my information on from my pants pocket and slipped it across the counter to Alice. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, that’s it. We’ll update your personnel file.”

“Thank you.” I spun around and headed toward the door, sensing Alice watching me as I opened it and left the department. I paused in the hallway and looked for the administration office, discovering it was at the end of the corridor. Reaching the office, I tugged at the hem of my blouse to straighten it and opened one of the double doors. A man in a business suit sat behind a large reception counter, the private and intimate-looking lobby filled with several couches, potted plants, and chairs.

“May I help you?” the man said, carefully studying me.

“Umm, yes. I was hoping to see Mr. Morgan. I’m Sofie Fletcher from the marketing department. I need to return his jacket.”

“One moment, please.” The man picked up a phone and dialed a number. “Ms. Prescott, I have Sofie Fletcher from marketing here asking to see Mr. Morgan. She says she needs to return his jacket. Certainly, I’ll go ahead and do that.” He hung up the phone, his furrowed brow indicating either surprise or confusion at the instructions given to him by Ms. Prescott. “This way, please,” he said, stepping away from his desk and opening the door to my left. He motioned for me to go in.

I entered a large office with two good-sized cubicles directly in front of me. Their front walls were waist-high and topped with a small counter, while the single back wall contained several filing cabinets and more counter space. A salt-and-pepper-haired woman sat at the desk in the cubicle on my left. The nameplate on the counter listed her as Mavin Prescott, her title executive secretary. Ms. Morgan was standing next to her.

“May I help you, Ms. Fletcher?” the woman said from her seat at the desk. She looked at me over the rim of her eyeglasses.

“Mavin, Sofie is the new hire from the women’s shelter I mentioned. Sofie, is there something I can do for you?” Ms. Morgan raised an eyebrow, her gray-blue eyes scrutinizing me.

I looked down at my feet, suddenly embarrassed and feeling like I didn’t belong there.

“Sofie?”

“I wanted to return Mr. Morgan’s jacket. I had an accident at lunch, and he let me borrow it. I’ll leave it with you and get back to work if that’s okay.” My words had come out in a rush, and I hoped they made sense. I stepped forward and draped Reid’s jacket across the counter.

Reid suddenly came around the corner of the cubicle and stopped when he saw me. “Hey, I was on my way to get my jacket from you. It looks like you’ve saved me the effort.” He stood there in his tailored light-blue-and-white pinstriped shirt and navy tie. His shirt fit him nicely, the muscles in his upper arms emphasized by the snug-fitting fabric.

I hadn’t noticed that earlier and couldn’t understand how I’d missed it. Realizing I was staring at Reid’s arms, I looked up, catching his amused grin. I straightened my back and jutted my chin out, giving him a defiant look while silently daring him to laugh at me. It didn’t work.

Reid chuckled as he stepped forward and grabbed his jacket. He slipped it on and reached for my arm. “Come on. I’ll have Lawrence drive you home. I have an appointment, and your apartment is on the way.”

I pulled my arm back, surprised by his suggestion. “I can’t go. I’m not off work for another fifty minutes and don’t want to get in trouble.”

Reid burst out laughing. “You’re standing here with the two owners of the company, one of which offered to drive you home, and you’re worried you’ll get in trouble. May I ask by whom?”

“By my supervisor. Besides, it isn’t appropriate to cheat my employer out of almost an hour’s pay.”

“Okay, okay. You win,” Reid said. “I’ll walk you out. Mother, Mavin, I’ll see you in the morning.” Reid motioned toward the door and tipped his head at me.

I turned to Ms. Morgan and Ms. Prescott to say goodbye. Ms. Morgan was studying Reid, her eyes searching his face. She looked at Ms. Prescott and arched a brow, and Ms. Prescott nodded. It was clear there was some secret between them. I only wished I knew what it was.

“Well, are you coming?” Reid said, holding the door open, the corner of his mouth turning up into a faint smile. “I thought you needed to get back to work?”

“I do. Thank you.” I uttered a quick goodbye over my shoulder and marched toward the door, frowning at Reid as I passed by him.

We stood side by side in the elevator lobby, neither of us talking. Then Reid chuckled.

“What is so funny?” I demanded, my lips tight as I faced him.

“Oh, nothing, except I’d swear you enjoy driving me crazy.”

“I do not!”

“Uh-huh.”

The elevator suddenly dinged, and the doors opened. The car was going up. I hurried into the elevator and turned around, my eyes on Reid as I pushed the button for my floor.

“Sofie Fletcher, you are truly one of a kind. You never fail to intrigue me,” Reid said as the doors closed.

I leaned against the wall of the elevator and closed my eyes. What was that supposed to mean?

CHAPTER 9

The Club

I SHIFTED MY body while I sat on the bathroom counter at work, the hard surface becoming uncomfortable as my legs dangled over its edge. My impatience grew as Della took her time artfully applying a selection of her cosmetics to my face.

Giving me a stern look, Della lowered her hands and took a step back. “Quit moving around. You’re going to make me mess up your eyeliner.”

“Well, hurry up, then. I don’t want someone to come in here and catch me getting dressed up to go out. Besides, is all this makeup necessary?” My makeover seemed like such a waste of time. Although I had agreed to go to the dance club with Della and Adam to celebrate Adam’s birthday, I had no desire to impress anyone.

“Relax, okay? It’s after six o’clock on a Friday night. Everyone’s already left, so there’s no one here to see you. And you’re dressed up so nicely; it would look silly to go out without some makeup, so let me do my thing. I’m almost finished.”

I opened my mouth to comment, and Della threw her hand out to signal me to stop.

“I don’t want to hear another complaint. I swear you act like this is killing you, even though my dress looks gorgeous on you, and so does the makeup.”

I slid off the counter and scanned my image in the mirror. Della’s navy cocktail dress did fit me beautifully, and I liked its three-quarter-length angel sleeves, off-the-shoulder style, and rhinestone-embellished shoulder straps. It was the length that bothered me. I felt half-naked, like my butt was showing every time I bent over. The fabric wasn’t the best either, especially with the way it hugged my body.

“A couple more touches, and that’ll be it. So stand still for a minute.” Della applied a little more of her glittery blue eyeliner to my right eye and plum-colored lipstick to my lips. “Ooh, I like that. The eyeliner looks like a starry night with your sapphire eyes. What do you think?”

“It’s nice, but still too much makeup for my taste.” I turned my head from side to side checking out Della’s handiwork. I was thankful she didn’t try to get me to wear the bright red lipstick in her bag. My mother used to wear that shade along with her false eyelashes and heavy makeup when she went out at night.

“Hang on a second.” Della tapped her index finger on her lip as she scrutinized my reflection in the mirror. “What if we put your hair up? I bet it’ll look cute.”

“In a ponytail? It’ll look too casual for this dress.”

“No, not a ponytail. I can sweep your hair back and clip it up. Here, I’ll show you.” Della grabbed a hairbrush and a fancy-looking silver-and-rhinestone hair clip from her bag. After brushing my hair, she pulled it back into a low ponytail, gave it a little spiral twist, then pulled it toward the top of my head and folded it back down. After tucking the ends in place, she secured it with the hair clip. Della eyed her masterpiece and grinned. “See? Super easy, and your hair looks pretty, especially with the way those straggler strands of hair fall in front of your ears.”

“Okay, I have to agree. It looks nice.”

“Good. I’m glad you like it. Now you’re officially done. We better pack everything up and get out of here since Adam will be at the restaurant any minute. We’ll go to the club right after dinner.”

Packed up and ready to go a few minutes later, Della hooked her arm in mine as she led us from the bathroom. I felt like a kid going to their first birthday party. I was nervous, my stomach feeling tight since I had no idea what to expect. But I

couldn't help feeling excited too. One thing was sure: I planned to have a good time.



“Do WE HAVE to wait in that long line to get into the club?” I said, my gaze fixed on the line of people working their way down the side of the building. No one had been standing there when we'd walked past it on our way to the restaurant earlier. Now it was a completely different story. I supposed we were fortunate we weren't here the previous weekend when they'd had their Fourth of July celebration. It would have been much busier, and we likely wouldn't have gotten in.

“No, that's the general admission line. I bought VIP tickets online for the three of us. We'll have a table on the edge of the dance floor. We need to tell one of the ushers we're VIPs,” Adam said, leading Della and me toward a burly usher standing by the door. “Excuse me. We have VIP tickets.” Adam flashed the usher our tickets along with his ID.

“You'll have to wait.” The man turned his back on Adam as if dismissing him. He stood there scanning the crowd, his body blocking our path.

“But I thought a VIP ticket allowed us to get in without waiting?” Adam said, sounding confused.

“You'll get in when I say you can,” the usher said, turning around to glare intimidatingly at Adam.

I stepped from behind Adam and Della and stood by Adam's side, the tone in the usher's voice alerting me there was a problem brewing. “Adam, why do we have to wait?” I whispered, not wanting to make the usher more belligerent than he already was. I stole a peek at the man, finding him watching me.

“You're with these two?” the usher said, his eyes greedily scanning me.

“Yes, we're celebrating his birthday,” I said hesitantly, nodding my head toward Adam as I turned sideways.

“You can go in after I check your ID.” The corner of the usher’s mouth quirked upward, his gaze focused on my rear in the body-clinging dress. He turned away long enough to pretend to look at Della’s and my IDs. Then his eyes were back on my behind as he opened the door for us.

Adam quickly grabbed my arm and Della’s and pushed us through the doorway. He let go of us as soon as the door closed. “I didn’t want to take a chance that the usher meant Sofie could go in, and Della and I had to wait. It looks like Sofie is our secret weapon tonight.”

“I told you the dress was perfect, and you look gorgeous,” Della said, laughing. She seemed highly amused by the usher’s sudden change of heart.

“I agree, as long as Sofie doesn’t bend over. She is a bit taller than you,” Adam said, pointing at my hemline.

“I told you the dress was too short!” I pulled on the stretchy fabric, trying to bring my hemline down.

“Oh, stop it,” Della said, pulling my hand away from the dress. “You look fine. Adam is acting like a mother hen, that’s all. Now can we go inside? I want a drink.”

Adam looked at me and rolled his eyes. “We better go. The queen is thirsty.” He let out an exaggerated shriek when Della swatted him. Then he took my arm and escorted me to the coat check area, leaving Della staring at our backs.

I tried to suppress my laughter, failing as giggles escaped from behind my palm. Hanging out with these two was like being in a comedy skit.

We checked our coats. Then I followed Della and Adam up a staircase and into the club. Unsure of what to expect, I scanned our surroundings, taking in every detail. A disc jockey was performing on the stage, the music energetic and loud. The lighting was dim on the dance floor and surrounding VIP sections, and there was a bar and open area off to our left. Glancing up, I spotted another level above us, several people standing at its glass wall, looking down at the people below.

The place was busy, with standing room only, except for the VIP seating.

Adam showed our tickets to one of the ushers standing at the top of the short staircase leading to the dance floor. The man led us down the stairs and through the crowd to a leather-covered booth-like seat with a small coffee table fronting it.

“What do you want to drink?” Adam said after getting situated in our booth. He motioned to a server as she hurried by our table.

The woman mouthed that she’d be back.

“I want a margarita on the rocks,” Della said. “Sofie, how about you?”

“A Coke, that’s all.”

“You’re not drinking?” Della raised an eyebrow at me.

“No, I feel completely out of place right now, so I’d rather not.”

“Suit yourself.” Della shrugged her shoulders, turning to study the crowd.

Adam ordered our drinks when the server returned. I sat there, eyeing the dance floor, shocked at the number of bodies crammed together in such a small space. I was turning away when someone caught my attention. It was Alice from human resources. I shifted in my seat to tell Della that Alice was here, but she’d already seen her.

Della nodded toward Alice. “I don’t know any of the people Alice is with, but I know they’re not from work. It looks like she’s part of a bachelorette party.”

I nodded at Della, not caring either way. My immediate concern was getting through the night without having bodily contact with a floor full of strangers.

The disc jockey sidelined my concern a moment later when he played a popular song I happened to love, the beat making it impossible to stay still.

Adam jumped up and pulled me to my feet. “We have to dance to this one.” He motioned for Della to join us.

The three of us went out to the floor. Della and Adam danced while I stood there, trying to keep from getting bumped and pushed.

“What’s wrong?” Adam called out, trying to make his voice heard over the music.

“I don’t know how to dance,” I called back, my cheeks burning while I eyed the people around me, hoping no one heard what I said.

“That’s nonsense. Just move your body to the music.” Adam grabbed my hand and danced with me. He sang to the music while making faces at me, spinning me around as he executed some hilarious dance moves. He was clearly trying to put me at ease.

Della was hysterically laughing as she danced with the two of us. After several songs, I had to admit I was having fun. After a few more rounds of dancing, the three of us returned to our booth to take a break.

Adam wiped his forehead with a napkin and grinned at me. “I told you it would be fun. And I have no idea why you said you didn’t know how to dance. You looked like you were doing pretty good out there.” He glanced over his shoulder toward the VIP area next to the stage. “I wasn’t the only one who thought so either. A couple of those guys sitting by the disc jockey have their eye on you, and one of them is pretty cute. He’s the tall guy in the white shirt with the rolled-up sleeves.”

“They’re drunk,” Della said, watching the group. “The guy in the red shirt is obnoxious. I saw him bump into a couple of people on the dance floor. He tried to get overly friendly with some woman until her boyfriend pushed him away and told him to back off. One of the douchebag’s friends pulled him off the floor.”

“Seriously? I didn’t see a thing.” Adam took another look, scrunching his nose when the guy in the red shirt jumped up and down to the music and bumped into people. “Della’s right. A couple of them act like they’ve had too much to drink, especially the guy acting like a human jumping bean.”

“I don’t believe it,” Della said, the surprised tone in her voice causing Adam and me to turn around and follow her gaze. “Reid Morgan is here. He went over to the corner table next to the wall. I told you he’s a player. He joined that sleazebag that comes in here from time to time.”

“Who’s the guy?” I said brusquely, disliking Della’s labeling of Reid. Although I’d heard her call him a player on several occasions, this time, it bothered me.

“I don’t know who he is, but he’s an ass. He comes in here and acts like he’s some important person. He puts his hands all over the women and gets a little too friendly with them at his table. I don’t understand why management lets him stay. If you watch him long enough, you can catch him slipping cash to one of the employees, who’ll return to his table with a skaggy woman in tow. It’s like he pays the employees to bring him women he can fondle.”

“You can’t possibly be serious,” I said, my voice rising. I couldn’t picture Reid hanging out with someone as disgusting as that.

“Yes, I’m serious. I had a VIP table next to his last time I was here on a date and saw everything the guy did. Watch the sleazebag, and you’ll see. He’s already motioning one of the employees over to his table. The douche will say something to him and then reach out and shake the guy’s hand while he slips him some cash. Just watch.”

The three of us stared at Reid’s table, waiting to see what the man would do. The situation felt so tense, it dawned on me I was holding my breath. Expelling the air, I leaned forward, my eyes narrowing as the employee reached their table.

“No way. The guy’s doing it, just like Della said. It’s like watching some porn movie playing out in front of us.” Adam’s eyes were like saucers as he stared at the scene unfolding in front of us.

“I told you,” Della said as the employee put whatever the man had handed him in his pocket. She seemed pleased with her ability to predict the man’s play-by-play actions. Then her expression changed, and she turned to me with a stern look. “You need to stay away from Reid Morgan, Sofie. The guy with him is bad news, and if that’s the kind of person he hangs with, Reid Morgan is nothing but trouble.”

“There’s no way it’s as bad as you say. Reid, I mean Mr. Morgan, isn’t that type of person,” I said, not wanting to believe Della.

“You never know. Bad people come in all shapes and sizes and are experts at getting you to trust them.”

I didn’t...couldn’t...agree with Della. The world I’d lived in before Dean was the shadiest, the people the worst of the worst. Reid did not fit the profile. Something else was happening besides him hanging out with a piece of trash. There had to be.

“Look at that. I told you the sleazebag has women brought to him,” Della said, nodding her head toward Reid’s table as she leaned back in her seat and smugly folded her arms across her chest.

Shocked, I sucked in my breath. The employee had returned and was depositing two barely dressed and skanky-looking women at Reid’s table. One woman slipped into the booth next to Reid while the other sat next to the unidentified man, his arm going around the woman while he groped her breast. Stunned, I stared at the man’s hand.

“Up with you. We need to dance.” Della stood and grabbed my arm, pulling me toward the dance floor. “You need to ignore him. Better yet, pretend he doesn’t exist. I’m telling

you, Reid Morgan is nothing but trouble. This pathetic show of theirs proves it.”

I peeked over my shoulder at the corner table, my stomach churning. Now I wasn't sure what to think. Could my impression of Reid Morgan be that wrong?

CHAPTER 10

A False Perception

REID COCKED HIS head at Geoff, eyeing him across their table in the dance club's VIP section. "Now that we've gotten past the niceties, why did you insist I meet you here? We could have met at my office." He was more than a little bothered by his cousin's request, preferring not to be here. He only associated with his cousin on his mother's side when necessary, and he wouldn't do it at all if he had his way. But his dying aunt, Geoff's mother, had made Reid promise to look out for him. Trying to do that took more energy and patience than he had most of the time, the situation compounded by their age gap. Reid was thirty-four, while Geoff was twenty-three and raised as a privileged brat.

"Well, cousin, besides needing your help with something, I thought we could have some fun. You know, talk a little business and then enjoy what these ladies have to offer afterward. They look like they're ripe for some fun. Isn't that right, ladies?" Geoff groped the breast of the woman sitting next to him as she eagerly nodded affirmation of her willingness to please him. Then he eyed the woman next to Reid, motioning her to slide closer to him.

"No, thanks. I'm not interested," Reid said, his voice terse as he put his hand up to stop the woman from moving toward him. He gave his cousin an annoyed look. "If this is what you got me here for, I'm leaving."

"Hold on," Geoff said, putting his hand in the air. "I need your help, so don't act like an old man and wig out on me. I need you to talk to your mother on my behalf. I asked her for money from my trust fund a week ago, and she turned me down."

"Why involve me? I'm not the trustee, and I don't have anything to do with it. Your parents delegated that

responsibility to mine.” Reid rubbed his forehead, trying to keep his composure. If Geoff wanted money, either he’d blown what he had or he was scheming on something. Reid knew his mother was a shrewd businessperson. She must have had a good reason if she had turned Geoff down.

“I’m asking you because I want the money for an investment I’m talking to some people about, and I need you to get your mother to see it’s a good deal. It’s a huge sunken treasure expedition. The people in charge want me to partially fund the operation in exchange for a share of what they find. One of my dad’s old cronies approached me about the deal.”

Reid could understand why his mother had turned Geoff down. An expedition like that was risky. Geoff’s father had been an oceanographer, and he had been legendary in the field. He’d looked for sunken treasure as a hobby and had hired Reid to work on several projects when Reid was in his twenties. Geoff’s dad had died five years ago in a scuba diving accident off the coast of Panama in search of a sunken Spanish galleon. To speak to his mother on his cousin’s behalf, Reid would have to research the project, talk to experts, and see what was involved. It would take time to dissect and wasn’t something he could do in a dance club.

“Well? I can tell you’re thinking about it. Are you going to help me or not?”

“Look, I need much more than your recommendation to broach the subject with my mother, so we’ll have to talk about this next week. I’m not going to do it here, especially when we’re not alone.” Reid clenched his jaw, looking at his cousin with disgust when he saw him play with the nipple of the woman sitting next to him, her arousal visible through her sheer blouse.

“Fine. If you want to talk next week, we can do that. But now that you’re here, why don’t you try to relax and have fun? Quit acting like a damn priest.” Geoff turned to the woman when she moaned. “Let’s see what you got for me, honey.” He slid his free hand up the woman’s leg and underneath her

dress. “Ahh, that’s nice. I’ve got something for you.” He took the woman’s hand and placed it on his crotch.

“I’m leaving.” Reid abruptly stood, his lips tight. His cousin was a pig, and he hadn’t come here to watch his shameless and disgustingly inappropriate behavior.

“Jesus, Reid. Would you lighten up and have some fucking fun? I bet Blondie next to you is just as ready as this one is.”

Reid leaned forward to grab Geoff, then stopped, suddenly picturing Geoff’s mother. He growled and turned toward the dance floor, intending to head for the exit. He had to do a double take. The woman on the floor looked like Sofie. *It was Sofie!* What was she doing here?

“It looks like someone got your attention, cousin. Which one?” Geoff said, appearing unfazed by Reid’s irritation with him.

“The woman in the dark dress with her hair up.” Reid’s voice was tight, his attention focused on Sofie. “She’s dancing with the tall guy with the rolled-up sleeves. The guy in the red shirt, bouncing around like an idiot, is behind her.”

“Damn, cousin. She’s hot. Well, ladies, it looks like I get you both to myself tonight for a nice little threesome. I’ll give a special prize to whoever gets me off first.”

“You’re a damn pig,” Reid said, his eyes narrowing as he scowled at Geoff. His cousin seemed increasingly brazen and disgusting every time he saw him. Reid cursed his promise to his aunt, wondering if he should kick Geoff out of his life altogether and break it. Either that, or he’d do Geoff some severe damage one of these days.

“Hey, don’t take it out on me because you’ve forgotten how to get your rocks off. Why don’t you pull your lady off the dance floor and play with her in a corner? What’s her specialty, anyway? Sucking or fucking?”

“You’re a goddamn ass.” Reid clenched his fist and swiveled toward Geoff, stopping himself before he took a swing. Fighting to restrain himself, he turned back to the

dance floor in time to see the guy in the red shirt grab Sofie from behind, his hands all over her as she fought to get out of his grasp. “Shit!” Reid bolted toward Sofie, his rage unleashed. No one touched her like that.

Reid could see the terror on Sofie’s face as he scrambled through the crowd to get to her, Della and Adam rushing in from another direction. Reid’s heart was pounding, his fists tightly clenched as the man continued to touch Sofie. He had almost reached her when Sofie swung her arm backward, nailing the man in the groin. He dropped to his knees, and Sofie ran like a wild animal from the dance floor.

“I’ll get her,” Reid yelled, rushing past Della and Adam.

Sofie was fast as she dashed down the stairs and out the front door, her feet barely touching the ground. Panic gripped him as the fear of losing sight of her grew. Then Sofie stumbled. Reid held his breath as he watched her try to stay upright, suddenly crashing onto her side and hitting her head on the concrete. Reid sprinted toward her, fearing the worst as she lay facedown on the sidewalk.

Reid knelt next to her, his breath coming in fear-laden pants. He needed to move her but didn’t want to cause more damage than the fall had already done. Carefully touching her, he rolled her onto her side. “Sofie? Can you hear me?”

Sofie flipped onto her back and bolted upright. “Don’t touch me,” she cried, her hands and arms beating Reid wildly.

“Sofie, stop. It’s me. It’s Reid.” He tried to grab her flailing arms, realizing the fall had momentarily stunned her, his touch now spurring her to react. She was fighting to defend herself, unaware it was him.

“Leave me alone,” she yelled, still fighting to get out of Reid’s grasp.

“Sofie, it’s Reid. Stop fighting. I’m not going to hurt you.” He grabbed her arms, hoping to calm her down.

Sofie stopped fighting, appearing to realize it was him. She threw herself into his arms, looking relieved.

Reid looked down at her as he held her. He brushed her hair from her face. “Where are you hurt?”

“I don’t know.”

Reid pulled back slightly and peered at her. He could see well enough from a nearby streetlight to tell she had a cut near her hairline and a trail of blood dripped from it. “I saw you stumble and fall. It looked like you landed on your side and then hit your head. There’s blood coming from a cut on your forehead. You need to get checked out in case the cut is serious, and you might have a concussion. I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital. Please take me home. I’ll be fine.” Sofie adamantly shook her head.

“You hit your head pretty hard. You need to get checked out. If you don’t let me take you to an emergency room, you’ll have to go to my house so I can call my doctor and have him do a video chat to check you out. It’s one or the other. I’m not going to let you go home.”

“Your house. No hospital, please.”

“All right. Let me call Lawrence to pick us up.” He took his cell phone from his pants pocket and dialed Lawrence.

“Hello?”

“I need you to pick me up where you dropped me off, and I need you to come right now.”

“I’m on my way, sir.”

“Thanks.” Reid hung up and stashed his phone back in his pocket. He looked down at Sofie, tenderly brushing another loose strand of hair from her face. “Can you stand up?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Let’s try.” Reid stood and carefully pulled her to her feet. “Can you tell if you’re hurt anywhere else?”

“My left hip felt a little tender when I stood right now, and my forearm burns a little. I might have some road rash from

hitting the ground.” Sofie held up her left forearm, the underside pointing toward Reid.

“That’s a yes. You must have slid on it.”

Lawrence pulled up to the curb and dashed from the car. “What happened?”

“She fell. You’ll need to take us home so I can call my doctor.”

“Yes, sir.” Lawrence backed away to the car, watching Sofie as he held the door open.

Reid helped her into the back seat. He climbed in beside her, his body pressed against hers. “You’re shivering.” He drew her into his arms. “Is that better?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you run like that?”

“The guy that grabbed me kept trying to put his hand up my dress. I freaked out, I guess.”

“Did he...succeed?” Reid couldn’t help but picture the sickening sight of Geoff slipping his hand under the dress of the woman sitting next to him. Knowing Sofie might have unwillingly had the same thing happen made him angry.

“No, I stopped him,” Sofie said softly.

Reid held her tighter, thankful the asshole had failed in his attempt. He was proud of her for nailing the guy in the balls. Reid relaxed against the seat and closed his eyes. She’d scared the hell out of him when he’d seen her fall, and he hoped to God his doctor could confirm she was all right.

Reaching his home in the Beacon Hill neighborhood, Reid helped Sofie from the car and up his front steps. He was fumbling in his pocket for his keys when the front door opened, and his personal assistant, Anderson, was standing there wide-eyed.

“Sir?” Anderson said, stepping back so Reid could bring Sofie into the house.

“I need you to get a hold of Dr. Rowland and see if he can do a video chat. Sofie fell and has a cut on her head, and I need to make sure it’s not serious.”

“Yes, sir,” Anderson said, shutting the front door and disappearing from the foyer.

Reid led Sofie past the parlor and helped her up the stairs to the floor above them. Once there, he led her down the hall to his bedroom and had her sit on his bed. Reid gingerly removed her purse strap from her shoulder and placed her bag on the nightstand. Stepping back, he saw the wary look in her eyes. “I’m not trying to pull anything, I swear. I want to clean the cut on your head so I can look at it, and the antiseptic and gauze I need are in my bathroom. All right?”

Sofie nodded her understanding, a skeptical look still on her face.

There was suddenly a knock on the door. Reid turned, seeing Anderson standing in the open doorway.

“Dr. Rowland is available for a video call. He’s waiting by his computer.”

“Thank you, Anderson. You can go. I don’t think I’ll be needing anything else tonight.”

“Yes, sir.” Anderson backed away and disappeared down the hall.

Reid retrieved his laptop from his office in the room next door. He set it down on the table between the two wing chairs by his fireplace. Taking a seat in one of the chairs, he opened it and dialed Dr. Rowland.

“Good evening, Reid. I understand you’re with a young lady who fell and hit her head. Let’s start with you telling me what happened.”

“Certainly, Doctor. Sofie was running down the sidewalk and tripped. I was behind her, and from my angle, it looked like she landed on her side and then hit her head on the concrete. Sofie has some abrasions on her left forearm, so she

must have slid. Since she was running so fast, I'm worried she might have hit her head pretty hard and could have a concussion. There's a cut near her hairline that I haven't looked at yet. I was getting ready to clean it."

"I'd like to see her. Can you put Sofie in front of the screen?"

"Yes, hold on while I get her over here." Reid got up and motioned to the chair. "Sofie, you'll need to come over here and talk to Dr. Rowland so that he can look at you." He backed away, taking a seat on the bed.

Sofie walked to the chair and took a seat, turning to face the laptop's screen.

"Good evening, Sofie. I'm Dr. Rowland. Hmm. The cut on your forehead doesn't look too bad. Can you show me your forearm?"

"Yes." Sofie held her arm up so the injury faced the screen.

"I have to agree with Reid. It looks like you slid on your arm. It's not as bad as I expected, so you must have landed on your hip or shoulder first. Do either of those areas hurt?"

"My hip does a little bit, but it's not bad."

"Is there any bruising?"

"I don't know." Sofie stood and grabbed her hemline, pulling the dress above her left hip. She turned in a quarter circle so the doctor could see the area.

"There is some slight bruising..."

Reid barely heard their conversation, his gaze glued on Sofie. He knew he should excuse himself or at least turn around, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. She had an extremely nice figure, and her pink lace underwear was sexy with the way it cut low in the front and barely covered her cheeks in the back. He could feel himself getting warm when Sofie took hold of the waistband and lowered her undergarment so Dr. Rowland could fully see her injury.

Sofie let go of her hem and sat in the chair, snapping Reid from his thoughts.

“I’d like to look at your eyes and ask you some questions to gauge the extent of your head injury. Can you please put your face close to the screen?” Doctor Rowland said.

Reid got up and walked to the bathroom, leaning against the door frame as he watched her. He had to be the biggest jerk on earth. Dr. Rowland was checking out Sofie because she was injured, and all he could think about was how much he wanted to put his hands all over her sexy-as-hell hips and pull her body against his. He ran his hand through his hair as he turned away. Damn, he wanted her.

“Thank you, Sofie. I don’t have any other questions for you. Can you please put Reid back on the call?”

“I’m here.” Reid sat in the other chair and turned the laptop around to face him. “Well, how is she?”

“The injury on her forehead doesn’t look serious. You can clean it, apply some antibacterial ointment, and dress it. The same goes for her forearm. But don’t scrub it too hard, and make sure you remove any debris from the wound. She’ll need to ice her hip for about twenty minutes every couple of hours. As far as a concussion goes, Sofie isn’t experiencing any of the symptoms we’d consider a red flag, so I’d recommend rest and keeping a close eye on her for now. However, if anything changes, I want you to get a hold of me at once.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Sofie doesn’t have insurance. Can you send me the bill for her charges?”

“Yes, I can do that. And like I said, if anything changes with Sofie, get a hold of me immediately.”

“I will. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Reid hung up the call and closed the laptop.

“I don’t want you to pay my medical bill. I can take care of it,” Sofie said, looking displeased.

“Please don’t argue with me for once. The bill won’t be cheap, and you won’t have any insurance until you become permanent at work. Let me take care of it, all right.”

“Okay, I won’t argue. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now I need to clean and dress your wounds. You’ll be staying here tonight since Dr. Rowland said someone needs to keep an eye on you.”

“Oh, no, no, no. I can’t do that.”

Reid gave her a stern look, daring her to argue with him.

“Fine,” Sofie said, sighing. “Can I take a shower first? The drunk guy that grabbed me was sweaty and smelly. He was pretty gross.”

“Of course. I’ll set you up in the bedroom across the hall. It has its own bathroom, so you’ll have plenty of privacy.” Reid glanced at her dress. “You’ll need something to wear. One of my tee shirts and a robe should work.” He disappeared into his walk-in closet, returning with a folded shirt in his hand and a robe draped over his arm. “The bedroom and bathroom are this way.” He handed the garments to Sofie and led her across the hall.

“This is nice.” She stood there with her back to Reid as she scanned the bedroom with its king-sized bed, fireplace, and sitting area. She placed the garments on the bed.

“There should be towels and all the amenities you’ll need, including a new toothbrush, in the bathroom. Come back to my room after you’re finished.”

“I will.” Sofie’s back was still toward Reid as she glanced toward the bathroom.

He retreated from the bedroom and had almost closed the door when he stopped. He could see through the narrow opening that Sofie’s dress had slipped from her body and was lying in a heap around her ankles, her bra and underwear following. Reid couldn’t resist staring, although he knew he shouldn’t. She was gorgeous. She had long, shapely legs, a

tantalizing behind, and a tiny waist. There were two dimples above her rear, and they were sexy as hell. Sofie's movement as she unclipped her hair snapped him from his reverie. He quietly latched the door and leaned against the wall. It took all his effort to keep from going back into the bedroom and pulling her into his arms.

Reid was sitting in the chair by his fireplace when Sofie finally returned. She was wearing his robe, the collar of his tee shirt visible underneath. He motioned her to sit in the other chair. A tube of antibacterial ointment, some gauze dressings, and Band-Aids were already on the table next to him. Sofie was quiet while Reid took care of her wounds.

“That’s it. I’ll check on your injuries in the morning, although they should be much better. Oh, and the cold pack. I use this brand I found a while back when I hurt my shoulder. It has an advanced technology that lets it stay cold for up to eight hours, so you should be able to use it several times.” Reid retrieved the cold pack and support wrap from the nightstand and handed them to Sofie. “I’m a light sleeper, so if you need anything, call out. I’ll hear you.”

“Thank you. Good night.” Sofie left the bedroom and went across the hall.

Reid showered and crawled into bed, the image of Sofie standing naked in front of him still vivid in his mind.

CHAPTER 11

A Night Together

REID OPENED HIS eyes and stared at the ceiling. Something had awakened him. He turned on his side and propped his head on his arm to listen. It was crying. *Sofie was crying*. He threw the covers back and sprang from the bed, rushing into the hall. Worried, Reid reached for the doorknob, only to realize the crying had stopped. He waited and listened, but the room beyond stayed silent. Reid quietly backed away and returned to bed, knowing he'd have to check on her if he heard the crying again.

He'd only been back in bed for a minute or so when there was a soft knock on his bedroom door. Reid turned on the bedside lamp and went to answer it, finding Sofie standing in the hall with red-rimmed eyes, dressed in his tee shirt.

"I had a bad dream. Your house is big, and it creaks. I don't want to be alone. Can I please stay with you?"

Reid stared at her for a moment, instantly feeling stuck. She looked scared and upset, and he wanted to comfort her. On the other hand, with the way he cared about her and had for a long time, letting her share his bed was a bad idea.

"Please," she whispered, a tear sliding down her cheek.

That was it. Reid couldn't turn her down. He motioned toward his bed, shutting the door while Sofie crawled under his bedcovers. Reid joined her, making sure to keep some distance between them. He reached over and turned off the lamp. Suddenly curious, he asked, "What was your bad dream about?"

"I was trapped in a house fire. There was smoke and flames, and I couldn't find my way out." Sofie sniffled and buried her head in the pillow.

Reid couldn't take it anymore. He reached for her, surprised by the coolness of her skin. "Come here and get warm." He held her as she curled against his chest, aloe vera and mango drifting to his nose. It wasn't long before he could hear her soft, gentle breaths as she slept.

Sofie uttered a little sound. What it was, Reid couldn't tell. He must have dozed because her head was buried in the crook of his neck, her hand sliding across his chest while her fingers stretched and retracted as they played with his hair. She made the sound again, and he could swear it was a soft purr. Reid silently cursed himself for getting into this predicament. He could feel himself getting hard, his body reacting to her touch.

She made another sound, causing Reid to look down. She'd moved her head, her eyes now open and watching him.

Reid placed his hand over hers, stopping her fingers from moving. "You have to stop."

"Why?" Sofie whispered.

"Because I like it."

She stared at Reid, her eyes unblinking. Then she lifted her head and kissed him.

Reid tasted her lips as his mouth searched hers. They were soft and luscious, and he wanted more. But Reid knew he had to stop, somehow pull himself away from her and go to another room. Sofie was scared and vulnerable, and he'd never be able to forgive himself if he took advantage of her situation and let their intimacy continue. Tossing the covers back, Reid sat on the edge of the bed, his head resting in his hands. What he wanted to do and what he needed to do were at complete odds with one another.

"Reid?"

"I need to go to the other bedroom. I'll let you sleep." His back facing Sofie, he got up from the bed and walked toward the door.

"Why?"

He stopped and slowly turned to face her. “I’ve wanted you ever since that night we worked together on the presentation. I can’t stay here with you. Your presence, and your touch, are driving me crazy. I have to go.”

“Stay, please.”

“You don’t understand,” Reid said, his voice strained. “If I get back in bed with you, I won’t be able to stop myself. And I don’t want you for a single night. I want more than that. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Do you still want me to stay?”

“Yes.”

Reid climbed back in the bed, slowly sliding his body next to Sofie. He ran his hand across her stomach, her skin warm and bare since the tee shirt had ridden up to her chest. “I want to kiss you, and I don’t want to stop.”

Sofie nodded, her eyes moving to his lips, hers slightly parting.

Reid leaned in, his hand caressing her hip as he tenderly kissed her. Then his tongue ardently searched and teased, his passion unleashed as he pressed against her flesh. His cock was hard, and he wanted her. Taking her nipple in his mouth, he rolled it with his tongue and sucked on it while his fingers teased the other. He could hear Sofie’s moans in his ear, her legs suddenly spreading. “Do you want me?” He had to make sure.

“Yes,” she said, her body straining forward.

Reid slid his hand under her buttocks, pulling her against his groin.

Gasping, Sofie reached down and touched him. “You’re... huge,” she whispered.

“Do you still want me?” Reid said as he slipped her nipple back in his mouth.

“Yes,” Sofie moaned.

Reid sat up and pulled the tee shirt over Sofie’s head, tossing it on the end of the bed. Then he slipped off his pajama pants and pulled a condom from the nightstand drawer. He put it on and turned to Sofie, her eyes on him as he stood tall and thick. Reid gingerly slipped his body on top of hers, his knee spreading her wider. Then he eased inside, plunging in small increments until he filled her, jolts of pleasure circuiting through his loins. Reid wanted her. His body needed her, and he couldn’t take it slow. He plunged with frenzied strokes, his breath catching in his throat. Sofie was warm and tight, fitting him like a glove. Thoroughly aroused, he could feel himself throb, the unreleased pressure building.

Sofie ran her hands down Reid’s back, purring as he thrust, her body straining against his. She leaned her head back and moaned.

Reid suddenly stopped. “I want to watch you. Take the top. That way, you’re in control and can take what you want.” Reid’s voice was raspy, his breathing labored. He rolled off Sofie and grabbed himself, pointing the wet and glistening condom toward the ceiling as he reached for her.

Sofie slid on top of him, her knee digging into the mattress as she eased herself down his length. She teased him at first, taking several inches at a time until he filled her. Then Sofie rode him, little moans escaping her throat. A look of rapture spread across her face as she leaned forward, Reid’s abdomen rubbing between her legs.

Mesmerized, Reid watched her expression change as she frantically slid her body up and down his shaft, her lips parting as she closed her eyes. She looked so erotic and felt so damn good as her body squeezed around him, her movements thrusting him deep inside her. Reid’s muscles were tight, the tension in his groin at the breaking point. He could feel himself throbbing as Sofie plunged herself down on him.

Then he heard her let out a series of whimpers before wildly crying out, her body slumping forward. Her arousal and

orgasm pushed him over the edge. Groaning, he could feel himself pulsing as he shot into the condom. He moaned as Sofie moved again, another burst of semen spurting into the latex. Reid opened his eyes to find Sofie sitting on him with the oddest look on her face.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, looking at him wide-eyed.

Confused, he didn't understand what had happened. “Are you okay?” he said cautiously, hoping his size and uncontrolled eagerness hadn't hurt her.

“I've never felt that before,” she breathed, a look of wonder on her face.

“Felt what?” Reid cocked his head at her, his curiosity piqued.

“An orgasm during sex.”

“Never?” Reid said incredulously.

She shook her head and gave Reid a timid smile. “I liked it.”

Reid smiled. He'd worried for a moment that something terrible had happened, and it turned out to be something special instead. He'd given Sofie her first orgasm during intercourse, and he liked being her first. After tonight, he knew he never wanted to see her with someone else. He cared for her and wanted Sofie to be a part of his life.



“GOOD MORNING,” REID said when Sofie opened her eyes. He'd been lying on his side, watching her sleep.

“Good morning to you too. I must have fallen back asleep.” Sofie smiled at Reid and stretched her arms above her head, her body fully displayed since they'd kicked the covers off during an early-morning moment of passion.

“Your purse has been vibrating on the nightstand where I left it last night. I suspect it's from a cell phone.” He grabbed her bag and placed it next to her on the bed.

Sofie sat up and retrieved her phone. She glanced at the screen. “Della’s been trying to get a hold of me. Is it okay if I text her to tell her I’m with you?”

“Of course. Being with me doesn’t need to be a secret.” Reid leaned over and kissed the inside of Sofie’s thigh.

“Stop that. You’re tickling me,” Sofie said, giggling. She finished her text and tossed the cell phone on the bed. “I told Della I’m okay and here with you. I let her know I’d explain later.”

“Good.” Reid kissed her thigh again and grinned. “I’d nibble a little higher like I did earlier this morning, except now I want food. It’s already midmorning. How about some breakfast? My housekeeper and cook, Grace, doesn’t come in on the weekends, and Anderson would have left early this morning to go to Braintree, where he stays on his days off. But I happen to make some pretty mean pancakes and scrambled eggs.”

“Yum. That sounds good.” Sofie swung her feet to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. She squealed when Reid wrapped an arm around her and pulled her back down to the mattress, his body leaning over her.

“I’ll have to bring you back upstairs after we eat. You’re too delicious not to taste one more time.” He took one of Sofie’s nipples in his mouth. After a quick tease with his tongue, he released it. “Breakfast before dessert. I need to keep my stamina up around you.” He got up from the bed and slipped into his pajama pants. He held out his hand. “Are you coming?”

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

“I’ll see you in the kitchen. It’s down two flights of stairs from here.”

“How big is this house?” Sofie looked wide-eyed at Reid.

“The house is five levels, which is typical for around here. Most residences are tall and narrow, with four or five floors. We entered the house last night on the second floor, or what

most people call the first or main floor. The kitchen, dining room, mudroom, and den are on the bottom level, with a separate entrance to the street. We're on the third level, which has this bedroom, the bedroom across the hall, and my office. Above us is another floor with more bedrooms, and that's where Anderson stays during the week while he works here. The top level has a great room with a kitchenette and an outside deck. I've always loved this place, although sometimes I get tired of all the stairs. Anyway, I'm hungry, and I need a cup of coffee. I'm going down to the kitchen to make breakfast. Do you want coffee or tea? I have both."

"Coffee, please."

"You got it. A cup of coffee coming up." Reid walked out the bedroom door and headed downstairs to the kitchen. He hummed to himself as he set the Cuisinart up to brew a small pot of coffee. Having done that, he pulled the staples he needed for breakfast out of the refrigerator and placed them on the counter. The kitchen filled with the smell of fresh coffee as Reid opened the French doors to the walled patio, Sofie in the forefront of his thoughts. She was an enigma, a shroud of mystery seeming to surround her. In time, he'd learn all about her. And time was something he had plenty of because he had no intention of letting her go.

"Do you need any help?" Sofie said from the bottom of the staircase. She had slipped back into Reid's tee shirt, the bottom of the garment ending right below her rear.

Reid looked at her with hungry eyes. Damn, he wanted her again! "You can grab two cups from the cupboard by the stove and make us some coffee. There's milk and creamer in the refrigerator and a bowl of sweetener packets on the counter. I prefer creamer."

"That doesn't sound too difficult." Sofie went to the cupboard and reached up to retrieve the coffee cups from the middle shelf, the tee shirt exposing her rear. She swung around with a cup in each hand, giggling when she looked at Reid.

He could feel his face flush when he looked down at his crotch. His pajama pants were like a tent, and his erection was the pole holding it up. "I can't help it. You drive me crazy." *Damn, she does more than that. Why the hell does she arouse me more than anyone else ever has?*

"I'm glad I have that effect on you, because it's mutual." Sofie set the coffee cups down and sauntered toward him.

"What are you doing?" Reid said devilishly, spotting the mischievous grin on her face.

"I think breakfast will have to wait." Sofie slid one hand up Reid's chest, the other slipping under the waistband of his pajama pants.

Reid closed his eyes as her warm hand cupped his balls. He groaned as it slid up his shaft, and he swore he could feel himself doubling in size when her fingers wrapped around him, stroking him up and down. He groaned again when she put his nipple in her mouth, teasing it with her tongue and sucking on it. "Dammit, upstairs now, or I'm going to come all over your hand."

"Mmm, does the big man in your pants need to get dressed?" Sofie said, licking her lips while her hand teased him. "Why do you have a drawer full of condoms anyway? Am I one of many that share your bed?"

"You're the only one," Reid groaned, Sofie's hand still working him. "Contrary to popular belief, I don't sleep around. The condoms are from the last time I dated, which was months ago." Reid groaned again. "Sofie, I swear to God, you're in dangerous territory. You'll make me come any second if you don't stop."

"Take me here, right now," Sofie breathed, her voice suddenly husky. "I'm on birth control. I can't get pregnant."

Reid cocked an eyebrow at her. "Do you sleep around?"

"No, the birth control pills regulate my periods and make my flow lighter. It's been months since I've been with anyone."

He let out a low growl. Reid wanted her, and he didn't want to wait. He grabbed her hips and jockeyed their positions so she was against the kitchen counter. He spun her around so her back was facing him and pulled the tee shirt from her body. Reid slipped his pajama pants to the floor and pressed himself against her. His finger stroked between her thighs, eliciting a low moan from her throat. He kissed her neck and reached for her nipple.

"I want you," Sofie said, tilting her head back. "Take me."

Reid spread her legs with his knee, and she leaned over, her arms resting on the counter as she exposed herself, ready for his taking. With his hands on her hips, he slowly entered her, erotically watching as he slid in and out. Reid couldn't be gentle. The sight of her taking him had him too aroused. He plunged, and she gasped. He plunged again, and she frantically pushed her hips toward him, appearing eager for more.

He leaned against her body as he thrust, his fingers pinching her hardened nipples until he heard her series of moans. Sliding a hand between her legs, he teased and rubbed her nub while she squeezed around his plunging shaft.

"Oh God, I'm going to come," Sofie breathed between her pants.

Reid stroked her faster, his finger wet and slippery. He wanted to feel her orgasm.

Sofie let out a low moan, and then her body shuddered.

Feeling her contractions as she came, Reid was far too aroused to hold back any longer. He grabbed her hips, erotically watching for a second time as he frantically thrust. She felt so tight, and her orgasm had made her even wetter. He was nearing the brink...coming closer...closer. Then he let out a deep guttural groan as he released inside her.

Spent, Reid pulled away and turned Sofie around. He studied her face. She looked flushed, her pupils dilated.

"Are you all right?" he said, suddenly worried.

“Sex with you is intense. I’ve never had anything like it.” She averted her eyes, her cheeks bright red.

“I have to say the same. You drive my body wild.” Reid pulled Sofie into his arms and held her. Although he’d had a lot of girlfriends, none compared to Sofie. She made his body burn with desire, and he couldn’t get enough of her.

“I need to clean up since you were sweet enough to leave me a puddle.” Sofie gave Reid a coy smile, her tone teasing.

Reid grinned at her. “I’ll make breakfast while you do that. We’ve worked up quite an appetite this morning.”

Sofie giggled and headed toward the staircase, stopping to wipe the inside of her thigh with Reid’s tee shirt. She peeked at him over her shoulder, her face blushing when he burst out laughing.

Amused with Sofie’s antics, Reid leaned against the counter and watched her disappear up the stairs. Intrigued, he couldn’t wait to unravel the mysteries surrounding her.

CHAPTER 12

The Forbidden Word

T IRED AFTER THE horrible incident at the dance club and hours of physically exhilarating sex with Reid with little sleep, I grabbed my pillow and curled up on my air mattress. Reid had just left, bringing me home a while ago after he'd made us breakfast and changed the dressings on my forehead and arm. I traced my bottom lip with my finger where he'd nibbled it before telling me goodbye. He lit my body on fire, his strength, masculinity, self-assurance, and unexpected tenderness arousing me in a way I'd never felt before. I couldn't recall ever being this happy and physically satisfied.

Wanting an hour or so of rest before Reid picked me up later for dinner and a show, I relaxed and closed my eyes. Then my cell phone rang. Scrambling across the carpet on my hands and knees, I snatched my purse from the floor and retrieved the noisy device. I looked at the screen. It was Della. "Hello?"

"Where are you?"

"Home."

"It's about time. Now you can fill me in on what happened to you last night. Adam and I freaked out when you ran from the dance floor, and when neither you nor Reid came back, we assumed you were together. It would have been nice if you had told me you were okay last night instead of this morning."

"Sorry, I got sidetracked. A lot of stuff happened."

"Like what?" Della's tone sounded suggestive, her words hanging in the air.

"I fell on the sidewalk and scraped up my arm and cut my head. Reid took me home and had his doctor look at me on a video call."

“Oh, shit. That’s rough and not what I expected you to say. Are you okay?”

“I am. It’ll heal.”

“What happened after that?”

“I stayed at his house and went to sleep.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“All night?”

There was silence on my end. I grasped for a way to answer her that wasn’t a lie and would stop her questions.

“Oh my God, you’re not answering! You slept with Reid Morgan! Okay, okay. You have to tell me. Was he mediocre, good, or blow-your-socks-off excellent in bed?”

“I’m not telling you. That’s personal,” I said, shocked by Della’s bluntness.

“Come on. Tell me something about him. I’m dying here.”

“Dammit, Della. I’ll answer that one question and nothing else. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“He was several notches above blow-your-socks-off excellent.”

“Serious? Oh my God. You have to tell me more.”

“Nope, we agreed.” Besides being unwilling to give her the intimate details, I didn’t know how to describe Reid without sounding odd. He was like a valiant, daring, and dashing knight, a man who was dripping in masculinity but happened to be playful and have a hidden tender side, in addition to a player facade that he used to fool everyone. And then there was the intimate side of him. He was so sensual and erotic he could write a bedroom manual that was, as Della put it, blow-your-socks-off excellent. Even to me, my description sounded weird.

“Now you’re killing me,” Della wailed. “How about if you come to my place or Adam’s tonight? We can have something to drink and watch a movie. What do you think?”

“You are so pathetically obvious. No, I’m not going to let you loosen my tongue. Besides, I’m going to dinner and a show with Reid tonight.”

“Really?” Della said, sounding surprised. “It wasn’t a one-night stand?”

“No. Reid said he wanted me for more than a single night.” I clapped my hand over my mouth as soon as I said the words. Damn, Della.

She cackled and then let out a huge snort. I had to laugh; she sounded ridiculous, and I pictured Porky Pig every time she did it.

“Okay, fine. I’ll stop badgering you for now. You’ll let the details slip eventually. I’ll bet on it.”

“Bet away. You’ll lose.”

“Wait and see. Anyway, now that the subject of Reid Morgan is off the table, Adam and I were curious why you freaked out so bad when that bouncing idiot came up behind you in the club and tried to get you to dance. Was it because he was drunk? We know you hate drunks based on what you said when we had dinner at Adam’s apartment.”

“It was because the guy tried to slip his hand under my dress when he grabbed me from behind.”

“Oh, shit. We didn’t know. None of us saw that. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s over with, and I can’t change it. The guy was an asshole like every other drunk person I’ve been around. My dad was one, and Dean...well...he got whiny, mushy, and sloppy most of the time.”

“And put his hands all over you? Sorry, but you let that information slip out at Adam’s too.”

I sighed, wishing I'd kept my mouth shut that night. There was nothing I could do about it now. "Yes, Dean did that. He'd paw and fumble around, wanting sex even though he was physically unable to do anything because he was so drunk. Then he'd demand that I try. It was uncomfortable," I said, my tone devoid of emotion.

"I'm sorry, Sofie. That sounds so awful."

"It was." I sat there on the worn carpet, thinking about the incident from last night. Yes, I'd gotten upset when the guy came up behind me in the club, his body sweaty and stinky, his whiskey-laden breath at my ear while his fumbling hand tried to work its way between my legs. But I'd completely lost it when I'd pictured Denny doing it in his place. He was the piece of shit who called himself my mother's boyfriend, although he fulfilled another role in her life. I was fourteen when he attacked me like that. My mom had thrown a lamp at Denny to get him off me, which caused him to turn his wrath on her. I ran like crazy, learning to hide from him from that point onward.

"Umm...Sofie. You stopped talking. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I was thinking about something. Sorry."

"No worries. Well, I better let you go. I'm glad you're okay. I'll see you at work on Monday."

"I'll see you then. Bye." I hung up my phone and crawled over to my mattress, making a second attempt to lie down. I needed a nap so I'd be well rested for my outing with Reid tonight.



"THESE ARE NICE seats. How did you manage to get them at the last minute?" I said, my view unobstructed as I looked down at the stage. I'd never been to a play and looked forward to Reid's special treat.

"Anderson tracked them down for me. He has an extensive network of connections," Reid said, putting an arm around my

shoulder. “You said you haven’t seen *Anastasia* before, right?”

“I haven’t. This performance is my first play.”

“Perfect. You’ll like it. Ahh, it looks like the curtain is going up.”

I snuggled against Reid the best I could with the armrest between us. The evening felt so magical. It made the trauma of last night seem like the distant past, Reid now a constant thought in my mind. He made me feel comfortable and oddly secure, and I enjoyed every moment I had with him. He’d taken me to the seafood restaurant across the street for dinner before the play, the outing including another of several firsts for me, eating oysters on the half shell and filet mignon. Reid had gotten a kick out of my oyster fiasco. The little delicacy had almost launched from my mouth when it had submerged my tongue in a slimy, salty blob. Then he’d teased me about not minding something salty in my mouth when I’d gone down on him at my apartment this morning after he’d taken me home. My cheeks had burned like a lit bonfire when I’d informed him he tasted much better than an oyster, my comment rewarded with a devilish grin.

Relaxed and wonderfully content, I watched in awe as the play continued, the singing and acting riveting my attention to the stage. Reid grinned at me every once in a while as I alternated between wiggling in my seat to the music and eagerly leaning forward as I intently followed the plot. We’d watched the performance for a while when the curtain came down, and lights went on. Confused, I turned to Reid.

“What happened?”

“It’s the intermission. We’ll have a short break to get some refreshments and use the restrooms if needed. Let’s get a glass of wine.” Reid stood and placed his hand on my back as he escorted me from our seats to an open area with a bar. After a short wait in line, he bought two glasses of white wine and led me to a spot overlooking the lobby.

I was taking a sip from my glass when I noticed a woman scrutinizing us from a place near the wall. It was Reid's mother, Virginia Morgan. Startled, I choked on my wine, some of the beverage going down my windpipe. After several coughs, I looked up at Reid, my eyes watering. "Your mother is here. She's standing by the wall with a group of people."

"Where?" Reid slipped his arm around my shoulder before glancing across the concession area, looking for his mother. "I see her. She's with Maddie Langston, Maddie's partner, Harold, and several of their friends. Maddie is my mother's best friend." Reid smiled at her when she waved. "She saw us, and it looks like she's coming over here."

To say she'd seen us felt like an understatement since her scrutiny had been intense, and if her eyes were a camera, she'd have a photo album full of snapshots by now. She had done the same thing when I'd returned Reid's jacket to the administration office. Except at that time, there had been some secret communication going on between her and Mavin Prescott. I couldn't help but wonder why we were of such interest to her. Was it acceptable for the company to hire me but not okay for me to fraternize with her son? Was she surprised to see me with Reid tonight and not happy about it? My mind was leading me down a dark path, and I needed to stop it. I was jumping to conclusions.

"Mother." Reid hugged his mother and kissed her cheek. "I didn't know you had planned to see the play tonight."

"I must have neglected to mention it." She turned and gazed at me with the same intensity in her gray-blue eyes as she'd displayed during my interview. "I see Sofie has joined you tonight. It's a pleasure to see you this evening."

I swallowed and mustered a smile. "It's nice to see you too, Ms. Morgan." I couldn't help feeling confused. The way she'd been watching us and the intensity in her gaze just now made me question whether she liked me. But her comment that it was a pleasure to see me was made with what sounded like sincerity. At this point, I wasn't sure what to think.

“Reid, before I forget, you and I need to schedule some time next week to discuss your cousin Geoff. He came to see me about his trust fund, and I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“I saw him last night, and he told me he had approached you about it.”

“You saw Geoff? I must say I’m surprised. I thought you preferred to stay away from him.”

“I do, but he contacted me, saying he needed to talk to me in person and insisting we meet at a club last night. I ended up leaving right after he broached the subject of his trust fund. His behavior was unpleasant as usual.”

Ms. Morgan looked disappointed, a frown taking over her normally unreadable expression. “I’d hoped he’d mature one of these days and adopt a more proper behavior. My sister and your uncle should have put their foot down when he was a child instead of spoiling him rotten and letting him run wild. But that’s a subject for another time. Oh, there is one more item I want to mention before I run back to join Maddie. I’ll need to know by the middle of next month whether or not you plan to join me in September for the opening night gala at Symphony Hall. I’ve already bought your ticket, and Maddie has an extra one since Harold won’t be able to join her this year, so if you want one or both tickets, I’ll need to know. Otherwise, we’ll let someone else buy them since the event will sell out.”

“I’d forgotten about that with everything going on lately. I’ll think about it and let you know.” Reid turned to me, his arm slipping around my waist. “I usually go with my mother to the annual event at Symphony Hall. We can talk later, but I’d like you to join me.”

“That would be wonderful if you both attended,” Ms. Morgan said, maintaining her reserved expression, although I could swear I saw a hint of a smile. “Well, I better get back to Maddie. The curtain will be going up in a few minutes.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow afternoon so we can discuss Geoff,” Reid said.

“That’ll work. I’m not aware of anything going on tomorrow. Sofie, I’m sure I’ll see you later.” Ms. Morgan tipped her head at me and smiled at Reid.

“Good night,” I said, my voice low. I was still unsure whether Reid’s mother liked me or hated me. Either way, their conversation had been enlightening, confirming that I was right and Della was wrong. Reid wasn’t the player Della made him out to be with his presence at the club last night solely because of a request from his cousin, who happened to be the sleazebag at the corner table. It seemed Reid was just as disgusted with his cousin’s behavior as we had been. That wasn’t the reaction you’d get from a man who pursued multiple women just for a piece of ass.

Reid led us back to our seats, the curtain going up shortly after. I was as engaged with the second half of the play as I’d been with the first. The singing, acting, and plot were attention-grabbing and entertaining, with Reid seeming to get as much enjoyment from my reactions as he did from the play. The performance finished, and Reid whisked me from the venue, Lawrence already waiting for us at the curb. After getting situated in the back seat of his Mercedes, Reid directed his attention to Lawrence.

“You can take me home. That’ll be it for the evening.” Reid slipped his arm around my shoulder and gave me one of his devilish grins. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like you to stay with me tonight.”

“I, umm...wasn’t sure what your intention was for the evening. I didn’t pack anything, so I’m not prepared.” I wanted to kick myself as soon as I commented. I had hoped our evening wouldn’t end after the show, and now that I’d opened my mouth, it probably would.

“You didn’t have anything with you last night, and it didn’t seem to be a problem. But if you’re more comfortable going home, I can have Lawrence drop you off.” He turned his

attention back to Lawrence. “Change of plans. You can take Sofie home instead.”

“Yes, sir,” Lawrence said, glancing at Reid in the rearview mirror.

I felt my body sink into the upholstery. My excitement and sexual tension, which had grown when Reid had told Lawrence to take him home, were now disintegrating.

Reid laughed, his amusement becoming visible when Lawrence drove under a streetlight. “You look disappointed. Was there something you wanted tonight?”

I shot him an irritated look, my lips tightly closed. I wasn’t about to tell him I’d gotten aroused and needed to go home and take a cold shower.

Reid leaned close to my ear. “I packed an overnight bag. It’s in the trunk.”

I stared at him, dumbfounded. “You’re okay with staying at my apartment? It’s not nearly as nice as your place. Are you sure it’s all right?” My tone was questioning. I had a hard time believing I’d heard him right.

“It’s fine. I don’t care where we stay as long as I’m with you.” Reid kissed me, his hand massaging my thigh. When he pulled away from me, the humor was gone, his expression replaced by something I couldn’t identify.

I snuggled against him, an intoxicating feeling of happiness filling me. Suddenly confused, I lifted my head and peeked at him. I’d never had this feeling before, and I wasn’t sure what was happening.



“I FEEL BETTER,” Reid said. He was coming from my bathroom completely naked, his hair damp from the shower. He dipped to his knees at the end of my air mattress and crawled to my pillow.

“I’m sorry my television isn’t bigger, but it’s all I have.” I motioned toward the small piece of equipment sitting on a crate, a sitcom playing on its screen, casting shards of light across my bed.

“It’s not the television that interests me. It’s you.” He leaned over me, with his hands pressed against the air mattress, one on each side of my shoulder. He had the same expression on his face as the one in the car, the one I couldn’t place. He slowly leaned down to kiss me while his eyes studied my face.

I closed my eyes when his lips touched mine. They were soft and gentle, his breath minty from my mouthwash, his body smelling like lavender.

He lay beside me, placing little kisses on my lips, his tongue tasting and teasing as his hands slowly explored my body.

I put my head back, relishing his warmth and touch. A string of sensations grew in my lower body as his mouth teased one nipple and then the other, followed by a trail of kisses down my stomach. I eagerly spread my legs as he lay down between them, a small gasp escaping me as his tongue gently teased.

Reid flicked me with his tongue, causing me to gasp again, my nub sensitive from my arousal. His hands caressed my thighs, my stomach, and then my breasts as he continued to taste me, my body writhing beneath him.

I strained toward his tongue, his alternating motions driving me wild with sensual pleasure. I squirmed as he increased the pressure, his tongue sliding over me in an erotic rhythm as he pinched and rolled my nipples. The hardened points stood at attention as they begged for more. I let out a series of moans as Reid pushed me toward the brink, my body needing to release, my voice pleading with him not to stop.

Reid released my nipples and reached for my hands, his fingers intertwining with mine, the two of us connecting as I

cried out, my body straining forward in sync with a wave of pleasure. He flicked and teased me again when I thought my body was spent, his action causing another wild moan and a second release underneath his tongue. Reid got on his knees and slid forward, his body hovering over me as he guided himself inside.

I ran my hands down his back, my eyes studying his face as I took him. I wanted to feel, smell, taste, and touch him. I wanted to be a part of him. I moved in a sensual rhythm to match his own, our actions slow and deliberate, our bodies seeming to meld as one.

Reid reached for my hands, holding them next to my head as his fingers laced with mine once again. His strokes were gentle as he pulled himself almost all the way out and slid back in again. It was like he was savoring every moment while trying to ensure it felt as good for me as it did for him. Reid's pace suddenly quickened, his thrusts growing harder.

My eyes locked with his as my muscles grew taut, an unusual sensation growing inside me. Reid's engorged head was stimulating my G-spot, which, until now, I wasn't even sure I had. I closed my eyes, savoring the delicious pleasure he was giving me. That I could have been married for years and never felt this sensation before was mind-blowing. But I knew why. Intimacy with Dean had been a bartered requirement, a chore of sorts. Sex with him had been quick and nonpleasurable, with him fumbling at the mechanics of it most of the time. I opened my eyes and looked into Reid's. The connection between us was electric and different than anything I'd ever felt.

"You light me on fire," Reid whispered, his body pounding with frenzied thrusts, his breathing coming in labored pants.

I spread my legs wider, pushing my body against his. I wanted all of him. I wanted him to fill me to the point of bursting. The pleasure he was giving me made me want to scream. My whole body was on edge, my skin on fire, nerve

endings like shorting circuits while all my senses tingled. I closed my eyes, ready to come any second.

“Look at me when you orgasm,” Reid whispered.

I opened my eyes, my gaze locking with his. I grabbed his hips, my entire body straining forward as waves of pleasure rippled across my midsection.

Reid strained above me, my orgasm seeming to push him over the edge. He thrust several more times, then his lips parted as he let out a long, guttural groan, his body still as a warm puddle spread inside me. Then his body slowly relaxed.

I reached up and touched his cheek, his expression looking so intimately serene. Then I saw the look in his eyes. It was the look people gave each other in romance movies, the look associated with that four-letter word. It was also the look I’d seen in his eyes earlier that I couldn’t identify. Now I understood why things suddenly felt different between us. Our connection wasn’t purely physical.

Reid rolled off me and lay by my side. I was about to snuggle in his arms when he turned and placed his head on my stomach. Surprised by his action, I stared down at him. He seemed vulnerable yet trusting, and I liked it. I slid my hand through his hair, my fingers tangling and caressing. Then I held him.

After a moment of stillness, Reid slowly stirred. He slid his hand across my stomach, his finger tracing a circle around my belly button. Then he said, “I love you,” his words spoken so softly that I could barely hear them.

I froze, my heart feeling as if it had stopped beating. I looked down at Reid, suddenly scared. He made me feel all these emotions I’d never experienced before, and I couldn’t get him out of my mind. I wanted to taste, touch, and feel every piece of him, become a part of his soul. Shaken, I stared at him, realizing that Reid Morgan loved me and I was in love with him.

Reid shifted his body, coming back to the pillows. He reached for me, and I snuggled in the crook of his neck.

I kissed his skin and snuggled closer, his body warm underneath my cheek. Then I uttered that four-letter word. The one that had never crossed my lips before. “I love you too.”

Reid seemed to expel a deep breath, and then his body relaxed, his arms tenderly holding me as he rested his head against mine. “You’re one of a kind, and I don’t ever want to let you go.”

I closed my eyes, my world suddenly feeling like a fairy tale. I could only hope it was just as happy.

CHAPTER 13

A Viper's Threat

I'D SPENT THE weekend with Reid, and it was one of the best I'd ever had. He'd taken me candlepin bowling besides my first play, followed by a romantic walk along the waterfront. He'd been funny, attentive, and incredibly charming, on top of his exceptional talent at being sexually exhilarating in bed.

Now it was Monday morning, and I'd tossed and turned throughout the night, Reid the uppermost thought on my mind. Unable to sleep and giddy to see him, I'd arrived to work an hour early. The office was quiet and empty when I came around the corner of my desk and sat in my chair. I was bending down, putting my belongings in my drawer, when a noise disturbed the silence. Looking up, I saw Krista marching toward me, and she didn't look happy.

"My goodness, you're here early. Hmm, by any chance, were you hoping to run into Reid? I heard about your escapade on the dance floor Friday night, including your running out of the club and Reid stuffing you in his car. Stay away from him, Sofie. You're not in his league."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You're insignificant and nothing but a plaything to Reid. A toy he can use until he tires of you. You'd be disappointed if you thought it would be more than that."

"How dare you!" I slammed my drawer shut, floored she'd talk to me like that.

"How dare I what? Tell you the truth? Face it, you come from the street, a women's shelter, according to what I heard. You're not exactly the type of woman he can bring home to his mother, especially with your background. You've moved constantly and can't hold a job. One of your employers even fired you for theft. There's also that matter of you being

married. Fletcher isn't your given name. So, where is your husband? Are you divorced or still married?"

"None of that is any of your business. Besides, Reid's mother is already aware of everything you said. She personally hired me." I spoke through my clenched teeth. If I weren't at work, I'd be on her already, pummeling her with my fists while wiping that smirk off her face.

"You silly girl. You don't fit in and never will. Hiring you at the company is far different than allowing you to be a part of their family. I can see the headlines now. 'Boston Society Meets Street Trash.' You're on the bottom of the social ladder and would be nothing but an embarrassment to them. Does Reid even know your background? Did his mother share it with him? I'd venture to say she didn't. He wouldn't give you the time of day if she had."

"You don't know him!" I jumped up from my chair, my hands balling into fists. Reid wasn't like that and never could be. I was sure of it.

"Oh, I know him. Intimately, in fact. I also know how adept he is at throwing women to the curb and moving on to someone else. Save yourself the pain and embarrassment of Reid tossing you away. He'll always have someone waiting in the wings to replace you. And he'll always be looking for someone fresh. Reid didn't get his reputation by accident. He earned it. As a matter of fact, have you seen the headlines in the tabloids? Hmm? Your lack of an answer tells me you haven't, so let me be the first to show you." Krista pulled her cell phone from her pocket. After some typing on the screen and a few swipes with her finger, she held it up with the screen facing me.

I glanced at it, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of anything more. "Really? An old photo of Reid with some woman. What's your point?"

"First, that's not some woman. Look again. It's Samantha Wilding, the soap opera star. Second, it's from five days ago when he was supposedly in New York on a business trip. And

the headline says it all: ‘Samantha Wilding’s New Beau. The two get cozy in New York restaurant.’ Oh, and there’s another photo of them leaving a hotel together. Would you like to see it? You’re shaking your head. I take it that’s a no? If you change your mind, the photos are widely available online. So, maybe now you’ll heed my advice and stay away from Reid before he discards you like a worn-out sock. After all, you haven’t got the looks, personality, or sophistication to compete with a woman like her. And before you get upset at me, let me remind you that I’m just the messenger and simply looking out for your best interest.”

“You’re a viper incapable of looking out for anyone but yourself. It sounds more like you’re a disgruntled ex, pissed off because you don’t have Reid, and angry that he wants me. Go ahead. You can say whatever you want. I know the real story.”

“You’re so naive.” Krista made a clicking sound with her tongue as she shook her head. The expression on her face was mocking, and the noise she was making reminded me of a snake’s rattle before it viciously struck. “Think what you want, but we both know Reid’s getting himself off between someone’s legs, and they’re not yours. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” An evil-looking sneer contorted her face as she sauntered away, the devious sound of her laughter sending a chill up my spine.

My knees shook as I waited for her to disappear around the corner. Then I sank onto my chair, my body deflated. My mind was like a jigsaw puzzle; each thought was a piece of the whole that I couldn’t put together. Was Reid playing me? Was he sleeping with some gorgeous soap opera star that I’d never be able to compete against? If it were just Krista saying it, I wouldn’t believe it. But the evidence was in front of me, available for the whole world to see on the internet.

I looked down at my hands as a snuffle escaped me. It had to be true, and I was a sucker to believe Reid. He was like every other man I’d known, and they wanted one thing—a piece of ass. Nauseated and lightheaded, I left the office and

went down the hall to the restroom. Making sure it was empty, I went into the end stall and quietly closed the door. I sat on the toilet lid and brought my knees to my chest. Then the tears came. He'd said the four-letter word, and it was a lie.

I'd been there for a while. Precisely how long, I wasn't sure. After wiping my eyes and rinsing my face, I looked at my image in the mirror. I was such a fool. I'd believed a fairy tale, admitting to Reid that I loved him, only to be knocked to my knees. Burdened with my thoughts, I plodded back to the office, my steps heavy with the pain of his deception.

"There you are. Reid was here looking for you," Della said when I came through the door. "Oh, shit. You look like hell. What happened?"

"Nothing. I don't feel good. That's all." I brushed my hair from my cheek and came around my desk to sit down.

"Nah, something's up. There's more going on than your feeling sick." Della's eyes narrowed as she scrutinized me. "Spill it. What happened?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. Just a little lightheaded and queasy." I turned on my computer and pretended to work, but I couldn't think. My mind was off somewhere else, submerged in a bog of anguish and bad memories. I bit my lip, angry at myself for being so naive and allowing Reid to use me.

"I'll leave you alone, then, but I still think there's something you're not telling me." She spun on her heel and walked away. There was a frown on her face as she took one last look at me before disappearing around the corner.

The next few hours crept by as I struggled to stay at my desk. I'd even wondered if the clock had stopped at one point, the time seeming to stand still. Near lunchtime, I decided to leave a few minutes early. In no mood for company, I wanted to disappear for the next hour and hoped I could make it through the rest of the day. Grabbing my purse and lunch bag, I left the office and stepped into the elevator. Reid passed by as the door closed. He had to be heading to my office.

I spent my lunch hour hidden away at the small park on the corner. When I returned to the office, Della was heading into the conference room for a meeting, her eyes on me until the door closed. She stopped by my desk twice after that, prodding me to tell her what had happened. I gave her the same reply each time, telling her I didn't feel well.

The day progressed, and it was now late afternoon. I was filing paperwork in the cabinets behind my desk when I sensed someone watching me. I turned to find Krista standing at my counter with that wretched smirk back on her face.

"It's four o'clock. I hear you don't feel well. Since you came to work an hour early, you can leave if you want."

"Thank you." I turned away to shut down my computer and gather my belongings. I pretended as if she weren't there.

Krista stormed away a moment later, appearing frustrated by my silence and lack of response.

I left the office and headed to my bus stop. It wasn't long before I was home. I tossed my purse and lunch bag on my coffee table and crawled into bed, my heart and mind in tatters. I wanted to sleep the pain away, hoping to wake up and find it all gone.



I OPENED MY eyes. Groggy, I tried to pinpoint the sound that woke me. Then I heard it again. Someone was buzzing me from downstairs. Feeling confused, I looked at my watch. It was seven o'clock. I must have fallen asleep for the last two hours. Strangely exhausted and numb, I dragged myself from my air mattress and answered the buzzer. "Yes."

"It's Reid. Let me in."

I leaned against the wall. I could take care of the situation now or do it later. Although the longer I waited to back away from our relationship, the harder it would be. And it was in my best interest to end it before Reid broke my heart. I closed my

eyes and hung my head. Then I pressed the button, letting him into the building.

Reid was at my apartment in less than a minute. He bolted across the threshold before I could fully open the door, his body rigid as he stared at me from several feet away. “Dammit, Sofie. What’s going on? I’ve been calling and texting you all day, and you haven’t answered. I even looked for you several times, and you’d disappeared. What’s happening? Why are you ignoring me?”

I closed the door and turned to face him, my shoulders slumping as my gaze shifted to the coffee table. I’d left my cell phone buried in the bottom of my purse all day, unaware he’d been trying to reach me.

“Could you say something to me, please? Give me a clue as to what happened. We spent the weekend together, and now you won’t talk to me. Why?”

I studied Reid with tired eyes as I tried to figure out what to say. He was upset and sounded confused. What if Krista was wrong? Could it be possible that it wasn’t a lie and he loved me? Was I on the verge of making a huge mistake?

“Talk to me, Sofie.” Reid took a step toward me.

God, how I wanted him to reach out and hold me. I wanted to feel his body’s warmth and the comfort and security of his arms. I wanted Krista to be wrong. I wanted him to love me. “Reid...I...”

His cell phone rang, cutting me off.

“Shit!” Reid yanked his phone from his pocket and frowned at the screen.

My breath caught in my throat, my body reeling. I was close enough to see the photo displayed on Reid’s phone. The caller was Samantha Wilding.

Reid ignored the call and stuffed the device back in his pocket. He reached for me. “Sofie?”

I backed away, my stomach churning. “It was a mistake,” I whispered, my mind swirling in a sea of anguish.

“What the hell are you saying?”

“It shouldn’t have happened. We were a mistake. I work for you, and it isn’t right. We’d face endless rounds of malicious gossip, your reputation would suffer, and my job would eventually be at risk.”

“Is that what’s important to you, appearance and what other people think? What about the feelings we have for each other? Am I supposed to pretend you don’t mean anything to me, that nothing happened between us?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t do that, and I don’t understand what’s driving you to back away. You can’t turn off what we shared as if it were a damn light switch.”

“I told you it was a mistake. You need to go. Postponing the inevitable isn’t doing either of us any good.”

“You want me to leave? Deep down, that’s what you really want?”

“Yes,” I said, my world crumbling around me. The word *liar* screaming in my head because this wasn’t what I wanted.

Reid stared at me, his eyes darting across my face as if he were desperately trying to read my thoughts. He looked pained, the energy and light in his gray-blue eyes now clouded over. Without saying another word, Reid turned and walked to the door. He paused with his back to me, his hand on the doorknob. Then he walked out.

I sank to my knees on the floor; my body bent forward, my arms wrapped around my waist. My anguish felt physical, like pieces of my heart were spread across the worn carpet. I leaned my forehead on my knees and cried. For the first time in my life, I’d felt happy and loved, and it was a lie.

CHAPTER 14

The Reckoning

I DID A double take, surprised to see Adam accompanying Della as she strode toward my desk. As long as I'd been here, he'd never come to marketing to visit me. Their expressions looked solemn, and I couldn't imagine what they wanted.

"Okay, that's it. Adam and I are here for an intervention," Della said.

"For what?" I turned away to finish sorting the stack of mail on my desk. I didn't have the energy to deal with them.

"You haven't been yourself for the last three weeks and have completely ignored us. It needs to stop. You need to talk to us, tell us what's going on. We can't stand the empty look on your face, and I swear, it's like your body's a shell with no emotion attached. We know it has to do with Reid because he hasn't been around, and you've not mentioned him." Della came around the desk and took hold of my arm. "We're going to lunch, and you're going to spill it."

"Stop it! I'm fine." I yanked my arm away and spun around in my chair, giving them a view of my back.

"Knock it off, Sofie. Della and I feel like scrounging monkeys with a bowl full of empty peanut shells," Adam said, his voice rising.

I spun back around, staring wide-eyed at Adam.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Della said, glaring at him, her teeth visibly clenching. "You're not helping."

Adam's shoulders slumped, and he looked hurt when he turned to look at me. "Sorry, it's just...we're scrounging for some way to help you, feed you some comfort, but we're helpless. Our hands are the bowl of empty shells. We have

nothing to give you because you won't tell us what happened, and seeing you like this is killing me." Adam looked down at the floor, quietly nudging the carpet with his toe. He seemed so glum as he stood there.

"Fine, I'll go to lunch." I yanked my lunch bag and purse from my drawer and stood. I wanted to say something snarky but decided against it. The sad look on Adam's face was still there. He wasn't pretending. He was truly hurt. Now I felt compelled to comfort him. I came around my desk and hooked my arm in his. "Lead the way. We'll go to lunch."

Adam gave me a faint smile and led me to the elevator. Once downstairs, he picked a quiet spot in the courtyard and then took off to get lunch for Della and himself. Della and I sat at the table, neither of us saying a word. After a minute or so, Della finally spoke.

"This is killing us, Sofie. Both of us. You look so devastated. We want to help. And Adam, he's so sensitive, he's pretty upset."

"What do you want me to do? It's not like I can change things." I let out a long, deep breath, suddenly feeling tired.

"Change what? We don't even know what happened, and you haven't been the same for weeks."

Adam returned to the table, looking annoyed. "The line at the counter was super long, and I didn't want to wait. So I got us two premade roast beef and cheddar sandwiches." He placed a tray in front of Della and then sat next to her with his.

"Reid has a girlfriend." The words came shooting from my mouth.

"What?" Adam said, dropping the sandwich he was unwrapping.

"Come on, you're joking, right?" Della leaned back in her chair and gave me an odd look. It was like she didn't want to believe it but was shocked that it might be true. "Who told you this garbage?"

“Krista.”

“And you believed her?” Della said, her voice shrill. She shook her head at me. “Why would you believe a word from that witch’s mouth?”

“Because she had proof.” I pulled my phone from my purse and brought up the two pictures of Reid and Samantha Wilding that Krista had texted me. I handed my phone to Della. “She showed me one of those photos three weeks ago and then sent both of them to me last week when she saw me watching Reid at lunch. They’re from the internet.”

“Is that Samantha Wilding?” Della said, looking shocked.

“It is. The pictures were from Reid and Samantha’s little rendezvous in New York right before he and I spent the weekend with each other. According to the story in the tabloid, they were pretty cozy, and the journalist called Reid her beau.”

“But that was before you and Reid got together. You said so yourself. So, why is that an issue?” Della said.

“Because Reid lied to me when I asked if he was dating anyone. Plus, they’re still contacting each other. She called Reid when he came to talk to me the day I broke it off with him.”

“Oh, shit. Look at what the witch said in her text to Sofie.” Della handed my phone to Adam. She looked pissed.

Adam’s face flushed, his eyes darkening. “*Remember you were only a toy to him. This is the woman in his bed and the one he wants. You’re not even in his class, so give it up.*’ The goddamn bitch said this?”

Della and I jerked our heads toward Adam, his outburst highly unusual.

“Yes, that’s what she said. It’s her text. She must have gotten my phone number from Alice. I can’t think of any other way she’d get it. And that’s not all Krista said. She spewed a mouthful of demeaning things to me three weeks ago. It was

the morning I was all upset at work and ended up going home an hour early.”

“I knew something happened that morning. I should have guessed it was Krista.” Della’s eyes were cold, and her face rigid.

“Oh, it was her, and she was in rare form that morning. I had come to work early, hoping to see Reid, and she caught me at my desk. She was angry and confronted me about what had happened at the club. Alice must have told her about my running off and Reid chasing me down. She even knew I’d gotten in his car with him. Then Krista was kind enough to tell me I was street trash from the shelter and didn’t belong in Reid’s social circle, saying I’d be an embarrassment to him if he knew. She also seemed to know personal information about me that Alice must have given her. And the witch got off telling me I was his play toy and meant nothing to him, saying he’d eventually dump me. I didn’t believe her until she showed me the picture on her phone.”

“Oh my God, Sofie. You need to report her to Mr. Kingsley. What she did is harassment, and she can’t gather information about you from your personnel file to use against you,” Della said, sounding aghast.

“What’s the point? It’s my word against hers, and this isn’t the first time she’s harassed me, either. She’s been doing it since I got hired. I don’t want to go to battle against a manager. I need my job and can’t afford to get fired. Besides, I don’t want to be labeled a rat. It’s fine. I can take care of myself.”

“That’s not being a rat,” Adam said defiantly. He leaned forward with his forearms on the table, the muscle in his jaw twitching. “It’s called defending yourself. And why would you get fired? You’ve done nothing wrong. She did. You have proof since she sent you that text.”

I was about to reemphasize that I couldn’t bring myself to tattle to human resources when I spotted Reid and some woman come out of the pizza restaurant across the courtyard.

The woman turned, and I could see it was Samantha Wilding. I grabbed the edge of my chair, my stomach churning as I watched them. They chatted for a moment, and then they hugged.

“What are you looking at? Your face is as white as a ghost.” Della turned in her chair to look behind us. “Oh, shit. Is that Samantha Wilding?”

“Yes.” I could feel my eyes becoming moist as they pulled away from each other, and Reid kissed her cheek. “I need to go.” I stood as Reid turned, and we made eye contact. I felt suddenly nauseous, my breakfast ready to come up any second. I grabbed my belongings and briskly walked away, hearing Reid call my name from across the courtyard. Unable to face him and desperately needing the restroom, I bolted across the concrete. I rounded the corner and dodged into a coffee shop, beelining it to the toilet. I’d barely closed the door when my stomach relieved me of my breakfast. I leaned against the wall and wiped my mouth, feeling devastated. After cleaning myself up, I returned to the office, avoiding Adam, Della, and Reid.

I’d been back at my desk for almost an hour when it dawned on me I’d never seen Della return from lunch. I was contemplating what might have happened to her when the office door opened, and Mr. Kingsley approached my desk.

“Sofie, I need you to grab your belongings and come with me.”

I stared at Mr. Kingsley, my breath coming in rapid spurts, my pulse racing. Was I being fired? Suddenly confused, I retrieved my belongings and quietly followed Mr. Kingsley to the elevator as my head spun with conflicting thoughts. We took it to the second floor, and Mr. Kingsley led me to the administration office.

“You can go in. Ms. Morgan is waiting for you,” the receptionist said as Mr. Kingsley approached his counter.

I followed Mr. Kingsley past Ms. Prescott's desk and rounded a corner. We walked by an office with the door open. Reid was sitting at the desk, and Della and Adam were sitting in two chairs in front of him. Reid looked upset when he saw me, and I diverted my gaze. Feeling lightheaded and shaking, I continued to follow Mr. Kingsley, unsure what was happening, although I knew I would find out any second. He led me into the office next to Reid's, motioning me to sit in one of the chairs in front of the desk. Ms. Morgan sat there with a stoic expression as Mr. Kingsley settled in the chair next to me.

"Sofie, I understand Krista sent you a text message last week. I'd like to see it," Ms. Morgan said, her voice firm.

I nodded and retrieved my phone from my purse. I opened the text message, my hand shaking as I placed my phone on Ms. Morgan's desk.

Ms. Morgan picked up my phone and looked at the message. Then she handed it to Mr. Kingsley. He frowned as he looked at the screen.

"I understand Krista confronted you in the office three weeks ago regarding some events that occurred while you were out for the evening at a dance club. Is this correct?" Ms. Morgan said.

"Yes."

"I need to hear directly from you what was said. Do you understand me, Sofie? I need to hear it in your words, and I don't want you to hold anything back. Am I clear?"

I nodded and explained the best I could what Krista had said to me and what I'd said to her in return. When I had finished, I folded my hands in my lap and waited to find out what would happen to me.

Ms. Morgan turned to Mr. Kingsley. "Is Alice here today?"

"Yes, she is."

"Good. I'll go with you back to your office, and we'll talk with Alice." Ms. Morgan looked at me as I sat there, my knees

shaking. “Sofie, I do not want you to leave these offices. After Mr. Kingsley and I finish with Alice, we’ll talk to Krista. The meetings may become ugly and disruptive, and I expect we’ll escort Krista back to her office to collect her belongings immediately afterward. I don’t want you near your office until we’ve finished. Ms. Prescott will be at her desk. You can let her know if you need anything.”

“Okay.” I watched the two of them walk out the door, and then I stared down at my lap. I was uncomfortable sitting alone in Ms. Morgan’s office but didn’t dare move, wishing I could run and hide instead. My breath caught in my throat a moment later when I heard someone enter the office behind me.

“I need you to tell me the truth. Did you mean it when you said you loved me?” Reid said, his words startling me.

“Yes,” I whispered, pained to admit it because of the circumstances.

Reid walked to the desk and sat on its edge so he was directly in front of me. “Look at me, please.”

I raised my head, meeting Reid’s gaze. My heart fluttered when I saw the expression on his face. It was the same look from before, the look I didn’t understand until I realized he loved me.

“I’m not dating Samantha. We grew up together, and she’s a family friend. Her mother is Maddie Langston. Honestly, it would be like dating my sister. That’s how close we are. I was in New York on a business trip tied to the nonprofit that I used to help run, the World Hunger Foundation. I was the director of new business development. I stepped down from my position when my father died, and I came back to Boston to help my mother run the company. I still work for the charity, but in a minor capacity. Anyway, that doesn’t matter right now. The bottom line is Samantha lives in New York and heard I’d be there on business. She asked if we could get together while I was there. She’s getting married to one of my close friends, who I introduced to her a few years ago. I’m one

of the groomsmen at their wedding. Her fiancé, Ryan, was flying in from Europe, and his flight got delayed, although he joined us later that evening. So, nothing is going on, Sofie. The person I love is you.”

I stared at Reid, my eyes clouding with tears as I hoped I’d heard him right. “So she’s just a friend, and all your jet-setting around the world that I’ve heard whispers about was business-related?”

“Yes, and I can assure you most of my travel allowed little or no time for personal enjoyment. Now, would you please come here?” He extended his hand, pulling me against his chest when I took it. “You’re so undeniably special. Why would I want anyone else?” Reid tipped my head up with his finger as he looked down and kissed me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, eagerly returning his kiss. I loved him, and I missed him. I stood there, savoring his body’s warmth and his gentle touch. I wanted to scream *Reid Morgan loves me*. I was so happy.

“I want you to know Adam and Della told me everything,” Reid said as I snuggled against his chest.

“Everything?”

“Yes, and it’s okay. I don’t care that you were married or lived at a women’s shelter. None of that matters, and your husband was a fool not to appreciate or love you. I feel bad about what happened to him, but he didn’t deserve you.”

I relaxed in Reid’s arms, relieved he was comfortable with this part of my life.

“I don’t want any more secrets between us. Is there anything else you need to tell me? I want to get it out of the way so we can move forward with everything out in the open. No surprises.”

I could feel fear bubble up inside me. What was I supposed to say?

Reid looked down at me, studying my face. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“No,” I whispered. I couldn’t tell Reid the darkest secrets of my life. I feared if I did, he’d feel so shocked and sickened by what he learned that he’d reject me, and I couldn’t deal with that after everything that had happened. All I could do was try to keep those pieces of my life hidden and hope that no one came looking for me.

Reid’s cell phone rang, and he pulled it from his pocket and answered it. “Hello? She did? That’s too bad it went that far. Okay. Are you firing her now? I will. Better yet, I’m going to take Sofie home right now, so I can get her out of here. Okay. I’ll see you in the morning. Bye.”

“What happened?” I glanced up at Reid, almost afraid to hear his answer.

“Armand fired Alice. She admitted to giving a copy of your personnel file to Krista. She said Krista threatened her if she didn’t do it. I don’t know the details yet, but I’m sure I’ll find out the whole story later. Krista is heading to human resources, and Armand will be firing her shortly. I’m going to take you out of here before that happens. How about if we swing by your apartment to gather a few things, and then I take you home? I want you to stay with me. Is that all right?”

“Yes.” I could feel my cheeks burning as I pictured the two of us naked in his bed, Reid pleasuring me in a way I hadn’t known was possible before I met him.

“You’re blushing. I hope you’re thinking what I am. I’ve seriously missed you.”

I reached down, my hand cupping him through his slacks. “Mmm. I’ve more than missed you.”

Reid put his hand over mine and pulled it away. “You better stop that, or I’m going to have to take you into my office and lock the door, and that’s not exactly proper. At this point, we’ll be at your apartment a lot longer than a few

minutes since there seems to be something we both want, and it's not going to wait until I get home.”

“Good,” I whispered as my hands slid up his thighs. “The sooner the better.”

Reid growled as he gently pushed me away. “Home, now, before you drive me crazy.” He grabbed my hand and led me toward the door, now in a rush to get out of there.

I grinned at his eagerness, feeling the same way. But deep down, it was so much more than that. I'd been so miserable over the last three weeks, and it wasn't only because I missed the sex. I missed Reid. He made me feel whole, comforted, secure, and content. It was almost like he'd reached into my soul, the connection beyond description. My life felt incomplete without him, and I couldn't imagine what I would do if I lost him again.

CHAPTER 15

The Annual Gala

I STOOD IN Reid's walk-in closet, holding a glittery emerald-green cocktail dress in front of me as I scanned my image in the mirror. Although it was nice, I was partial to the royal-blue chiffon. The color was a much better complement to my dark hair and sapphire eyes. Satisfied I'd selected my outfit for this evening's opening night gala for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, I turned to hang the dress back up in Reid's closet. I jumped when I spotted him standing in the doorway.

"The dress is nice. Is that what you're wearing this evening?"

"No, I'm going to wear the royal-blue dress I bought the other day instead. Do you want to see me try it on?"

"Do I want to see you get undressed in front of me? What kind of question is that?" Reid devilishly chuckled as he walked toward me.

"I'm serious."

"So am I." Reid kissed me while his hands caressed my rear. Then he stepped away and sat on the bench in his closet. "Go ahead. Show me."

I turned my back to Reid and grabbed the hem of my blouse, slipping the fabric over my head. I watched him in the mirror, noticing I had his full attention. A thought suddenly occurred to me, and I realized this could be more fun than I'd thought. A strip tease seemed fitting, especially since the mere thought of it was sexy and exciting. Swiveling my hips in an erotic rhythm, I unclasped the waistband of my pants and inched them downward, slowly exposing my underwear. I could see in the mirror that Reid's eyes were on my ass when I dropped them to my ankles.

“Damn, you’re wearing a thong,” he said, sounding pleased.

Achieving my desired reaction, I slid my fingers along the waistband of my thong. Moving my hips in a slow circle, I teasingly inched the lacy red fabric down my cheeks until my rear was bare. After letting the skimpy garment fall to the floor, I spread my thighs and bent forward, giving Reid a full view of what I had to offer. Wanting to arouse him even more, I reached down and slowly touched myself, causing Reid to groan behind me. I lifted my head to watch him in the mirror, spotting the bulge in his pants.

“I don’t know how long I can sit here and watch. Damn, I want you.”

I stood and met his eyes in the mirror as I continued to sensually swivel my hips while unclipping my bra and dropping the garment from my fingers. Knowing he was intently watching, I seductively pinched and teased my nipples as I whispered, “Imagine my tongue on your cock.”

“Come here,” Reid groaned. “Dammit, I want you.”

I sauntered toward him with a suggestive swish of my hips and stopped in front of him, his mouth instantly going to my nipple. I moaned as his finger teased and stroked between my legs, the area wet from my arousal.

Reid bent down and spread my lower lips, his tongue flicking and stroking my nub. He fingered me as his tongue continued its wild up-and-down motion, drawing a succession of moans from my throat. “Ride me,” he said, his voice breathless as he removed his clothes and lay down on the bench.

“Not yet. I want to taste you first.” I got on my knees and teased him, my tongue sliding up and down his erection. I grabbed him, slipping his tip in my mouth, incrementally taking more of him until I had him all. Then I worked his shaft and head with my hand as I sucked and teased, deep-throating him in between.

“I’m going to come.” Reid’s voice was deep and rough, and his face and chest flushed as he strained forward.

“Not yet. I’m not done.” I climbed on top of him as I held him upright. “I want to come with you inside me.” I thrust my body down on him, sliding up and down his shaft with frenzied strokes. Then I leaned my upper body forward, my palms on his chest. I rode him like I couldn’t get enough, his abdomen rubbing against the nub between my thighs. I threw my head back as my body shuddered, wave after wave of contractions grabbing his cock as I had a wildly erotic orgasm.

Reid grabbed my hips, his movements frantic as he repeatedly pulled me down on him. He suddenly let out a long, guttural groan as he held me against him, his body lying still as he released.

I stared at Reid, my mouth slightly parted as I felt a warm pool of his semen spreading inside me. He’d been so aroused he’d ejaculated more than usual, and this wasn’t the first time I’d felt it. I smiled to myself, feeling empowered to have such an effect on him.

Reid stood when I climbed off him, and then he suddenly scooped me into his arms and carried me from the closet.

“What are you doing?” I said, laughing.

“I want to hold you. Lay down with me for a while. We have plenty of time before we have to get dressed.”

Reid laid me on the bed, and then he snuggled next to me while I curled up in his arms. He leaned down and kissed me, his lips sweet and tender, his hand gently caressing my hip.

My mind wandered while he held me. What we’d shared a moment ago was wildly uninhibited sex. What we were sharing now was love, and you needed love for the sex to mean anything. I hadn’t understood that until I’d met Reid. Intimacy with Dean had been unemotional and purely for sex, my part simply a job. Once I understood it, the difference between the two seemed striking.

“I want you again,” Reid said, kissing my neck and extracting me from my thoughts.

I nodded, never seeming to get enough of him.

Reid slid on top of me and tenderly slipped inside. His demeanor and his passion were different this time. He was slow, tender, and deliberate. He kissed and caressed me, his hands sliding across every inch of my body as we lit each other on fire. He came inside me. Then he held me for a long time.

“I want you to move in with me,” Reid said, his words seeming to come out of nowhere.

“What?” I stared at him, wondering if I’d heard him right.

“I want you to live with me.”

“Seriously? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I hate the nights I’m here and you’re at home. It’s hard for me to sleep because I constantly think about you. And it’s not only about the sex. I want to make you breakfast, sit on the rooftop terrace together, relax with you in the evenings, and discuss our plans. I want this to be our home together. Does that make sense?”

“It does, but when do you plan on this happening? I have a lease, even though it’s only month-to-month. But still, I’d have to give notice.” I was trying to sound logical, although my head was swirling with a mix of thoughts. What Reid was asking me to do was a huge step, and I didn’t know if I was ready for it. For the first time in my life, I was living on my own, and it had taken enormous amounts of hard work and effort to get to this point. I had to pull myself up with grit and determination and force myself to move forward, more so during the times I desperately wanted to give up.

“For some reason, I thought you’d be ecstatic when I mentioned moving in with me. But you sound hesitant instead. Don’t you want to live together?”

“I do, but it’s complicated. And it’s not you, I promise.”

“Are you afraid you’ll be giving up your independence and freedom? That you’ll lose it once we’re under the same roof?”

“Yes, that’s part of it.” I let out a long sigh. “I’ve never lived by myself until now, and having my own apartment feels like I’ve accomplished something, especially after all the garbage I went through to get here. This will sound silly and probably won’t make much sense, but I almost feel like I’ll be backsliding if I give up my apartment.”

“It doesn’t sound silly, and I understand what you’re saying. I want you to live with me, but I don’t want you to feel pressured to do it. How about if I give you some space to think about what I said? We can talk about it when you’re ready.”

“Thank you for being so understanding. I’ll give it some thought, I promise.”

“That’s all I can ask. Now we better shower and get dressed. I don’t want to be late for the gala.”



REID AND I looked for his mother once we’d entered the Symphony Hall building. After spotting her in the large foyer outside the concert hall, we worked our way across the floor to join her.

“Mother,” Reid said, giving her a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“You look very handsome this evening,” Ms. Morgan said as she smiled at her son in his black tuxedo. “And you, Sofie, are gorgeous in that chiffon dress. The color is stunning on you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Morgan.”

“Please, call me Ginny. It’s more than proper since you’re dating my son.” She smiled, displaying genuine warmth toward me for the first time.

“I’ll try to do that.” Although I meant what I said, it was difficult for me to do. Being Reid’s mother was one thing, but

she was also the company's owner, and whether Reid cared to admit it or not, Ginny was in charge. She was formidable and, at times, quite intimidating.

"Is that Geoff?" Ginny said, gazing at a gentleman working his way through the crowd.

"It is. I hate to say it, but if Geoff's here, he must have an ulterior motive. I've never known an evening of culture to be appealing to him."

"Let's not jump to conclusions, shall we?" Ginny raised an eyebrow at Reid.

"All right, I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. It looks like he's coming over here anyway, so we'll find out soon enough what he's up to."

"Auntie, what a surprise to see you here this evening," Geoff said in an exaggerated tone as soon as he reached us. He gave Ginny a peck on the cheek.

Reid frowned, and I understood why. Even I knew this was an annual event for Ginny, and she'd been attending it for years.

"Geoff, it's nice to see you. What brings you to the gala this evening?" Ginny said. There was something in the way she looked at him for a brief second, and I couldn't place what it was since she'd quickly adopted her usual poker-faced expression.

"Oh, I thought I'd be a good sport and support Boston's culture scene. Who knows, it might be fun."

Ginny smiled at him, and then I realized what it was. It was trust, or the lack of it. She didn't trust Geoff, and I could see it in her eyes. That made two of them because Reid didn't either. That reaffirmed to me that I needed to be wary of him.

"I'm going to join Maddie. Reid, don't take too long. You'll want to be at the table before they stop people from entering. Our table is up front next to the stage." Ginny

glanced at Geoff. "I'm sure I'll see you later this evening. Enjoy the performance." With that said, Ginny walked away.

"Well, cousin, are you going to introduce me to your guest?" Geoff's gaze darted from my lips to my chest before he turned back to Reid.

"Sofie, this is my cousin, Geoff Engels. This is my girlfriend, Sofie Fletcher." Reid's jaw was tight as he gave the introductions, making our relationship status clear.

"Ahh, your girlfriend. I guess that night at the dance club worked out for you. Congratulations, Sofie looks quite the catch."

"She is. Sofie, we should head to our table. Geoff, we'll see you later." Reid took my arm and led me away. He appeared to relax once we entered the concert hall and headed toward the stage.

"There she is. I've been waiting to meet the young lady who has Reid so enamored," Maddie Langston said from her seat at the table.

I smiled at her comment, recognizing her from our night watching the play.

"This is Sofie Fletcher. Sofie, this is my dearest friend, Maddie Langston," Ginny said as Reid helped me with my chair.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Langston."

"Please call me Maddie. Reid's practically like a son to me, having grown up with my daughter, Samantha, and our families go back years before the children were born. Speaking of children, I hope he's bringing you to Samantha's wedding next month. It'll be on October twenty-second. If he's not, come anyway, and I'll sneak you in." Maddie winked at me, and I could see Reid trying to stifle a grin as he gave her a quick hug and kiss on the cheek.

"Yes, I was planning on attending. That is unless Reid changes his mind and decides not to take me. In that case, I'll

have to sneak in as you suggested.” I raised an eyebrow at Reid, teasing him as he took his seat at the table.

“There’s no way that’s going to happen. Sofie will be joining me at the wedding.” Reid slid his arm around my shoulder and kissed my forehead, appearing amused by the conversation.

“Wonderful. I’ll have to share some of Reid’s boyhood stories with you while he’s not listening,” Maddie said teasingly.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Reid said, laughing.

“Oh, my dear. Yes, I would, so don’t tempt me.”

Ginny introduced us to the other four people at our table. Then a young man came to see what we wanted to drink. After taking our order for a California chardonnay, he brought us our first course and glasses of wine. Reid had preordered us shrimp Caesar salads.

“Since this is your first time, I should explain a few things,” Reid said. “The performance is more enjoyable and less nerve-racking when you know what to expect.”

“Good idea. I don’t want the whole room staring at me because I did something wrong,” I said, feeling daunted as I pictured the scene.

“You’ll be fine.” Reid held my hand under the table and gave it a little squeeze. “First, we need to stay relatively quiet so we don’t distract the performers and the other patrons. You’ll also need to make sure your cell phone is off.”

“It is. I turned it off before I put it in my purse.”

“Perfect. Now, as far as the applause goes, it’s proper to applaud when the concertmaster or first-chair violinist enters the stage. We also applaud when the conductor enters. During the performance, we only applaud at the end of a full piece of music, not in between. Watch me, and I’ll let you know when to do it. Got it?”

“Yep, I’ll do everything you do. That’s simple enough.” I grinned as I removed my hand from his and placed it on his knee. “This is going to be fun.” With Reid as my tutor, I wasn’t worried. He’d look out for me and ensure I followed the proper etiquette.

The concert began, and I made sure to applaud when Reid did. I’d never heard this type of music before and found it fun and exciting. Unable to help myself, I quietly tapped my foot to the music, garnering smiles from both Ginny and Maddie Langston. It wasn’t long before our server brought our dinner to the table. Reid and I had the parmesan-crust chicken breast, while Ginny and Maddie had the herbed salmon. Everyone agreed the dinner was delicious.

When we finished, the servers picked up our dinner plates, and the performance stopped for the intermission. Reid led me to the champagne bar, and after ordering two glasses, we stepped off to the side to chat. We’d only been there for a few moments when one of the gentlemen at our table approached us.

“Sofie, I hope you don’t mind if I borrow Reid for a moment. I have a friend of mine that’s interested in hearing about his nonprofit.”

“Oh, I don’t mind as long as you bring him back safe and sound.” I smiled pleasantly at our table companion as I teased him.

“I promise to do that,” the gentleman said. He laughed as he led Reid away.

Reid glanced over his shoulder at me and mouthed that he’d be back.

Now alone, I people-watched, backing away to a quiet spot partially hidden by a five-foot-tall potted shrub. I was observing a group of people in a visibly humorous discussion with an abundance of hand gestures when I sensed someone standing behind me. Then I heard breathing next to my ear, the person’s breath warm and garlicky.

“You smell so nice, and your ass looks so tight. I’d love to fuck it.”

I jumped to my side, bashing into the shrub as I scrambled to turn around. Geoff was standing in front of me with a suggestive smirk twisting his mouth.

“How dare you!” I said, my voice shaking as I spit the words out between my clenched teeth.

“Oh, Sofie. There’s no need to get upset. Our encounter seems to be quite fortuitous. I came here hoping to find some wealthy widow who needed a cock between her legs, and I found you instead. I can promise you I’d be an experience you’d never forget and can pleasure you in ways that’ll make you beg for more.”

I tossed my champagne in his face and was a hair away from lifting my arm to cram my glass into his forehead when I stopped myself. Several people near me were watching. I took a step backward. Keeping my voice low, I said, “You’re a disgusting pig. Don’t come near me again.” I spun around and stormed away, catching Ginny watching me. We made eye contact, and then I rushed into the room across from me that housed one of the venue’s bars. I stood near the corner as I tried to calm myself.

Ginny followed me into the room. “What was that all about?”

“Nothing. It was nothing.” The words rushed from my mouth as I dropped my gaze to the floor and shook my head.

“That wasn’t nothing. I want the truth. What just happened?”

“Geoff said something...inappropriate...to me.”

“Sofie, look at me.” Ginny’s face had softened, and she seemed to be trying to read my face. “I want you to tell me word for word what he said.”

Embarrassed, I could feel my cheeks burn as I repeated Geoff’s words.

Ginny seemed to reel backward as I spoke, looking both angry and shocked when I'd finished. "I don't want you to say anything to Reid tonight. Do you understand me?"

I nodded my head slightly, understanding her perfectly.

"Geoff is family, which makes it a delicate situation. It would be best if Reid heard what happened directly from me, especially since I witnessed it. I'll need to wait until the timing is right. If Reid finds out right now, he'll go after Geoff, and this is not the place for it." Ginny reached out and took my hands in hers, surprising me. "Will you be all right?" Her voice was unusually comforting.

I nodded again, unable to say anything.

She gave me a faint smile. "It's all right. I understand better than you know how unpleasant some men can be. Sofie, did you ever wonder why I gave you a chance after your interview?"

"Yes, I wondered why."

"It was because you remind me of myself. Now is not the time to explain, but I can tell you that I more than understand what you've gone through and the hard effort, determination, and guts it takes to get back on your feet."

Reading between the lines, I was contemplating what she'd been through when Maddie's voice was behind us.

"Ginny, there you are. I have a couple I want you to meet. They're new to Boston's social scene, and I thought you could give them some tips and advice."

"I'll need a minute while I finish up with Sofie," Ginny said over her shoulder.

"Of course, I'll get a glass of champagne from the bar. Meet me over there." Maddie turned and left the room.

Ginny swung back to face me and smiled while she brushed a strand of hair from my cheek. "You are much more resilient than I was and stronger than you think. Now, go on."

Find Reid and try to enjoy the rest of the evening. We'll deal with Geoff later."

"I will." I walked away, oddly comforted by the knowledge I wasn't the only one with secrets. I only wished we could sit and chat, and she could tell me hers.

CHAPTER 16

The Rotten Apple

I HUMMED TO myself while I opened the dining room drapes, letting the sunlight stream through the French doors leading to the patio. Still groggy, I went into the kitchen to make some coffee. I was standing at the counter, waiting for the pot to finish brewing, when I heard Reid's shoes on the stairs.

"That coffee smells good. I wish I had time for a cup," Reid said, coming into the kitchen and strolling toward me.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay? We could go back to bed," I said while Reid kissed my neck and fondled my breasts underneath my sheer nightgown. He was sending a delicious shiver up my spine.

Reid dropped his hands and took a step backward. "As much as I'd love to, it'll have to wait until I get back. Don't forget—after I finish my workout at the gym, I plan to stop by my mother's place. I still don't know why she was so insistent on talking to me this morning. If it were that important, she could have caught me at work during the week or last weekend at the gala."

"Did she give you any clue as to what she wanted to discuss when she called last night?" I turned around to face him, well aware of what the topic would be.

"No, she didn't. All she'd say is it was best we talked in person. Anyway, I better get going. I want to get my workout done before the gym gets too crowded. I'll be back in a couple of hours." Reid kissed me goodbye. Then he opened one of the French doors to the patio to let some fresh air into the house. He picked up his gym bag and walked out the door leading to the street.

Ginny had given me a heads-up that she planned to tell Reid about Geoff's inappropriate comments and behavior at

the gala. I couldn't help feeling nervous, my stomach already knotting up at the thought, and I wasn't looking forward to the conversation Reid and I would have once he returned home.

Picking up my mug and cell phone, I retreated upstairs to the family room to read my email and drink my coffee. I set my phone on the table and sat in my favorite chair, its plush upholstery and thick cushions making it my go-to place to relax. The *Business Weekly* magazine Reid had wanted to give to his mother was lying on the table, the publication having an article he wanted her to read. It was too late now. He'd have to give it to her during the week.

I leaned back in my chair and took several sips of my coffee, enjoying its nutty aroma and robust taste, the caffeinated brew perking me up. I was placing my cup on the table when a noise caught my attention. Cocking my head, I turned toward the sound, trying to pinpoint what it was. It sounded like footsteps on the stairs. That was what I'd heard. But that made no sense since Reid had left, and I was the only person here. Chalking it up to the age of the house and my imagination, I giggled at how silly I was acting. Then I sucked in my breath, the hair on my arms standing on end and my body turning ice-cold. Geoff's image was in the mirror hanging in the hallway. He was dressed in a black hoodie and lurking on the other side of the wall. *Oh God!* my mind screamed over and over. He'd come through the French doors and up the stairs.

"My dear Sofie. It's so wonderful to see you again. Have you missed me?" Geoff's voice had an ominous tone, and an evil smirk twisted his bottom lip as he casually stepped into the room.

I reached for my cell phone.

"Don't touch your phone!" Geoff said, his face darkening. "What's the matter? You aren't happy to see me. Well, I can't have you calling anyone, can I? That would spoil my fun, and don't try to tell me Reid will be home any minute. I know he goes to the gym on Sunday mornings and will be gone for at

least a good hour. I waited on your patio until he left, so I know damn well how long he'll be gone. And, I must say, I thoroughly enjoyed watching my cousin play with your tits. Now it's my turn."

"If you touch me, Reid will hunt you down." I desperately tried to sound confident and threatening, but my voice and body noticeably shook.

"That's if you tell him. Would you risk him getting angry at you and believing you invited me here for a little fun in his absence? Tell me, are you willing to take that chance? If you're smart, you'll let me have my fun and keep your mouth shut. Isn't that better than the possibility of him blaming you and kicking you out?"

I slowly stood from my chair, my eyes darting around the room as I searched for an escape. "You don't have to do this. You can leave now, and I won't say anything."

"Oh, it's too late for that. You've already made me hard, and I want something. Your nipples look so hot through your nightgown. Now I want you to take off your underwear and show me what else you've got." Geoff's eyes seemed to glaze over as he rubbed his crotch. "We're going to play a game, and I assure you it will be fun. Well, at least for me it will be. You're going to be a bit sore after I've finished. You see, I'm a creative sort and plan on taking you multiple ways, and we'll see how long I can prolong getting off."

"You're sick. You need help." I backed toward the parlor at the front of the house. I could run, and if he darted into the family room to get to me instead of running down the hall to block my path, I might reach the front door before him. Once outside, I could scream until I got someone to help me.

"I need help? That's amusing. My ex-girlfriend said the same thing. That was before I shoved my cock up her ass."

Oh God. I had to get away from him. He was crazy. I closed my eyes for a second and then bolted toward the front of the house. Reaching the front door, I threw it open,

frantically darting across its threshold. I ran into Reid on the front steps.

“What the hell?” Reid said, grabbing my upper arms to steady me on my feet. Then he saw Geoff standing in the foyer.

“He broke into the house and was going to rape me,” I cried, lunging into Reid’s arms.

“You fucking bastard!” Reid yelled, rushing into the house toward Geoff.

Geoff took a step backward and spun around, flying down the hallway and bolting down the stairs. Reid was right behind him. My entire body shook as I rushed into the house and shut the front door. Retrieving the lap blanket from the couch in the family room, I tossed it around my body and scrambled out the sliding door to the adjoining deck. I searched the patio below me. The back gate was open, but no one was there. Loud voices were coming from the alley behind the house. Then an unfamiliar voice shouted “Police!” before yelling at someone to stop running and get on their knees. I sank onto the patio chair behind me, my body shaking.

I don’t know how long I sat there, but I was sure it had been a while by the time I finally spotted Reid and two police officers come through the gate. Reid led them into the house, and I went inside and closed the door, hearing Reid call my name.

“Sofie, where are you? I have the police with me, and they need to talk to you.”

“I’m in the family room,” I called back as Reid came up the stairs.

He came through the doorway and rushed to my side. He wrapped me tightly in his arms as if he were afraid to let me go. “I’m so sorry I left you. Geoff said he didn’t touch you. Is that true?” he whispered.

“He didn’t touch me. I ran before he got the chance. That’s when I collided with you on the front steps.”

Reid looked down at me and searched my face. “Are you all right?”

“I will be.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, a look of relief covering his face. “I need you to tell the police everything that happened so they can file a report. Here, sit in the chair. You need to answer their questions the best you can.”

“Okay, I’ll try.” I wrapped the blanket securely around me and sat in my chair while Reid stood by my side. I waited for the officer that had taken a seat on the couch to say something.

“Ms. Fletcher, I’m Officer Daniels, and this is my partner, Officer Tran.” Officer Daniels nodded toward his partner, who was standing near the doorway to the hall. “First, I want to let you know we have the man that broke into your house in custody. One of the neighbors spotted him sneaking around the alley and then saw him go through your back gate. The woman called us and reported the man’s suspicious activity. We were investigating the report when Mr. Morgan chased the man down the alley toward us. So, now that we’ve received Mr. Morgan’s statement, we’ll need to get one from you.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling Reid’s hand squeeze my shoulder.

“Can you verify the identity of the man that broke into the house?” Officer Daniels said.

“Yes, he’s Geoff Engels. He’s Reid’s cousin.”

“Thank you. Detailing what happened may be difficult, but I’ll need you to try. Can you do that?”

“Yes, I’ll do my best.” I explained in full detail what had happened, from my hearing footsteps on the stairs to my bolting out the front door into Reid’s arms. Twice during my recital of what Geoff had said to me, Reid turned away and stared out the sliding door while he ran his hand over his face. The second time he did it, his eyes were red when he turned back around.

“Ms. Fletcher, have you had any prior issues with Mr. Engels?” Officer Tran said, taking several steps into the room.

“Yes, I had a problem with him last weekend when Reid and I were at the symphony orchestra’s annual gala.”

“What?” Reid said, staring down at me with a look of confusion. Then his face darkened, and his eyes narrowed. “When did it happen, and what did he do?”

“It was when our tablemate took you away to talk to a friend of his about your charity. Geoff snuck up behind me and said some things.”

“Like what?” Reid said. He let out what sounded like a low growl, making me more nervous than I already was.

I tugged at the blanket, securing it around me. Then I told Reid what Geoff had said, including how I’d thrown my champagne in his face and stormed off. When I’d finished, I glanced up at him. He stood there with his fists clenched, and he looked upset.

“Is that what my mother wanted to talk to me about? What Geoff said to you that night?”

“Yes, since Geoff’s family, she thought it best if you heard it from her.”

“Fuck. None of this might have happened if I had known.” Reid ran his hand through his hair and paced the floor.

“Ms. Fletcher, did anything else happen that night?” Officer Tran said while his partner scribbled notes on a small pad.

“No, that was it.”

Reid’s cell phone rang, making me jump. I turned to look at him as he glanced at the screen.

“Speaking of my mother, this is her.” Reid’s mouth was tight as he answered the call. “Hello?” There was a pause, then he said, “No, I’m not coming over. We’ve had an incident. Geoff broke into the house and attempted to assault Sofie.”

After another pause, Reid snapped, “Yes, I’m upset. You should have said something earlier rather than wait until today. We’ll talk about this later. I have to go.” Reid hung up his phone, the tense look on his face indicating his anger.

“Ms. Fletcher, I believe we have everything we need from you,” Officer Tran said, breaking the tension that had filled the room. He turned toward Reid. “Mr. Morgan, I have one more question for you. You told us you’d come home unexpectedly after leaving to go to the gym and found Mr. Engels in your house. Why did you come home?”

“I’d left a magazine here that I had wanted to give to my mother, who I planned to visit after the gym. Since I was only a few blocks away, I came back home to grab it.”

“It’s a good thing you did. Otherwise, things might have turned out differently,” Officer Tran said.

Officer Daniels got up from the couch. “Our forensics team will need to take fingerprints from the downstairs French doors. After that, we should be done.”

“All right. Do you know how long that will take?” Reid said.

“No, but I can find out for you.”

“Reid, I’m going upstairs to lie down. Do you mind?” I said, getting up from my chair.

“Not at all. I’ll come up there as soon as the police finish.”

“Okay.” I went upstairs and curled up on Reid’s bed, spreading the lap blanket on top of me. Panic gripped me when the image of Geoff in the mirror nudged back into my mind. For some bizarre reason, I wondered for a moment which incident had been the most terrifying: Geoff’s breaking into the house and threatening to rape me, or the terror-filled incident with Denny when I was fifteen, causing me to run like hell to Dean. I shook my head. As horrible as today’s incident had been, the one with Denny had been worse. I covered my head with the blanket, feeling sick.

CHAPTER 17

A Weekend In New York

IT WAS A chilly Friday morning in late October. I'd taken the day off since Reid and I planned to fly to New York in a few hours to attend Samantha and Ryan's weekend wedding. Finished packing the suitcase I had lying on the bench at the end of Reid's bed, I zipped it up and set it on the floor. We would only be gone for two nights, returning to Boston Sunday afternoon. Reid had the wedding rehearsal and dinner this evening. I was supposed to join him for dinner since it was for the wedding party and their plus-ones.

The ceremony was tomorrow afternoon and, according to Reid, would be a sizable event. Samantha and Ryan had reserved all the guest suites at the luxury boutique hotel where the celebration was taking place, putting the rooms aside for their immediate family and the wedding party. Everyone else, except Ginny, had to stay in one of the hotels in the surrounding area. Samantha had opted for this venue, which was an hour's drive from Manhattan, because of its privacy and stunning views. I'd initially been consumed with worry about fitting in with Samantha and Ryan's upper-class friends. Now I didn't care. I had something far more pressing than their wedding on my mind.

Reid had said he'd drop the subject of my moving in with him until I was ready to discuss it, but he'd brought it up several times over the past month. I'd promised him a week ago I'd give him an answer while we were in New York, and after much thought, I'd decided to give up my apartment, although my plans could easily change now that I was facing an unexpected and life-changing situation. Terrified of what Reid would do when I gave him the news, I nervously waited for him to leave so I could take a pregnancy test. It was to confirm what I already knew.

Reid came out of the walk-in closet toting his suitcase behind him while I stood there deep in thought. He set his luggage next to mine and turned to give me a quick kiss. “I’ll be back in about two hours, and we’ll head to the airport right after that.”

“Are you sure you have to go to work?”

“It’s best if I do. I don’t want to cancel this morning’s executive team meeting. The company is running so well right now, I want to keep the momentum going. Jason is brilliant, and since taking over Krista’s job, he’s made some great improvements. Between him, the new sales manager, and our design team, the numbers are shooting upward, and our financials are looking great. We’ve finally got a well-oiled and cohesive team. Krista was too aggressive and created too much friction. I hate to say it, but I never understood what my father saw in her.”

“That’s an odd thing to say about someone you previously dated.”

“I’d hardly call what we did dating. I went out with Krista maybe three times.”

“But what about the things she said to me and all the rumors? Krista made it sound like there was much more between you two than that.”

“Well, there wasn’t. It didn’t take that many dates for me to know Krista wasn’t my type. She bragged to everyone we were dating, and when I told her I didn’t want to go out with her again, she had to craft some story to save face. Who do you think concocted the rumors that I was a player and not relationship material?”

“That was her?” I stared wide-eyed at Reid, floored at his revelation.

“It was, and it wasn’t worth my time to correct. It would have been a battle to stifle all the gossip. So why bother? I figured I’d let people think what they wanted. Anyone who knew me personally knew the truth.” Reid glanced at his

watch. “Okay, I have to go. Make sure you’re ready to leave when I get back.”

“I will.”

He rushed out the bedroom door, and I could hear his shoes on the stairs and the hardwood floor in the foyer as he hurried toward the front door. I sat on the bench at the end of the bed and waited for Reid to leave the house. When I was sure he was gone and not coming back, I went into the bathroom and retrieved the paper bag I’d stashed underneath the sink. My periods were regular and occurred on the dot, so having my last one a little over eight weeks ago had to mean I was pregnant. I’d buried myself behind a wall of denial, but I was now too far along to ignore it, and my mind still reeled at the thought. I was on birth control pills, and this wasn’t supposed to happen.

I took the box out of the paper bag and read the instructions before opening it. There were three tests in the box, and I removed one of them. I sat on the toilet and pointed the tip of the applicator into my urine stream, setting it on the toilet tank when I had finished. I looked at the time on my watch. The box said I’d have the result in three minutes. That was three minutes too long. I paced back and forth across the bathroom floor, then sat on the bathtub’s edge with my head in my hands. I was petrified to see the official result.

The time was up, and I slowly stood, moving cautiously toward the toilet. I nervously reached for the test, hesitating as if I thought it could bite. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I looked at the display and hung my head. There was a plus sign. I was pregnant. Now I had to explain the situation to Reid.



IMPRESSED, I SCANNED the hotel’s facade and landscaping as we drove down a private lane. The building was a beautiful coral color with bright blue wooden shutters at each window, and a

multitiered fountain was visible in the decoratively tiled parking area.

“I can understand why Samantha and Ryan chose this venue for their wedding. This place is gorgeous. It’s like one of those huge Italian villas you see in magazines,” I said.

“I have to agree. The place is eye-catching,” Reid said while parking the BMW we’d rented.

A hotel employee rushed toward us when Reid stepped from the car and came around my side to open my door. The employee took our luggage after Reid pulled it from the trunk, and then we followed the gentleman up several steps and through a large oak door. Finding ourselves in the hotel lobby, Reid approached the front desk to check in.

I took several steps backward and glanced at my watch, surprised to see it was only three o’clock. But the time made sense. Our flight from Boston to White Plains, New York, had been one and a half hours, and the drive to the hotel added an hour. I hadn’t eaten anything since early this morning and would have been hungry, except my appetite had dwindled along with my tolerance of most foods this past week.

Reid got our room keys from the front desk clerk, and we followed the porter to our suite. The man deposited our luggage in the room, receiving a better-than-average tip from Reid. Then he quietly left.

“Well, what do you think? Is the room comfortable enough for you?” Reid said.

“Yes, it’s perfect.” I giggled with pleasure as I flopped down on the king-sized bed with its expensive-looking white comforter and linens. The room was bright and airy, with a small sitting area and three Italian-style French doors that opened to a wrought-iron balcony that overlooked a garden. Our room was larger than I had expected and more than comfortable.

“I’m glad you like it, although you wouldn’t complain if you didn’t.” He leaned down and kissed me. “You have to be

the least demanding person I've ever met. Although you still like to argue with me. I swear you have me completely mesmerized."

"And you are smart and ridiculously sexy, funny, and..."

"Okay, okay. You can stop. I have so many fine qualities it'll take you hours to list them."

"See, you're funny, just like I said."

Reid gave me a mock scowl and reached for my hand. "Come on. Let's explore the place and see if we can find my mother. She should be here somewhere with Maddie."

"That sounds like a perfect plan." I jumped up from the bed and took Reid's arm. "Lead the way, my gorgeously sexy man."

"Oh, now you're being possessive."

"Yes, I am. I have to keep my eye on you so one of Samantha's wealthy and stunning-looking girlfriends doesn't try to steal you away from me."

"Fat chance of that. There isn't another woman that can compare to you."

"Good, then I only have to keep one eye open at all times."

Reid burst out laughing, and I smiled, already having fun.

After taking several wrong turns, Reid and I stumbled into a small, cozy-looking lounge in one of the corners of the villa. It had a decent-sized wood bar, several wood tables with upholstered chairs, terracotta flooring, and walls covered in brown-and-tan wallpaper with wood wainscotting. A fireplace with an ornately carved wood mantelpiece was against the far wall. Earth tones made the room feel comfortable, and the panel of windows and glass door that opened to a terrace kept it from being too dark. Ginny was sitting at one of the tables with Maddie, the two chatting away while enjoying a glass of white wine and a piece of white layer cake with a toasted coconut frosting.

“Well, it looks like Reid and Sofie found us. So much for hiding,” Maddie said, giving us a teasing grin. “Please sit and join us. We were talking about the rehearsal and dinner later this evening.”

“I’m going to get a beer from the bar first. Sofie, do you want anything?” Reid said.

“Just a glass of water.”

“Are you sure you don’t want a beer or glass of wine?”

“No, just the water. Thank you.” I pulled out a chair and sat next to Maddie.

“Reid Morgan! I’ve been looking for you.” A tall, gorgeous redhead beelined it toward Reid. “Samantha told me you’d be getting here sometime this afternoon. How are you?” The woman gave him an overly friendly hug as he tried to back away.

“Who is that?” I said, underneath my breath. It seemed I would have to keep my eyes open after all.

“A bad memory,” Maddie said, looking displeased.

Ginny arched a brow at Maddie and cleared her throat. “Be nice.”

“Oh, believe me, I will. I won’t have to do a thing. That girl can make herself look like a fool on her own.” Maddie turned and nudged me with her elbow. “My dear, why don’t you grab your glass of water from the bar? You can save Reid the trouble of bringing Jillian to our table.”

“You want me to go to the bar?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Okay.” I got up and walked toward the bar, instantly gaining Reid’s attention. He looked relieved by my presence.

“Sofie, this is an old friend of mine, Jillian Price. Jillian, this is my girlfriend, Sofie Fletcher.”

“Girlfriend?” Jillian’s eyes narrowed as she scanned me from head to toe. “Hmm. Samantha didn’t tell me you were otherwise occupied. Well, it looks like Sofie and I have something in common. I’m sure she finds you as delicious as I did. You’ll have to excuse me. I need to find the rest of the ladies.” Jillian turned and briskly walked away after giving me a pointedly scornful look.

I cocked my head and stared at Reid. I had no idea what to say in response to her comment and attitude.

“Please let me explain before you get upset and this situation gets out of hand. Jillian is my ex-girlfriend. We stopped dating four or five months before you and I got together, and I haven’t seen her since we split up.”

“Is she the reason for your drawer of condoms?”

“Yes, she’s the reason.” Reid sighed and ran his hand across his face. He looked both frustrated and cornered.

“Don’t you think you should have mentioned I’d be running into your ex-girlfriend this weekend? I would think out of courtesy, you would have said something.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry. I should have said something, but it’s not like Jillian’s been on my mind and I purposely neglected to mention it. I honestly hadn’t given her a thought.”

I lowered my head and looked down at the floor. With everything going on right now, the timing of that woman’s presence couldn’t have been worse. What if Reid rebuffed me after finding out I was pregnant? He’d have Jillian’s warm body at his immediate disposal to comfort him should it happen while we were here. “Excuse me. I need some air.” I marched past Reid and left the lounge through the side door to the terrace, gazing at the mountains in the distance as I stood there on the deck.

Reid followed me outside and stood behind me. “I don’t want our weekend spoiled by an argument. Can we please put this aside?”

“I don’t want to argue either.” I turned around to face him, my irritation evaporating when I saw his pained expression. “I need you to hold me right now.”

Reid reached for me and drew me against his chest. His arms wrapped around me as he rested his chin on my head. “I’m sorry that happened.”

I snuggled against him, comforted by his touch and the faint scent of his cologne. I didn’t have any words to say. All I wanted was for him to hold me.

After a few minutes, Reid pulled away. “Let’s go back inside. They’ll be gathering everybody for the rehearsal soon, and I need to drink that beer I ordered.”

I nodded and took Reid’s hand, letting him take me back inside. Reid retrieved his beer and my water from the bar, and we sat at the table with Ginny and Maddie. They graciously kept chatting away, choosing not to comment on what had happened.

“Do you mind if Sofie comes with me and watches the rehearsal?” Reid said to Maddie.

“Not at all. Your mother was going to watch it. They can keep each other company.”

Reid reached over and put his hand on my thigh. “What do you think? The rehearsal shouldn’t take that long, and we’ll go to dinner immediately afterward. That way, you won’t have to find something to do, and we won’t have to look for each other when it’s over.”

I nodded and gave Reid a faint smile. He was going out of his way to include me and make me feel comfortable.

Reid finished his beer, and Maddie led us to the area where the rehearsal was taking place. It was on the lawn at the side of the estate, overlooking a serene-looking lake. A group of people was already there, chatting and milling around, and staff had strategically placed several chairs, giving a rough outline of the seating area. The sun was going down, and I could see why Samantha and Ryan had picked this place.

Forested mountains stood majestically beyond the lake, with a red, yellow, and orange kaleidoscope in the sky. The view and sunset were breathtaking.

“I better join the group,” Reid said. He gave me a quick kiss and walked away, drawn at once into a multitude of conversations with an abundance of handshakes, shoulder claps, fist bumps, and high fives, the male half of the wedding party overflowing with testosterone.

“I’m going to sit on the bench by that tree and watch,” Ginny said. She motioned toward a white wooden bench off to our left. “Come and join me.”

“Thank you, but I’m going to walk around and stretch my legs. It feels good after the flight and the drive to get here.” I figured I’d stroll in a wide arc around the area. That way, I could watch without hovering and still be visible. I had taken a few steps when a woman approached me. Dark-haired and petite, she looked a few years younger than me.

“Hi, you must be Sofie. I’m Ryan’s sister, Kate.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“Same here. I was hoping we’d get to meet. Reid talks about you all the time.”

“He does?”

“Yes, he does, nonstop sometimes,” Kate laughed.

I smiled, thrilled at her revelation. I turned to look at Reid, my smile turning into a frown. He was standing amongst the guys, talking and joking, while Jillian inched toward him.

“Ignore her. She’s nothing but a pain in the ass. She can try all she wants, but I can guarantee Reid won’t go near her. They fought like crazy when they dated, and he was ready to break it off with her when she screwed up and saved him the trouble.”

“Screwed up? What did she do?”

“Reid caught her in bed with one of Samantha’s actor friends and told her he was through with her. Then the other guy dumped her too. Reid won’t touch her with a ten-foot pole. Besides, he’s totally in love with you. You should hear the way he talks about you. It’s so cute.”

“Thanks. That’s kind of nice to hear.”

“I’m glad I could share. Well, I better join the rest of the party. The wedding coordinator is getting them organized.” Kate waved at Ginny and then hurried toward the others.

I continued my stroll for a few minutes and then stopped to watch. A woman in her thirties or early forties explained to everyone where they’d be walking and then showed them how to line up by what I assumed would be an altar of some sort during the actual ceremony. With that part completed, the woman sent the group back to the hotel deck, where her male assistant was waiting. He paired each groomsman with a bridesmaid and had them line up. Reid had paired with Kate. Figuring I’d see the entire processional tomorrow, I decided to take a walk down the gentle slope toward the lake.

I stopped a short distance away and sat in the grass, wanting to enjoy the sunset. I could hear the rehearsal taking place up the hill behind me. As I sat there, I thought about Reid. Since he was so damn gorgeous and sexy, would my life with him be filled with run-ins with ex-girlfriends and female strangers ogling him in front of me? God, I hoped not. At least I didn’t have to worry about Jillian since it was clear by Reid’s actions and the look on his face he had no interest in her whatsoever. One thing still puzzled me, though. If Reid had a line of women wanting him and could take his pick, why was he interested in me? I was simple and boring compared to them. Whatever his interest in me was, would it even last? It might be a different story once I got fat and moody from my pregnancy. I lay back on the grass, trying to push Reid out of my mind. I was determined to enjoy the sunset.

“What are you doing?” Reid said, sounding amused. His voice seemed to float above me.

I opened my eyes. “I guess I dozed off. Are you done with the rehearsal?”

“Yes, we finished a few minutes ago. Are you all right?”

“I’m a little exhausted from the drive and our flight. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry. Here, let me help you up.” Reid reached down and took my hand, helping me to my feet. “Everyone’s gone to the dining room for dinner. We need to join them.”

“In that case, lead the way.” I took Reid’s arm and walked with him back to the hotel.

When we entered the building, an employee directed us down a corridor to a medium-sized dining room with white wainscoting and walls decorated with an assortment of small, brightly colored china plates. I immediately understood why the sign outside the door said this was the China Room. Looking around, I could see the floor had the same terracotta tile I’d seen in the lounge, and another set of Italian-style French doors led to a garden in the center of the villa.

Maddie and Ginny motioned us toward their table, which sat eight. Ryan and Samantha had joined them, along with Ryan’s sister, Kate, and a gentleman I hadn’t noticed before. Reid helped me with my chair, and we took our seats.

“Sofie, it’s so nice to meet you,” Samantha said, giving me a sincere smile. “This is my husband-to-be, Ryan. You’ve already met his sister, Kate, and the man next to you is my baby brother, Derek. Ryan’s parents and grandparents will be here in the morning.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet all of you,” I said, glancing around the table. I’d already figured out that it was Samantha and Ryan sitting there since I’d seen their photos on the internet. Plus, I’d seen Samantha in the courtyard when she’d come to Morgan Systems to have lunch with Reid.

“Would you like a white or red wine?” a waiter said. He was standing at my elbow, looking down at me with a bottle of

wine in each hand.

“Neither one, thank you.”

“No wine?” Reid gave me a puzzled look. “You don’t feel well, do you?”

“I’m just tired. I’d love water if you could pour me a glass, though.”

“Sure.” Reid reached for the crystal pitcher on the table and filled my water glass.

I smiled at him and took a sip. Desperately trying to avoid any discussion regarding my health, I turned toward Samantha and listened to her chat with the group.

A waiter brought our mixed green salads with crumbled cheese and candied walnuts to the table while Reid buttered me a roll and set it on my plate. I nibbled at my food as I continued to listen to the conversations flowing back and forth. Reid seemed to be enjoying himself, becoming the center of attention from time to time.

After finishing our salads, our waiter brought us the main course. I had preordered the slow-roasted chicken breast, while Reid had chosen the steelhead trout. I had just taken a bite of my chicken when the smell of Reid’s fish wafted to my nose. My stomach instantly lurched. Panicking, I frantically glanced around the room, looking for a sign to the restrooms. I could feel my face flush as I grabbed my napkin and brought it to my mouth while I fought to keep from throwing up.

“Sofie?” Reid said, giving me an odd look as he tried to figure out what was happening.

“Excuse me,” I muttered beneath my napkin as I dashed from the table. With no time to run to the restrooms in the hotel lobby, I bolted out the side door and into the garden, plopping down on a bench illuminated by a decorative lantern as I puked into a bed of flowers.

Reid was suddenly behind me on the bench, rubbing my back with one hand while he pulled my hair back from my

face with the other.

Finished emptying what little there was in my stomach into the flowerbed, I turned to the employee rushing toward us. "I'm sorry. I couldn't get to a bathroom in time." Feeling mortified by the spectacle I'd made of myself, I brushed a tear from my cheek.

The employee put his hand up and apologetically backed away, apparently recognizing my distress.

I turned to Reid, tears now trailing down my cheeks.

"Come here," he said quietly, pulling me into his arms. "What's going on with you? Are you sick?"

"You're going to hate me when I tell you." A small sob escaped me while I buried my face in his chest.

Reid gently grabbed my shoulders and held me away from him so he could look at my face. "Nothing is that bad. What is it?"

"I'm so sorry. I swear I am. I didn't mean for this to happen. Please don't be mad at me."

Reid's body tensed, and he straightened his back. The muscles in his jaw tightened. "Who is he?"

"Who is who?" My head was swirling with confusion.

"The guy you're going to tell me you slept with, that's who." Reid's voice was low and harsh, his face like stone.

"Guy? There is no guy. I'm pregnant," I sobbed.

Reid stared at me, and then his face slowly changed as what I'd said sunk in. "You're pregnant?"

"Yes, but I didn't mean for it to happen. I swear I didn't."

Reid pulled me back into his arms and held me, a chuckle escaping his lips. "I'm not mad because you're pregnant. Being unplanned doesn't make it less special."

"You're sure you're not mad?"

“I’m sure. I wanted to have children someday but hadn’t found anyone I wanted to have them with. That is, until you came along. Although I’m shocked as hell, I am happy. We’re going to have a baby. That’s pretty special.” Reid chuckled again and squeezed me a little tighter.

“I’m scared,” I whispered.

“Why?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to have a baby.”

“You’ll be fine. We’ll be fine. We’re going to do this together.”

We held each other in the moonlight until Reid finally spoke.

“We should go back to the dinner before someone looks for us. I saw a few heads turn when you ran from the room.”

“I need to go to our room and brush my teeth. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.”

“Of course. So what was it that got your stomach upset—morning sickness?”

“I think so. It came on all of a sudden about a week ago. Certain smells get to me, and tonight, it was the smell of your fish.”

“In that case, if my plate is still on the table, I’ll finish it before you come back.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

We got up from the bench, and Reid walked me inside. I went upstairs, and he walked toward the dining room. After a good brush of my teeth and a dose of mouthwash, I returned to the rehearsal dinner. Everyone at our table was stealing glances at me and smiling when Reid pulled out my chair.

“Why is everyone looking at me?” I said under my breath after taking my seat. “Did I make a bigger spectacle of myself than I thought?”

“No, I explained you’re suffering from morning sickness, and the smell of my fish got to you.”

I stared at Reid wide-eyed. “You didn’t really do that, did you?”

“I did. So everyone knows we’re expecting a baby.”

I cautiously turned and scanned the table, seeing several smiling faces.

“Congratulations, my dear,” Ginny said, looking thrilled. Her eyes darted to my stomach.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling slightly uncomfortable, unused to the attention.

“How far along are you?” Kate said, sounding excited.

“Somewhere around six or seven weeks, I think.” I turned back to Reid, catching Derek giving him a high five over my head.

Maybe Reid was right and everything would be okay. All I could do was hope that it would, especially since my life had been nothing but a rocky journey up to this point.

CHAPTER 18

A Knockout Wedding Reception

CONCLUDING TWENTY MINUTES ago, the wedding ceremony had been elaborate and festive, the guest count mind-blowing. There had to be several hundred people in attendance for the event. I'd sat with Ginny, my eyes glued on Reid almost the entire time. Taller than the other men in the wedding party, he had looked so dashing and handsome as he stood near the altar dressed in a dark gray tuxedo and lavender tie.

So far, I'd succeeded at keeping my morning sickness at bay. I could only hope as the evening progressed that I'd continue to be so lucky. The last thing I wanted was to make a spectacle of myself like I'd done the night before.

Now back at the hotel for the cocktail hour, held on the terrace and in the gardens, Ginny led me from group to group as she introduced me to her friends. After a bit of chitchat and a list of names I couldn't remember, the wedding coordinator informed us the reception was about to begin. Ginny and I strolled down a brick-lined walkway to the festivity, housed in a separate structure a short distance away. The building was long and tall, with a row of windows beneath its roofline, and resembled a white-washed barn. Reaching the structure, we walked through a large entryway into a sizable room with multiple chandeliers and beautifully decorated tables in staggered rows. A band was setting up on a stage at the front of the room, and a large dance floor was in the middle, a bride and groom's table near its edge.

"Let's see where they put us," Ginny said, leading me to a set of tables full of tented cards. "I have mine and Reid's. We're at table two."

"I've got mine. I'm with you and Reid." I took several steps backward, making room for a group of guests that had walked up behind me.

“I see the cards for Maddie, Harold, Derek, and Kate. They’ll be at our table.” Ginny looked pleased as she scanned the place cards. She walked over to a stand displaying a diagram of the room. “Our table is at the front of the hall. Let’s get a seat.”

Ginny and I walked toward the stage, our table strategically next to it, with the bride and groom’s table adjacent to ours. We had just set our name cards in front of our chairs when someone announced the wedding couple was getting ready to make their entrance, the room instantly filling with excitement. Ginny and I hurried through the crowd, positioning ourselves near the doorway. Then the band played a lively pop song, and we could see the wedding party dancing their way up the walkway in groups of two.

Reid and Kate were the fifth set through the doorway, and although shocked, I couldn’t help but giggle. Reid was an unexpectedly talented dancer, and the two were putting on a wonderfully entertaining show for the guests. Even Ginny couldn’t help laughing. The maid of honor and best man came through the door next, then they all lined up, dancing and clapping as the wedding couple strutted into the room. After a group dance, the music stopped, and the room broke into rapturous applause. As soon as the room settled down, Ginny and I headed to our table. Reid saw us through the crowd and joined us.

“That was a surprise. I didn’t know you were so talented,” I said, grinning at Reid when he pulled out his chair and sat next to me.

“I’m saving my best stuff for you. This will be our first dance.”

“Hmm, I guess it will.” I could feel my face flush as I pictured him holding me in his arms while he whisked me around the dance floor, whispering sweet words into my ear. Now I couldn’t wait for the music and dancing to begin.

The reception continued in standard fashion. There were welcome speeches by Ryan’s parents and Maddie and then the

reception dinner, which included several toasts and more comments. The band took the stage as dinner ended, and the wedding couple presented us with their first dance. When their special moment concluded, the musicians played another song intended for the entire group.

“Now it’s time for our first dance,” Reid said, extending his hand.

“Mmm, I like this song... ‘Thinking Out Loud’ by Ed Sheeran. It’s perfect.” I smiled as I took Reid’s hand and had him lead me to the dance floor. I slipped my arms around his neck while his arms slid around my hips. We moved in rhythm to the music, my head on his chest while I savored every second of our first dance.

Reid’s lips were at my ear, and I could feel a warmth spread through my body.

“I love you,” he whispered.

I looked up at him, and he kissed me. His lips were tender and tasted sweet from his wine. I wanted to melt in his arms.

The music stopped. Then the band played a rock and roll song. Reid stepped backward and took my hand, the two of us dancing to the music. Pretty soon, I was laughing and smiling and having a blast. Three songs later, Reid held up his hand.

“I need some air for a minute. Let’s go outside on the patio.”

“I need to make a pit stop at the restroom first. I’ll meet you outside.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you in a few.” Reid gave me a quick kiss, and then we split up, going in two different directions.

I finished taking care of business and walked out on the patio to look for Reid. He was standing off in the distance, partially hidden by a tree. The area was dimly lit with several decorative lanterns, so it took me a few seconds to realize he was talking to Jillian.

Irritated, I beelined it toward them, my hands balling into fists. I stopped when I reached the tree. Reid's voice had risen, and he sounded upset.

“What are you plotting, Jillian? I know you too well. You're up to something.”

“Oh, please. There's no reason for you to be so defensive. I heard your girlfriend is pregnant and wanted to offer my congratulations,” Jillian said, her voice oddly reminding me of the hiss of a snake.

“Her name is Sofie.”

“Fine. I heard...Sofie...was expecting, and I wanted to say I'm happy for you. I also wanted to offer my help.”

“With what?”

“Well, once Sofie gets toward the end of her pregnancy, the poor girl will be terribly uncomfortable and won't want to have sex. I thought I'd help you out and offer my services. I'm sure you remember how wild we were in bed together. So anytime you feel yourself needing some company, come and see me. I promise you won't regret it.” Jillian reached toward Reid's crotch.

“Don't touch me.” Reid grabbed her hand and tossed it to the side. His voice was like a growl, and even in the dimness of the patio, it was evident from the stony expression on his face he was angry. “I'm with a woman I love, and we're having a baby. Why the hell would I want you or anyone else? Stay the hell away from me.”

Jillian stood there with her mouth gaping open as Reid stormed from the patio and headed toward the covered walkway.

I remained behind the tree, unable to move and overcome with emotion. I was pissed and disgusted by Jillian's offer. But I was relieved and comforted by Reid's response. He was loyal, trustworthy, and far different from any other man I'd known. Most men visiting my mother, paying her to either spread her legs or get down on her knees, had been married,

discarding their wives like a piece of trash. Immersed in my thoughts, I jumped when Jillian came around the tree.

She let out a small shriek. Then she glared at me. “You bitch. How dare you eavesdrop. Reid may have turned me down for now, but you wait and see. I’ll have him soon enough, so don’t mess with me. You’re a little nothing and can’t compete.”

My arm was swinging before I could stop and think, my action an automatic response to her baiting and my anger. My older brother had inadvertently taught me to fight when I’d had to defend myself repeatedly against him. And the leering men who’d come to see my mother, well, they were another story. I was a fighter, more than able to defend myself when cornered. I just chose not to go there most of the time.

Hearing a moan, I looked down at the ground. Jillian was waking up. I’d perfectly placed my right hook to the side of her head, and the momentum of my punch was so great that I’d knocked her out. Figuring this was the last place I wanted anyone to see me, I backed away and then ran. My heart felt like it was in my throat as I maneuvered in a wide arc around the building to make it look like I was returning to the reception from the hotel.

I walked through the main door to the barn and looked for Reid, spotting him scanning the crowd. He saw me and smiled, looking relieved. He headed toward me.

“Where were you? I’ve been looking for you.”

“I didn’t see you outside, so I was walking around,” I said.

“They’re getting ready to cut the cake, so we should go back to our table and watch.” Reid took my arm and guided me through the crowd of guests mingling in the hall.

We had just settled in our chairs when Jillian stumbled through the side entrance to the patio. Several people near her winced at her swollen face, and four bridesmaids, including Kate, rushed to her side. Two of them walked her to the restroom while Kate returned to our table.

“My goodness, what happened to her?” Maddie said, turning her attention to Kate.

“Jillian said she tripped on the patio and hit her head. I hope she’s all right. Her face is red and swollen, and it looks like she’ll have a black eye.” Kate sounded upset, her eyes darting toward the ladies’ restroom.

Reid turned his attention to the two groomsmen who’d come up behind us, asking him if he knew what had happened.

“That’s horrible. Isn’t it, Ginny?” Maddie said, a touch of amusement in her tone. Her eyes were on my hand as I took a drink from my water glass.

Glancing at the object of her interest, I sucked in my breath. My knuckles had swelled, and one of them was bleeding. I set my glass down and hid my hand underneath the overhanging tablecloth. Then I looked across the table at Maddie and Ginny. They were both eyeing me strangely while trying to hide a smile, Ginny’s behind her napkin, and Maddie’s behind the glass of water she’d picked up from the table.

“What’s all the commotion about?” Harold said, raising one of his bushy white eyebrows at Maddie as he returned from across the hall and settled in his chair.

“Oh, nothing. It seems Jillian had an unfortunate mishap on the patio,” Maddie said, casting a glance at Ginny.

I diverted my gaze to the napkin lying across my lap, waiting for one of them to finger me. But they both stayed silent, although Maddie’s low chuckle carried across the table.

Reid and the two groomsmen switched topics and talked about a mutual friend of theirs.

I sat there feeling smugly pleased, knowing Jillian would no longer be a problem since she’d be a fool to screw with me again. And I couldn’t help a self-satisfied smile as I glanced across the table at the two ladies and nodded. The three of us well aware of what had happened to Jillian.

CHAPTER 19

The Reveal

I WALKED UP the stairs with a large shopping bag in my hand. I'd looked for Reid downstairs, but he was nowhere around, so he had to be up here. "Reid, I'm home. Are you here?" I called out. "We need to leave for my appointment soon."

Reid stepped into the hallway from the spare bedroom. He grinned when he spotted the bag in my hand.

"Yes, your mother went overboard buying more stuff for the baby. I told her to stop, especially since I'm not due for another four months, and she's already spent enough money on all the baby furniture we have stored downstairs. I love the pair of shoes she bought, though. You have to see them." I set the bag on the floor and retrieved the small box holding the shoes. "Look, they're baby UGGs with a Velcro strap. Aren't they adorable?"

"They're cute, but damn, they're so tiny."

"Babies are tiny, silly. So, what are you doing in the spare bedroom? The look on your face tells me you're up to something."

"It's a surprise. Come in here, and I'll show you."

I followed Reid into the bedroom and came to an abrupt halt. I scanned the empty room. "Where is all the furniture?"

"That's my surprise. I had the furniture picked up while you were shopping with my mother. You had mentioned wanting to convert the bedroom into a nursery for the baby, so I thought I'd get it done. I've got a designer lined up, and she'll be here tomorrow. We could paint and decorate the room using a princess theme if the baby's a girl and a jungle theme if it's a boy. The contractor can be here Monday morning, and it should only take a week to complete the project as long as

we can confirm what we want when we meet with the designer. What do you think?"

I burst out laughing at his excitement. He'd been this way since learning I was pregnant, putting every fear I had to rest. He was thrilled to be a father and went out of his way to care for me, sometimes to the point he treated me like I was going to break. He'd insisted I move in with him as soon as we'd returned to Boston from Samantha and Ryan's wedding. Of course, I had to tell him I'd already made that decision. I'd been here for three months, and everything had worked out better than I could have ever dreamed.

"You're obviously amused, but you haven't answered me. So what do you think?"

"I think your idea is wonderful, and we'll know in about an hour or so which theme to go with since my sonogram is today. Or did you forget?"

"I haven't forgotten. I've been waiting for this appointment. I hate to admit it, but my mind drifted at work all week as I wondered whether we were having a boy or a girl."

"Well, you're about to find out. Let me put the bag of baby stuff away, and then I'll be ready to go." I picked up the bag I'd left in the hallway and placed it in the walk-in closet with the rest of the baby stuff we'd collected. After quickly freshening up, I met Reid downstairs by the front door.

"Come here." Reid took my hand in his and pulled me toward him. "I love you."

"I love you too." I wrapped my arms around his neck as he leaned down to kiss me, his hands caressing my rear. His kiss and his touch were so full of love. They went far beyond anything physical. It was like we'd become a part of each other.

Reid escorted me to his car, telling me to be careful because of the layer of snow on the ground. We had to go to the hospital's radiology department for the sonogram, and I was thankful Reid had taken the day off to join me. Ginny was

originally planning to be there with us but ended up going back to work to take care of a few issues that had unexpectedly come up.

“I’m nervous. How about you?” Reid said, holding my hand while we sat in the waiting room.

“I think I’m more excited than nervous.” I turned toward Reid, spotting the lines on his forehead. The sonogram seemed far more stressful for him than it was for me. I squeezed his hand and smiled at him.

A woman in scrubs came out a side door and glanced at the paper in her hand. “Sofie Fletcher?”

“That’s me.” I got up from my seat, and Reid and I followed the woman to an exam room.

“My name is Kelley. I’m one of the ultrasound technicians here, and I’ll be performing the sonogram on you today. I understand you’re twenty weeks along. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct,” I said.

“Great, we should get some nice images of the baby. Okay, Mom, I’ll need you to lie on the exam table. I want you to pull your shirt up to your bra and your pants down low on your hips. I’ll place a paper cover and sheet over your clothes to protect them from the gel I’ll be using on your abdomen. Dad, you can sit in the chair next to the table.”

Reid sat down after helping me get comfortable on the table. He watched me adjust my clothes as instructed, and then he reached for my hand. He looked incredibly nervous.

Kelley applied a glob of gel onto my baby bump and picked up a handheld piece of equipment. “I’m going to move this probe around your abdomen using the gel. It won’t hurt. Using high-frequency sound waves, we’ll capture images of your baby, which will display on the screen.” Kelley placed the probe in the gel and moved it around my stomach. She pointed to the monitor. “There’s your baby. Here’s your baby’s head, and there’s an arm. I’m going to zoom in. We can see the heart beating. I’m going to do a heart tracing and get

measurements.” A graph became visible below the image. “The beats per minute are perfectly normal.”

I turned to look at Reid, seeing him intently focused on the screen and appearing almost teary-eyed. I squeezed his hand, and he looked at me. He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it, and then his gaze went right back to the monitor.

Kelley pointed to the screen again as she moved the probe around my abdomen. “There’s the baby’s spine. Oh, the baby is stretching! Look at that.”

“That’s incredible. Sofie, look at that,” Reid said in awe, his gaze still frozen on the baby.

“I know. I can see it too,” I laughed, thoroughly enjoying Reid’s reactions.

After checking the baby’s placement and the placenta, Kelley stopped for a moment and turned to the two of us. “I have in my notes from your doctor that you want to know the gender of your baby. Is that still your decision?”

“Yes, we want to know,” Reid said, the pitch in his voice rising with his excitement.

Kelley smiled and pointed to a spot on the screen. “This little spot at the end of the spine is called the caudal notch. Based on the way it’s pointing downward, we can say the fetus is a girl.”

Reid got up from his chair and hovered over me. “A girl, Sofie. We’re going to have a little princess.” He squeezed my hand and brushed my hair from my face. Then he leaned down and kissed me. “I love you,” he whispered in my ear.

“I love you too.” I was thrilled he was so happy.

After cleaning the gel off my stomach, Kelley printed pictures of the baby and handed them to Reid. Finished with the appointment, we left the hospital and headed home. We were almost there when I turned to Reid.

“Promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll never let anyone hurt our little girl.”

“Of course I won’t let anyone hurt her. I’m her dad. It’s my job to protect her.”

“I’m serious, Reid. I need you to promise me. I need to hear you say it.”

“Okay,” Reid said, eyeing me strangely. “I promise I won’t let anyone hurt our daughter.”

“Thank you.” I folded my hands in my lap while I stared out the car window. I was going to hold Reid to that promise.



IT WAS A quarter past noon, and I was rushing from the office to meet Della and Adam for lunch at Beck’s Bakery and Café. I spotted them at a table next to the window. I waved, and they waved back. Then I hurried inside to join them.

“It’s about time. The wait has been killing us,” Della said when I reached the table. “I told Adam you’d refused to tell me how your appointment went on Friday and whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Of course, he was thrilled you were making me wait until you could tell us together.”

“You bet I was. No way did I want Della to know before me. Besides, this proves Sofie likes me better than you.” Adam wrinkled his nose at Della and shook his head in an I told you so kind of way.

“Oh, stop, you two. I like you both the same. Oh, wait. I dislike you both the same sometimes too. Does that count?”

“Well! I can’t believe you said that to us.” Adam tossed his head over his shoulder and pretended to look hurt. “You’ve become such a brat. It must be those pesky hormones of yours.”

“You’re such a drama queen. Now stop it,” I said, laughing at his comical behavior. I pulled out a chair and sat across from Della.

“Fine, then give us the news before Della and I die from the wait.” Adam brushed the back of his hand across his forehead and made a face like he was going to pass out.

“All right, enough already. I won’t make you wait any longer. The baby is healthy and the size it should be at this point. And Reid was totally in awe when he saw the images on the screen.”

“And...,” Della said, prompting me for more.

“Okay, okay. The baby is a...girl.”

“Yes!” Della and Adam said in unison, with Della shooting her arms in the air.

“Queen Morgan will be strutting her stuff around the office in twenty years. The boys better watch out,” Adam said, hilariously wiggling his shoulders as if he were strutting down the street.

Della and I burst out laughing.

“Okay, we need to get serious here. I’m starving. Is that my rotisserie chicken pita?” I said, eyeing the food on the tray in front of Adam.

“Yes, it is.” Adam placed my sandwich and a napkin in front of me.

“Perfect.” I took a huge bite, my stomach growling as if signaling me to hurry up and feed it.

“So, did you and Reid finally discuss how long you’re going to work and how much time you’ll take off after you have the baby?” Della said, leaning back in her chair as she watched me scarf down the sandwich.

“We did. Reid wanted me to stop working now and stay home. But I told him I didn’t want to since Jason was increasingly giving me more responsibility and becoming a mentor to me. It took some discussion, but he finally agreed. After the baby is born, I’ll take three months of parental leave, and he’ll work from home so he can help me. Hopefully, it will all work out.” I was about to say something else but

stopped. I rubbed the back of my neck while I scanned the restaurant.

“What are you doing?” Della said, studying me.

“I got the creepiest feeling a minute ago like someone was watching me. It was weird.”

“That is weird.” Della’s eyes darted from table to table. “I don’t see anything or anyone out of the ordinary.”

My eyes widened as I stared across the table at Della. “I can feel it again. Oh God, that’s creepy. I swear someone has their eyes boring into my back. Shit, look at the hair on my arm. It’s standing on end.” I suddenly shivered. “Adam, can you look behind me? Is someone watching me?”

“I don’t see anyone watching you, but the restaurant is packed, so it’s hard to tell. Someone could be watching you from outside, through the window. We are pretty visible.”

“You’re not helping, Adam,” Della said. “Sofie is already freaked out enough. Don’t make it worse.”

My body shivered again. “I can’t stay here. It feels too creepy.” I got up from my chair and took another look around the restaurant. Seeing nothing unusual, I turned back to Della. “I’ll see you upstairs. I’m going back to my desk.”

“No problem. I’ll see you in a few minutes.” Della gave me a puzzled look like she didn’t quite believe me.

I left the restaurant, rubbing the back of my neck while I hurried toward the corner of our office building. The tingling feeling had returned and had moved down my spine, my skin now feeling cold and prickly. Dashing along the side of the building, I rounded the corner near the front entrance and ran into Reid.

“Whoa,” he said as he steadied me on my feet. “Where are you going in such a rush?”

“I was going back to my desk to finish a project I’m working on for Jason.”

“What about lunch?”

“I already ate. Adam picked me up a chicken pita sandwich.” My words came gushing out. All I wanted to do was get out of there.

“You’re acting odd. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. It must be those crazy hormones of mine.” I gave a little laugh, trying to act normal.

“I guess so. Well, I need to grab something to eat. I’ll see you later.” Reid kissed me and then walked away.

I waited until he had disappeared around the corner. Then I hurried through the building’s entrance and quickly headed to the elevator. I wasn’t sure what was happening except that I felt an urgent and uncontrollable need to get as far away from the courtyard as possible. Call it foreboding, premonition, a bad omen, or any other similar term. The bottom line was I felt unsafe, like someone was out there intent on harming me.

CHAPTER 20

An Intruder

I STRETCHED AND rolled onto my side, burying myself underneath the down comforter on our king-sized bed. I felt relaxed for the first time all day. The incident during lunch this afternoon had scared me, and I knew in my gut that someone had been watching me. When Lawrence had driven us home from work, I'd found myself scanning people on the sidewalk, looking for anyone out of the ordinary. Now that I was behind locked doors and in bed with Reid, I finally felt safe.

"How are you feeling? You looked a little pale when I ran into you at lunch today," Reid said, lying beside me and gently rubbing my back.

"I'm fine. I was feeling a little off this afternoon. That's all." I still wasn't willing to tell Reid about my scare in the restaurant and courtyard. I was afraid he'd think I was crazy. "Why are you asking?"

"Because I want something." He slid his hand across my protruding baby bump while he snuggled against my back, his body spooning mine.

"Mmm, you're nice and warm. What could the man of my heart possibly want right now? Hmm?"

"You," Reid said, whispering the word in my ear before leaving a trail of kisses down the back of my neck and shoulder.

"That feels good." I reached behind me and touched him. "You do want something. You're already hard." I turned onto my back, softly purring when Reid slipped one of my nipples into his mouth. "Take me," I whispered, feeling my body tighten, that delicious tingling sensation growing in my core.

“I will after I take care of you first.” Reid scooted lower, spreading my legs with his knee. He lay between them, his hands caressing my breasts. Taking his time, he tasted and teased me, his sensual play rewarded with a mixture of sounds from my throat.

I ran my fingers through his hair, spreading myself wider as my body strained toward his tongue. “I’m close. Don’t stop,” I breathed, my back arching from the pleasure he was bringing me. I wanted to scream. His tongue felt so good. “That’s it. Oh God. I’m coming.” I pushed my head back into my pillow, straining as an orgasm rocked my body.

Reid came back to my side, taking my nipple in his mouth. Then his lips were on my neck, and he whispered in my ear, “I love making you come.” Carefully rolling on top of me, he slipped inside. He was slow and gentle at first, his pace and thrusts quickening with his increasing arousal.

I lifted my legs, wrapping them around him, tightening my muscles so they squeezed his shaft. My nails gently raked his back.

Reid’s breathing became heavier, his face straining above me.

“I want you. Make me wet,” I whispered.

“Oh, fuck. I’m coming.” Reid threw his head back, his lips parting as a groan tore from his throat. He held himself inside me until he was spent. Then he gently rolled over and pulled me into his arms, cradling me as we lay there. Reid looked down at me. “Sofie?”

“Yes?”

“Marry me.”

“What?” I stared at his chest, shocked by his request.

“I want to get married.”

“Because I’m pregnant?”

“Yes and no. Yes, because you’re pregnant. No, because it isn’t the only reason. I love you more than anything, and I know I’ve never felt this way before. What we have between us is so different. I want you in my life permanently. I want us to grow old together and have a couple more kids.”

“Please tell me you’re not joking with me. You’re not saying these things only to tell me later you didn’t mean it.”

“This isn’t a joke, and I’m not playing some sort of game. I want us to get married.” Reid reached down and tipped my chin up. “Sofie Fletcher, will you marry me?”

I searched his face. He was serious. “Yes, I’ll marry you.” A feeling of joy and contentment that I’d never experienced before filled me as soon as I said the words. I was beyond happy. Reid wanted to make our relationship a lifelong commitment.

Reid reached inside the bedside table and pulled out a small black box. “Can I make it official?”

“What is that?”

“A ring.” He opened the box.

“This wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment question, was it?”

“No, I’ve wanted to ask you for a few weeks.” Reid pulled the ring out of the box. “Here, put it on.”

I held out my hand, and Reid slipped the ring on my finger. I stared at it, wondering if this could somehow be a dream, and if so, when I would wake up.

“You’re not saying anything.”

“I’m so surprised by what just happened that I’m honestly debating whether this is real. Things this perfect don’t usually happen to me.”

Reid laughed as he tossed the empty box on the bedside table. “I swear, any other woman would be screaming with excitement or crying and fawning over the ring. And you stare at it and wonder if my proposal is real. When will you realize

how special you are and how much you mean to me? You need to understand it's okay to want something, and it's okay to believe you deserve it."

I gave Reid a timid smile. "I know I want to grow old with you."

"See, that's something. Now how about if we call it a night and go to sleep? I think you've worn me out." Reid chuckled as he reached down for the covers that had worked their way to the end of the bed and pulled them over us. Then he turned off the lamp and gathered me in his arms. It wasn't long before he was sound asleep.

Too wide awake to sleep, I relaxed in Reid's arms, listening to his gentle breathing while his chest rose and fell underneath my cheek.

Something caught my attention. I narrowed my eyes in the darkness, trying to concentrate. There'd been a sound, and it wasn't Reid. I lay there, unmoving, as I listened. But the house was still. I smiled, thinking I had to be so roused from Reid's surprise that I imagined it. Besides, the house was old, and it was known to creak. I snuggled against Reid's chest and tried to fall asleep.

My eyes shot open, and I stared at the door. It was slightly ajar, and I could have sworn we'd closed it. A tingly feeling was growing at the back of my neck, and I suddenly felt cold, like a chill had swept into the room. It was the same way I'd felt this afternoon when I could have sworn someone was watching me. I lifted my head from Reid's chest, turning it slightly to listen. Was that...breathing? Was it coming from the hall outside our bedroom door? I heard it again, and I wanted to scream. I couldn't move, and I couldn't breathe. I was suffocating in a sea of panic.

There was a footstep. The floor creaked. *Oh God...oh God...oh God. What do I do?*

"Reid, wake up. Reid," I whispered.

"Hmm."

“There’s someone in the house.”

“What?”

“I can hear someone in the hall. They opened our door.”

Reid bolted upright, taking a second to get his bearings. He quietly got up from the bed and slipped into his pajama pants. He held his finger to his lips, motioning me to stay quiet while he grabbed a tall crystal vase from the table by the window.

I pulled the covers to my chest as I sat against the headboard, my eyes glued on Reid as he silently crept toward the partially open door.

There was a sound in the hallway, footsteps on the stairs.

Reid dashed out the bedroom door. He was yelling, and now I could hear Anderson’s voice mingled with his. The two of them sounded like they were at the bottom of the stairs. It suddenly got quiet, and then I realized they were on the deck, their voices echoing in the stillness of the night.

Too afraid to move, I sat in bed and waited. It seemed like an eternity had passed before I heard someone coming up the stairs.

Reid hurried into the bedroom and turned on the lamp by the bed. His face was tense, and he looked visibly shaken. “Anderson is calling the police. There was someone in the hallway. Whoever it was saw me and ran down the stairs. Anderson was in the kitchen and hadn’t turned on any lights. He said he heard someone and thought it was one of us. He was coming upstairs to see if we needed anything when the person ran down the stairs, knocked him down, and took off through the French doors in the family room. We searched the patio and the deck, but whoever it was had taken off.”

“Oh God. I knew I heard someone in the hallway.”

“What did you hear?”

“Breathing. I could hear someone breathing. Then I heard a footstep and the floor creak. That’s when I woke you up. Reid, someone was watching us.”

Reid sat on the bed and gathered me in his arms. “Shh, it’s okay. I’ll have a security system installed in the house tomorrow.”

“Someone was watching me this afternoon.”

“What do you mean?” Reid pulled away from me and searched my face.

“It was in the café at lunch and then in the courtyard when I walked back to the office. I had the creepiest feeling someone was watching me. It even made the hairs on my arm stand up. Della, Adam, and I looked around but saw nothing unusual, although I couldn’t shake the feeling. That’s why I seemed so freaked out when I ran into you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was afraid you’d think I was crazy.”

“You’re not crazy.” Reid pulled me into his arms and held me. “I don’t know who would do something like this. Geoff’s on probation, and we have a restraining order against him. So he wouldn’t dare break into the house again. Krista made threats, but she was all talk and wouldn’t do anything like this either. Your husband is dead, so it’s not a disgruntled ex-spouse, and you have no family. I’m at a complete loss.”

Family? My mind raced, an overwhelming sense of fear crushing me like a shoe on a bug. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, and my mouth was suddenly dry. I closed my eyes, trying to bury the urge to hide. *Did they find me?*

CHAPTER 21

The Man In The Brown Jacket

REID LOOKED UP when I walked into his office, his workspace next to our bedroom. I felt comfortable in this room with its walnut executive desk, wall of cabinets, and overstuffed leather chairs. It mirrored Reid's strength and masculinity and always had a residual scent of his woody and spicy cologne. The curtains were open, and an abundance of light was coming through the windows. I could see he was paying bills.

"Do you like to listen to music?" I said, taking a seat in one of the leather chairs facing his desk.

"I do." Reid leaned back in his chair, an amused smile lighting his face. "That's an interesting question. Why are you asking?"

"The house is always so quiet. Do you think we could get a sound system or something like that so we can listen to music?"

"I didn't know you liked to do that."

"I do and always have. But I've rarely had the equipment to do it. I had a cute little pink portable radio when I was a girl. I loved that thing and used to sit by myself and listen to it whenever I was upset. To this day, music has the same effect on me. It seems to soothe my soul."

"What happened to your little pink radio?"

"It broke." I looked down at the floor, knowing this was a simplified version of what had happened. Denny had yanked my radio from my hand in a fit of rage and thrown it at the wall. I'd found it broken into several pieces when I'd retrieved it from the floor, tears streaming down my face. My mother had smacked me and banished me to my room after that because I'd woken them up, which had pissed Denny off, even

though it was midafternoon. Fearing Denny would come after me, I'd gone out the window. That was when I'd learned I could climb the fire escape to the roof and hide from him, making myself a fort out of discarded cardboard and pieces of wood from pallets I'd found in the neighborhood. I was eleven years old at the time.

Reid stood and came around the desk. He sat on the edge in front of my chair. "I don't know what you're thinking, but you look oddly sad. Would it cheer you up if I agreed to buy a home sound system? We could get a stereo speaker that allows you to stream music from your phone. You could use one of those applications like Spotify you play sometimes. Lawrence bought one recently and was telling me about it."

"Yes, that would make me more than happy." My spirit soared at his willingness to do that for me. I stood and wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him with an overabundance of appreciation.

He pulled away and chuckled. "Stop that, or I'll have to carry you into the bedroom."

"Mmm...go ahead. I won't mind."

"You are such a little minx." Reid scooped me into his arms and carried me toward the door. He stopped when the sliding door to the downstairs deck opened, and our gardener, Teddy Armstrong, called his name.

"Mr. Morgan?" Teddy called out for the second time.

Reid put me down and hung his head, clearly displeased with the interruption. "I'm upstairs. I'll be right down," he called out. He turned to me and frowned. "Sorry, but our little romp will have to wait. We have to leave soon anyway if you still want to have lunch at the seafood restaurant on Boylston before your shopping excursion with Della."

"Shoot, you're right. It is getting late." I took a step forward, giving him a saucy smile while I slid my arms back around his neck. "I'll have to give you extra-special attention tonight when we're alone."

“I can’t wait.” Reid gave me one of his devilish grins and kissed me. “I better see what Teddy wants. We’ll need to leave in about fifteen minutes.” Reid walked away, his shoes making a soft thudding sound as he trotted down the stairs.

I went into our bedroom and changed from my sweat clothes to something more appropriate, putting on a pair of maternity pants and a pullover sweater. Turning sideways, I studied my image in the mirror. My baby bump protruded pretty well at twenty-one weeks. It made me wonder how big I’d be by the time I delivered. Few of my clothes fit me as it was, so I wouldn’t be surprised if I eventually ended up with a new wardrobe. Today’s shopping trip with Della was along those lines, since I hoped to find several shirts I could wear.

After brushing my hair, I went downstairs to find Reid. He was in the family room, staring out the sliding door. He must have been deep in thought because he didn’t hear me come into the room.

“What did Teddy want?” I said, apparently surprising him based on the way he jumped.

“He found something in one of the bushes on the deck and wanted to show it to me.” Reid turned around and motioned to the coffee table in front of the couch. “That’s what he found. I spread it out.”

I walked to the table and reached out to pick up the paper.

“It’s best if you don’t touch it. That way, only Teddy, me, and the person who left it there have fingerprints on it. I’m certain it belongs to the person who broke into our house Monday night. I called the detective on our case. He said he’ll send someone over this afternoon to pick it up and photograph where Teddy found it.”

I sat on the couch and leaned forward to see what it was. Having worked in retail for quite a few years, I recognized the paper as an article torn from one of those rag publications you find next to the store checkout stands. “This is us,” I said quietly, feeling shocked. “It has the picture of you and

Samantha together in that restaurant in New York and one of Samantha and Ryan on their honeymoon. The last picture is of you and me with your mother at the orchestra's annual gala. Why?"

"Read the captions."

"Okay. Oh my God. 'Samantha Wilding Dumps Boston Millionaire,' then there's 'Samantha Wilding's New Beau,' followed by 'Boston Millionaire On The Rebound.' Reid, why would this be on the deck?"

"Because whoever broke into the house was targeting us. Teddy was here last Saturday and didn't see that article on the deck. So that means it got placed there sometime within the past week. I don't know if the article was left there on purpose, but it makes it clear that this person knew we lived here. We need to find out what this person wants."

My body was like ice when Reid sat beside me and slipped his arm around my shoulder. He'd confirmed what I'd already feared, and based on my incident during lunch on Monday, I was sure the target was me. My past had come back not only to haunt but to terrorize me. They had tracked Dean and me from Pennsylvania to New York, swooping down on us like vultures and ruining our lives. After a string of moves between Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse, they lost track of us. We'd finally felt safe when we moved to Quincy, Massachusetts. Now, with that article in their hands, it wouldn't have taken them much effort to figure out where I was.

"Dwelling on this isn't going to help. Let's go ahead with our plans. We'll go to lunch, and afterward, you can walk across the street to the shopping mall to meet Della. All right?"

I nodded in agreement, although I didn't want to leave after everything that had happened. But Reid was right. We should continue with what we planned. We couldn't put our lives on hold and hide.

We grabbed our coats and left the house. Reid parked in the public garage on Boylston and, after making sure I was bundled up, escorted me from the garage to the restaurant, careful not to slip on the icy ground.

Once we were inside, a host led us past the small table area by the front door to the dining room in the back. The left side of the restaurant had another dining area, while the right side held the bar. It was constructed from a dark-stained and highly lacquered wood and fronted by a row of royal-blue upholstered barstools. The countertop contained bundles of silverware wrapped in white linen napkins, with a set placed in front of each chair.

After some minor chitchat between Reid and me about what I hoped to find at the mall, our server appeared and took our order. I asked for the clam chowder in a bread bowl with sparkling water while Reid ordered their Maine lobster roll and an iced tea. We got into a discussion about baby names while we waited for our food. Reid preferred the old classic names like Amelia and Lillian for a girl and Clark and Ethan for a boy. I wanted something more creative. Reid was asking me to give him some examples of names I liked when our server interrupted our conversation, setting our lunch down on the table.

“Oh, this looks good,” I said, eyeing my bread bowl, a faint smell of clams and cream wafting to my nose.

“Can I get you anything else?” our server said, smiling down at Reid with her back to me.

“I’m good. Sofie, did you need anything?” Reid glanced at me from across the table.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“I’ll leave you to your lunch, then. Enjoy.” She walked away, stealing a parting look at Reid over her shoulder before rounding a corner.

“I swear there’s always some woman ogling you no matter where we go. At least you ignore it. I’d have to get pissed if

you didn't," I said teasingly, although it did bother me a little.

"First of all, it's unsolicited, and I'm not in the slightest bit interested. Second, I'm deeply in love with this gorgeous, sassy, extremely quirky, intelligent, and pointedly brash little minx. You should meet her sometime. You'd like her."

"Oh, you're funny. Ha-ha."

"Of course, there's the risk my fiancée might deck the woman should she take offense." Reid looked like he was trying to suppress a grin and was failing. "Hmm, like Jillian?"

"You knew?" My voice was incredulous. He'd never given me the slightest hint that he was aware of what had happened.

"Yes, I knew." Reid chuckled. "I saw your knuckles. It was an extreme challenge to keep from saying something at the time. Honestly, I wanted to laugh, but it wasn't exactly appropriate. I don't know what she said to you, but knowing Jillian, she got what she deserved."

"You're as bad as I am."

"Sometimes, but not all the time. There's no one quite like you."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was meant as one."

I took a bite of my chowder, instantly grimacing. "Ooh, it's still hot." I took a sip of my water to cool off my burning tongue, turning my attention toward the bar while I swished the liquid around in my mouth. I froze, my glass slipping from my hand. It hit the table with a loud thud.

Reid grabbed my glass, setting it upright, his napkin covering the puddle of water as he tried to clean up the mess.

I barely noticed. The muscles in my throat had tightened, and I could hardly breathe. The room was slowly spinning as I tried to keep my eyes on the man sitting alone at the bar in a brown leather jacket, his head shaved at the sides and hair

slicked back on top. His gaze was so intense it was as if he were burning a hole into my flesh.

“Sofie?” Reid said, glancing at me while he cleaned up the water. “The color has completely drained from your face. What’s wrong?”

“I swallowed wrong,” I said breathlessly, the words forced from my mouth. I wanted to curl up in Reid’s lap and hide.

“Do you need help? Should I get you more water?”

“No,” I whispered, my eyes feeling moist. I turned back to the bar, the seat now empty.

Our server suddenly appeared at Reid’s elbow. “Oops, it looks like we had a little accident. I’ve brought you a stack of paper napkins.” She placed them on the table, quietly backing away when Reid ignored her.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything?” Reid said, continuing to clean up the mess.

“Yes, I’m sure.” My body shook as I nervously scanned the bar and dining area by the front door. I needed confirmation that the man had left.

“We should eat our lunch, so you don’t keep Della waiting. Aren’t you supposed to text her when we’ve finished?”

“Yes, that’s what she said.” Although that was our plan, I felt too scared to leave Reid’s side. I needed to send Della a text canceling our outing. She was hanging out at her brother’s apartment around the corner, so it wasn’t like my change in plans would screw up her day. I pulled my cell phone from my purse, intending to send the text when I got one from her first. I opened the message. Della was already waiting for me at the mall and wanted me to meet her at Barnes and Noble.

“Who is it?” Reid said.

“It’s Della. She’s across the street and wants me to meet her at the bookstore.”

“All right. Let me finish my sandwich, and I’ll walk you across the street.”

My appetite had disappeared, along with my desire to go shopping. I picked at my clam chowder, taking enough bites that it looked like I’d eaten something. I debated with myself over and over as I sat there. Should I tell Reid who the man was? Logically, I knew I should. But I was scared. Bribery, extortion, assault, drug dealing, theft, and human trafficking were all offenses he had under his belt. I knew the list went beyond that since he was Denny’s enforcer. The police just hadn’t caught him committing the others. Identifying this man meant revealing some of the darkest parts of my life, and I doubted Reid could stomach the truth. Everything had a cost, and with our relationship now at stake, I had to find out what that cost would be for the man to leave me alone.

Reid finished his sandwich and paid the bill. We bundled back up, and then Reid took me across the street. After entering the mall and taking the escalator upstairs, we walked down the main corridor until we reached the bookstore.

“There you are. I was getting worried you were going to bail on me,” Della said, teasing me. She was standing by the entrance.

“A little late, but I’m here,” I said, although I wished Reid and I were heading home instead. I wasn’t as safe as I needed to be, the situation making me feel like a wild rabbit in an open field surrounded by wolves. I had to make sure I stayed with Della. There was always more safety in numbers.

“Cool. I hope you’re ready to explore. I need to find a new pair of sunglasses and get some makeup.” Della looked over at Reid. “You’re welcome to join us. You might enjoy it.”

“Oh, no. I’ll pass. Shopping isn’t exactly my thing,” Reid said, laughing.

“Too bad. You’ll be missing out,” Della said, teasing him. “I’ll bring Sofie home afterward, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Well, I’m going to leave you two to your fun. Sofie, I’ll see you at home later. Be careful, okay?”

“I will.” I forced a smile when Reid kissed me goodbye.

“Well, what’s first? Sunglasses for me or shirts for you?” Della said.

“Shirts for me. Let’s go to Madewell. They don’t have maternity clothes, but I might be able to find some loose-fitting tops that I can wear. We can look at sunglasses in the store across from it after that.”

“That’ll work.”

We went to Madewell, and just as I suspected, I found a long-sleeved denim shirt, two sweaters, and a blouse that fit over my stomach. From there, we checked out the shop across the corridor. Unable to find a pair of sunglasses Della liked, we went to another eyewear shop across the mall. After finding Della a cute pair she loved, we went to the cosmetics store next door.

Suddenly needing the restroom, I debated on what I should do. Although I was afraid to leave Della, asking her to accompany me so I could pee might trigger questions I was unwilling to answer. I hadn’t seen the man in the brown jacket since he’d left the restaurant, even though I’d looked for him repeatedly while we’d shopped. Since he seemed to have disappeared, I mulled whether it was safe to be alone. Figuring the odds were in my favor, I decided to take the gamble.

I turned to Della as she browsed a display of lipsticks. “I’m going to run to the restroom while you look at makeup. I won’t be long.”

“No worries. I’ll be here for a while.”

I left Della and headed to the restrooms around the corner from the store and down a short corridor. I rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly feeling that prickly sensation again. I nervously glanced over my shoulder, but no one was there. The corridor was empty except for a group of people heading

back toward the shops. Thinking I was overreacting, I tried to relax. Then I saw him. His cold dark eyes were watching me through the window of the clothing store near the restrooms.

I took a step, and the man did the same. Panicking, I backpedaled toward the shops. He sprinted from the store's side entrance, blocking my exit back to Della. I gulped for air, my pulse racing. I was trapped with nowhere to go except the women's restroom. Making a break for it, I ran down the hallway. The man roughly seized my arm, the force yanking me backward. Before I could do anything, he propelled me into the family bathroom, the door locked behind me.

I took a step backward while he advanced.

"I'd advise you not to scream if you value your kid's health." An evil-looking smile had transformed his mouth. "You look a little frightened. What's the matter, Liv? You're not happy to see your brother?"

"It's Sofie," I whispered.

He laughed. "Sofie Olivia Stevens, still trying to be the defiant little princess after all these years, is that it? Oh, that's right, your last name changed when you married that little wimp, Dean Fletcher. I have to say you've gotten pretty damn hot over the years. I've got a line of johns that would pay a premium to give you a good fuck, especially with that baby in your belly. I never understood the attraction, but some guys get off on that stuff." He took a menacing step forward, his hand suddenly underneath my sweater, his mouth at my ear. "Damn, you've got some nice tits. I could make some good money off you."

"Stop, Nick. Please," I begged, pulling his hand away.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Nick's hand was on my throat, and my body slammed against the wall. "I'll do whatever I damn well want." His voice softened. His mouth was back at my ear. "Don't worry, you may be a good fuck, but I'm not into screwing my sister, although I enjoyed watching you and your boyfriend get it on the other night. It was a great show."

My stomach roiled with his words.

Nick took his hand off my throat. “You were pretty damn easy to find once our dear mother found that article about you and your boyfriend.”

“What do you want, Nick?” I whispered, a tear sliding down my cheek.

“What do I want?” He laughed, the sound sending a chill up my spine. “Now, now. No need to cry. It’s pretty simple. You’ve found yourself a millionaire, and I want a piece of the action. You’re going to help me too. If not, well, you might not like the consequences. I’m even going to give you two choices. Your first choice requires welcoming your long-lost mother and brother into your life and your home. You won’t need to do much except play the game and stay out of our way while we get your boyfriend to trust us. Your second choice involves paying me to go away. I’d say a hundred thousand would do it. You were always an imaginative kid, so I’m sure that amount wouldn’t be too hard for you to get your hands on. Now, the next one isn’t a choice. It’s the penalty you’ll pay if you fail on either of your options, and it has to do with Denny.”

“Don’t, Nick, please,” I sobbed, my knees shaking as my body collapsed.

Nick caught me and dumped me on the toilet.

“Please don’t what? Tell Denny where to find you. That’s your penalty. You see, Denny gets out of prison in ten days, and you helped put him there on manslaughter charges when you testified at his trial that you witnessed him kill that hooker. You’re not his favorite person, so if you’re smart, you’ll take option one or two. Otherwise, I’ll tell Denny where you work and where you live. Oh, yeah, there is that little matter of you biting a chunk of meat from his leg before you ran away to Dean. I don’t think he’s willing to forgive you for that either, so there’s sure to be an extra-special payback, and I’m sorry to say he’s into anal these days, and he likes it rough.”

I leaned forward, heaving the contents of my stomach onto the floor. My skin felt clammy, and my breathing had become shallow. I could feel myself passing out.

“No, you don’t. Wake up, Liv.” Nick slapped my face. “I need you coherent, so you can go home and work your magic. And remember, I’m being nice. The choice is entirely yours. You can reach me at the Sky Park Motel. I’ll be waiting for your answer.” Nick straightened my clothes, a depraved look in his eyes. “I would refrain from saying a word about this to your boyfriend or the police. That would be a guaranteed penalty involving you and your baby’s health. This has been such a fun chat, but I need to get going. Enjoy the rest of your day, Liv.” Nick quietly left the restroom, leaving the door ajar.

I must have been there for a while because Della poked her head inside the bathroom, looking for me.

“There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” She suddenly noticed my vomit on the floor. “Oh, shit. You’re white as a ghost, and you’ve thrown up. I need to call Reid.”

“Don’t.” My voice was devoid of emotion, and my body felt like an empty shell.

“Okay. I won’t call, but I need to get you home.” Della helped me up from the toilet. Grabbing my bag, she led me from the restroom.

We passed a custodian while we headed toward the exit. Della told him about the mess I’d made in the family bathroom, gaining a sympathetic look when he saw my condition.

Della drove me home, walking me up the front steps when we got there. Reid must have seen her drive up, because he opened the door before I could retrieve my house keys from my purse.

“What the hell happened?” he said, taking my bag from Della and helping me into the house.

“She doesn’t feel well. Maybe it’s some residual morning sickness. She was fine until our last store. I’m going to leave

you two alone. Sofie, I'll call you tomorrow."

"Thank you," I said, trying to smile.

Della left, and Reid took me upstairs.

"You need to lie down. I should call your doctor."

"Please don't. I'll be fine. I'm already feeling a bit better, I promise."

Reid stood quietly by the bed, intently scrutinizing me. "Fine, but if you feel worse, you need to tell me at once."

"I will."

"I'll check on you in a little while." Reid kissed my cheek and left the room, his shoes echoing in the hall.

I closed my eyes, trying to relax. It wasn't long before the image of Nick came back to haunt me. Scared all over again, I grabbed a blanket from the closet and curled up in one of the chairs. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get him or the things he'd said to me out of my mind. Chilled by the memories, I wrapped the blanket around my body and scrunched up in the chair.

Reid found me in the chair when he brought me dinner. "I thought you were sleeping. What happened?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Hopefully, you'll be able to later. You still look pale." Reid set a small tray down on the table next to me. "I brought you some meatloaf and mashed potatoes from dinner yesterday. I made a small salad to go with it."

"Thank you. I am a little hungry."

"Good. At least your appetite is coming back. I saw you pick at your food in the restaurant."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"There's no reason for you to be sorry. All I want is for you to feel better. Maybe you should take a warm shower after

you eat and try to lie down again since the shower might relax you. I need to go downstairs and clean up the kitchen.”

“I will if you promise to come back afterward. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Sofie, what’s going on with you? You’ve been acting odd since you spilled your water during lunch.”

“I don’t know. I’m tired, I guess. I want you to hold me right now, that’s all.”

“I’ll tell you what. I’m going to take care of the kitchen while you eat, and then I’ll come back. We’ll shower, curl up in bed, and call it an early night. How’s that?”

“I’d like that.”

“Now, eat your dinner. I’ll be back.” Reid kissed my forehead and went downstairs.

I took my time, eventually eating everything on my plate. Feeling a little better, I went into the bathroom to take a warm shower, hoping Reid was right and it would help me to relax. I stood under the stream of liquid warmth and closed my eyes, wishing I could magically wash my situation away. Nick was someone you stayed away from if you cared about your health and well-being, and I was terrified of him. On top of that, I had no guarantee he’d abide by anything he’d said since he was so calculating and sleazy. Suddenly feeling vulnerable as I stood naked in the shower, I quickly finished and curled up in bed. I needed Reid’s arms around me, and I wanted him to make it all disappear.

“Are you feeling better?” Reid said when he returned and sat on the edge of the bed.

“A little.” I wrapped my arms around his neck when he bent down to kiss me. I didn’t want to let go.

Reid gently loosened my grasp and peered at me. “You aren’t okay, are you?”

“No.”

“Something is really bothering you. What is it?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just feeling insecure, maybe a little scared.”

“About what? The baby?”

“I guess.” I shrugged my shoulder. “I just want you to hold me.”

“All right, let me take a quick shower, and then I’ll join you in bed.” Reid got up and disappeared through the doorway to the bathroom, rejoining me a short while later. He slid under the bedcovers and pulled me against his chest, holding me while I absorbed his warmth and comfort.

“Reid, tell me you love me,” I whispered as I listened to his gentle breathing.

“You know I love you.”

“I’m serious. I need you to say it.”

“All right, I’ll say it. Sofie Fletcher, I love you more than anything on this earth. I want you as my wife, and I can’t wait for you to quit driving me crazy and pick a wedding date. How’s that?”

“You could have done without the picking a wedding date part, but it works.”

“Then pick a date, so I don’t have to keep mentioning it. I’d marry you tomorrow if you’d let me.”

“Valentine’s Day. That way, you’ll never forget our anniversary.” I slid my hand across his chest while I listened to his heartbeat.

“Are you joking or being serious? That’s two weeks away.”

“I’m serious. You said you’d marry me tomorrow if you could.”

Reid tipped my chin up and kissed me. He smiled when he pulled away. “Valentine’s Day it’ll be. We can have a small,

intimate civil ceremony and follow it up with something bigger if you like.”

“There’s no need for anything big. I prefer something small and simple with your mother and our close friends anyway.”

“That should be fairly easy to arrange.”

“Good. The point should be about marrying each other, not trying to put on a huge show.”

“Ahh, once again, you’re being practical. I like that.”

“I’m glad you do.” I kissed his chest, desperately hoping there would be no catastrophe between now and then.

CHAPTER 22

Unexpected Guests

I'D BEEN SO wrapped up in my thoughts while Lawrence drove us home from work, it took me a few seconds to realize Reid had asked me a question. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I was asking when your next doctor appointment was."

"It's on Wednesday of next week. It's a ten o'clock appointment."

"I'll put it on my calendar so I don't forget."

"Thank you." I turned away, staring out the car window. Although I saw everything along the street as we passed, I paid no attention. I couldn't get Nick off my mind. It had been three days since the disturbing incidents with him at the restaurant and in the mall. I'd expected to see him lurking around the courtyard at lunch yesterday or today as his way of putting pressure on me to give him an answer. But as far as I could tell, he was nowhere around, although I was sure he'd show up eventually since I hadn't contacted him at the motel. The question was when.

Nick was a vile man, an expert at getting close to people and then sucking the life out of them as he took everything they had. He'd done his best to ruin my life and destroy Dean's. It had started with Nick demanding that Dean steal merchandise from the store where we worked, threatening to turn him over to the authorities for having sex with a minor if he refused. The minor was me since I was fifteen. Dean was naive and scared and did what Nick told him. Then Nick wanted more. The thefts increased until the volume was significant, and the company took notice. That was when Dean stashed the digital camera in my locker, hoping no one would look there. Dean got fired, and so did I, and we had to move. Nick demanded Dean steal again from his next employer, only

now there was more ammunition. Nick threatened to tell the company that Dean had lied about being fired on his job application.

Nick got Dean involved with gambling shortly after that, encouraging Dean to spend what little money we had. When the funds dried up, Nick loaned him more. Pretty soon, Nick owned him, and Dean became so distraught his drinking worsened. Nick's vicious manipulation continued until Dean no longer resembled the man I'd initially met. By the time we'd gotten away from my mother and Nick, the vices instilled in Dean had grown into full-blown addictions. Our marriage and Dean's mental health deteriorated until they were in shambles.

I still couldn't shake my guilt, knowing Dean might be alive today had he never met me. Cringing in emotional agony at what I'd inadvertently done, I stared down at the floorboards. Nick planned to do it again, except this time, Reid was his target. I swore to myself as I sat there that no matter what it took, I wouldn't let Nick get his hands on Reid. That meant I had to tell Reid what was happening, and I needed to do it before it was too late.

Lawrence stopped in front of the house, snapping me from my thoughts. Reid helped me from the back seat, and then he and I went inside while Lawrence parked the car.

"Grace just left. She made shepherd's pie and a salad for your dinner. It's ready in the dining room," Anderson said, meeting us at the front door and taking our coats.

Reid and I went into the dining room across the foyer from the parlor. Grace was Reid's longtime housekeeper and cook, and part of her job entailed making us breakfast and dinner during the workweek. She'd put two place settings on the table, along with a casserole dish of shepherd's pie, a salad, and a pitcher of unsweetened iced tea.

"Do you want a lot or a little of the shepherd's pie?" Reid said, taking a seat at the table and picking up my plate and the serving spoon.

“A lot, please. I’m hungry.” I sat in my chair and poured us glasses of tea.

“Is this all right?” Reid set my plate down in front of me.

“It’s perfect, thank you.”

“So, how was work today?” Reid filled his plate and turned to give me his attention.

“It was a little unusual. Jason asked if I’d ever considered attending college to get a degree in marketing. He said I’m a natural at it. I’m sure he’s being nice and exaggerating a bit, although I am trying to absorb everything he’s teaching me. It’s like being his apprentice, and it’s kind of fun.” Jason’s enthusiastic mentoring had been a wonderful surprise. I enjoyed learning and regretted dropping out of school when I ran away from home and moved in with Dean. Although it took a lot of effort between working, babysitting Dean, and our constant moving, I managed to pass the GED test when I was twenty. Going to college was something I’d wanted to do ever since.

“If you want to take college courses, I’m sure we can make it work. It’s never too late to learn, and you never know where the knowledge will take you.”

“I’m glad you said that, because I want to try taking some classes.”

“You’re welcome to take as many as you want. I’ll support whatever you decide.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.” I smiled at Reid. He was such a loving, supportive, and kind-hearted man. He turned out to be quite different from my first impression of him. I was fortunate to have met him, fate somehow steering us in each other’s direction. As I sat with him, thinking about our relationship and future, I decided now was a good time to tell him about Nick, his threats, and my past. What I had to say was disturbing, and I was going to fervently hope he could look past the darkness and let his love for me be his guide.

Reid took a bite of his shepherd's pie and a sip of his tea. I watched him, suddenly becoming nervous. Deciding to confess everything was one thing. Speaking about the events was another, and it would be excruciatingly painful. I clasped my hands and took a deep breath, not quite ready to take the plunge but knowing I must.

"Reid, I have something I need to talk to you about, and I need you to let me finish before you make any judgment or say anything."

He furrowed his brow, peering across the table at me. "This sounds serious. Should I be worried?"

"I think..."

The doorbell rang, cutting me off.

"I'll get it," Anderson said, having just stepped into the dining room. He spun around and went to the front door.

I could hear a mix of voices coming from the front entry and porch. As I listened, I could make out Anderson's and two others, a female and a male. I held my breath. Oh God, I recognized the voices! My heart felt like it had stopped, and my stomach churned. I wanted to disappear; my whole world was about to disintegrate into dust any second.

"Sir?" Anderson stood in the dining room doorway. He looked visibly shaken, his eyes darting between Reid and me.

Reid studied him for a moment. "Who's at the door?"

"Sir, Sofie's mother and brother are at the door. They've requested to speak to both of you."

"Mother and brother?" Reid looked at me, his eyes narrowing. "Sofie? What the hell is going on? You told me your mother was dead, and you had no siblings."

"Reid...I..." I stopped talking, words unable to come. I lowered my head and covered my face with my palm. "Oh God," I whispered.

“Anderson, close the dining room door and show them into the parlor. We’ll be in there in a few minutes,” Reid said, his voice taut.

“You can’t leave them alone! Stay in the room with them,” I said, finding my voice. “They’ll steal anything they can shove in their pockets.”

Reid snapped his head toward me. “I want an explanation, and I want it now.”

Anderson quietly closed the double doors to the dining room.

“I couldn’t tell you about them,” I said, my eyes imploring Reid to understand.

“Why the hell not?”

“They’re evil people. They’re leeches. They ruined my life and destroyed Dean. I’ve hidden from them for years, trying to escape their threats and manipulation. My mother saw the article in that grocery store newspaper, and they tracked me to Boston. My brother tracked me here.”

“Was that your brother that broke into the house?” Reid’s voice was incredulous. He stared at me, his palms pressed against the tabletop as if he were ready to spring from his chair.

“Yes, and he was at the restaurant on Boylston. I dropped my water when I saw him, and he found me at the mall and threatened me.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?” Reid shouted. He jumped from his chair and paced the floor. He stopped and turned toward me, a hand on his hip while he ran the other through his hair. “You lied to me. All this time, you lied to me and continued to do so. And you put yourself and our child at risk and me too when your brother broke into our home.”

“Reid, stop. Please don’t yell at me. I started to tell you right before the doorbell rang. I swear I was going to tell you.”

“Not another word from you.” Reid spun around and headed toward the door. He yanked it open, marching into the parlor, his hands balled into fists at his side.

I bolted from my chair and ran after him, stopping him as he advanced toward Nick.

“Reid, stop, please,” I begged, trying to keep it from getting physically ugly.

Reid glared at me. Then he turned to Nick, a menacing look distorting his face. “What do you want?”

“Now, now. There’s no need to be upset,” Nick said, his voice deceptively smooth as he put his hands in the air and took several steps backward. “We came to see my long-lost sister, hoping she’d welcome us into her home.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Reid said, his voice tight.

There was a movement off to my right. I turned, catching sight of my mother standing up from the couch. It was the first time I’d seen her in years. She looked old and worn, and her face was caked with makeup. Her clothes were partially visible underneath her open coat and looked disreputable. She was braless, and her boobs were practically falling out of her slinky, low-cut blouse, her skirt so short it almost exposed her crotch. She looked every inch like the drug addict and prostitute that she was.

Reid stood there like a statue, staring at her.

“There’s my baby girl. Liv, honey, I’ve missed you.” My mother smiled, her previously crooked and nicotine-stained teeth replaced with ill-fitting dental implants. She took several steps toward me.

“Don’t you dare come near me!” I threw my palm in the air, motioning her to stop. “And don’t you dare pretend to love or care about me.”

“Liv, sweetheart, what are you saying? I’m your mama. Of course I care.” She took another step toward me. “Come on,

baby girl. I haven't seen you in a long time. Don't treat your mama this way."

"My mother?" I said, spitting the words from my mouth. "You were no goddamn mother to me. After Daddy died, you shacked up with boyfriend after boyfriend, half of which leered at me, and I was only nine years old at the time. I told you what was happening, and you called me a liar. And when you were high, you didn't even bother to go to your bedroom. You screwed your boyfriends in front of me. I had to see it and hear it. And then you shacked up with your drug-dealing pimp, Denny. He made my life a living hell, and you let him."

"Liv, honey. It wasn't that bad. I put a roof over your head and took care of you."

"Took care of me?" I took a deep breath, my mind spinning like crazy. She was insane. "Is that what you call taking care of your child? I hid at the public library every day after school to get away from your leering boyfriends. And Denny attacked me. You remember that one, don't you? I was fourteen years old, and he tried to have his way with me, telling me it was time I learned the trade so I could sell myself on the street, and he was going to break me in. You told him I wasn't old enough and asked him to wait a year. You had to throw a lamp at him to make him stop."

"He was thinking about your welfare, trying to teach you how to make some money," she shouted. Her behavior and intelligence were just as I remembered.

"You're fucking insane," I shouted back at her. "That's not what you're supposed to teach your daughter. You were supposed to protect me but tried to pimp me out instead. And you did it again. I had just turned fifteen when you and Denny came home high and drunk and demanded that I earn my keep on the street. Do you fucking remember that? Do you?" I yelled.

"We were trying to teach you something!"

“Teach me? You threatened me with bodily harm if I didn’t stand there and watch you go down on Denny. Then you told me it was my turn and pushed me to him. And you stood there. You fucking stood there and watched him grab me by my hair and shove his dick in my face. I had to bite him in the leg to get away, and then I had to trade my virginity to Dean in exchange for a place to stay.”

Reid stood there in apparent shock at the words and memories spewing from my mouth like vomit. His hand was on the wall as he leaned against it for support. He was ashen, the look on his face devastating.

“Liv, honey...”

“You bitch! You tried to pimp your daughter. Get out, get out, get out, get out, get out!” I screamed.

My meltdown brought Anderson and Lawrence running into the room from downstairs. Reid seemed to snap out of his fog.

He stepped toward Nick. “Get out of my house, and don’t you dare come back, or it’ll be the last thing you ever do.” He let out a low growl as he took another step forward.

Lawrence put his hand on Reid’s shoulder to stop him, and then he grabbed Nick by the arm to forcibly escort him out.

Nick shook Lawrence’s hand off his arm and lunged toward Reid. “You’re going to pay for this. I swear to God I’ll get you.”

Reid swung his fist, a crunching sound filling the air. He stood over Nick, now a crumpled heap on the floor. “Get both of them out of here, now!”

Lawrence picked up Nick and dragged him to the foyer.

Anderson grabbed my mother. She kicked and screamed while he wrapped his arms around her chest and tried to force her toward the front door.

“We’re Liv’s family. You can’t kick us out,” she screamed.

“I can. Get the hell out of my life. Don’t ever come near me again.” I glared at her, all the hatred I’d carried for her over the years coming to the surface. I pinched her cheeks with my fingers, my eyes boring into hers. “I wish you the same hell you put me through all those years.”

“You ungrateful bitch!” She spat on me. “I’ll tell Denny where you live. You’ll be sorry you kicked me out.” Her voice was shrill as she screamed at me, her face contorting with her rage.

Reid grabbed her from Anderson, seeing him struggle to hold her. She was like a wild animal, trying to kick, scratch, and bite to get to me.

Anderson opened the front door while Reid and Lawrence tossed my mother and Nick out of the house. The three of them stood on the front steps for a few minutes, and then they came back inside, Reid taking one last look toward the street before locking the door. Lawrence and Anderson disappeared downstairs. Reid headed toward the staircase, his expression dark.

I hurried toward Reid, stepping in front of him in the foyer to block his path. “Reid, I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad at me.” I reached out to touch his chest.

He grabbed my hand and looked down at me with ice-cold eyes. “Don’t touch me.” He brusquely tossed my hand to the side.

“Reid, please, don’t do this. Don’t be mad. Please. I’m sorry.” I reached out again, and he brushed my hand away.

“I said don’t touch me. I can’t even wrap my mind around what I just heard and saw. Those people are your family. They’re disgusting street trash. You lied to me. All this time, you’ve been lying. And you were a prostitute in training by your mother’s pimp? God knows what all her other boyfriends did. I don’t even want to be near you. This garbage makes me sick. I’m leaving. I’ll stay in a hotel tonight.”

“Reid, please, I’m begging you. Don’t be mad at me. I don’t want you to leave.”

“Move out of my way, Sofie. I need to go upstairs and pack a bag.”

“No, please,” I sobbed.

Reid pushed me to the side and headed toward the stairs.

I leaned against the wall, tears streaming down my face, my whole world falling apart. I heard Reid coming back down a few minutes later. Desperate for him to stay, I rushed to the bottom of the staircase to stop him from leaving. “Reid, please don’t go.”

He shook his head. “I can’t stay here. I can’t stomach being near you right now.” He brushed past me and went out the front door.

I crumpled to the bottom step, my head leaning against the rail. My heart felt shattered, my mind and body in agony, the emotional toll too much to bear. I sobbed, the tears endlessly falling as I felt myself slipping away into a pit of despair.

CHAPTER 23

Gone

AWAKE MOST OF the night, Reid couldn't get the scene with Sofie and her family out of his mind. It played over and over, the images it evoked of what those men and Sofie's mother had done to her making him both angry and sick. Finally falling asleep sometime around four o'clock this morning, he'd overslept, arriving to work an hour late. Although Sofie would be at work upstairs, he didn't want to see her. The emotion and pain from last night were still too raw. With a moderately busy calendar, he'd have to push his personal situation aside and try to make it through the day. He would deal with Sofie and her unsettling revelations at home this evening. Although at this point, he had no idea where their conversation would take them or what he would say.

After grabbing a cup of coffee from the kitchenette around the corner from Mavin's desk, Reid walked past his mother's office on his way to his. He heard her call out his name and backtracked several steps until he was standing in her doorway. "Mother? What did you need?"

"My God, you look horrible. You've got bags under your eyes and look exhausted and pale. Are you ill?" she said, looking him over from head to toe.

"I stayed in a hotel last night and didn't get much sleep. I need to change. I've got an extra suit in my office." Reid turned to walk away.

"Oh, no, you don't. Sit down."

Reid sighed, his shoulders sagging. He slowly turned around. "Look, I'm still upset and confused, and I don't want to talk about it. I've got some work I need to get done this morning, so you'll have to excuse me."

“Based on your appearance, I’d say you need to talk about it. I suspect this wasn’t a little argument.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Reid gazed down at the floor as he shook his head. He looked back at his mother. “I’m still trying to get a grip on what happened. It almost seems too bizarre to be real.”

“Sweetheart, sit down.” His mother’s voice had changed and was now softly comforting. She motioned to the chair in front of her desk. “Nothing helps better than talking about it.”

“Fine.” Reid sat in one of her guest chairs. He rubbed his forehead, feeling as horrible as he knew he looked. “We had a visit from Sofie’s mother and brother last night.”

“I didn’t know she had a brother, and I thought her mother had died years ago.”

“That’s what I thought based on what Sofie had told me. After seeing them in person and hearing Sofie’s mind-blowing and grossly disturbing stories, I can see why she chose to pretend they didn’t exist. I don’t think ‘degenerate street trash’ even adequately captures their disgusting qualities. To put it bluntly, her mother is a prostitute and, from what I could gather based on her looks and the comments flying back and forth, is also a drug addict. As far as Sofie’s brother goes, he’s probably worse. If I had to guess, I’d categorize him as a street hustler and drug dealer, maybe a pimp, who knows. Sofie said horrific things about them and informed me she’s been hiding from them for several years. Her brother is the one that broke into our house, and he’s been threatening Sofie, which she didn’t bother to tell me. I ended up punching him out and then escorted him and Sofie’s mother out the door with the help of Lawrence and Anderson. To say it was an ugly scene is a huge understatement.”

His mother’s expression changed while he spoke. Her eyes suddenly clouded over as if hiding something.

“You need to start from the beginning. I want to hear what happened from the time Sofie’s family showed up to the point

you left,” his mother said.

Reid rubbed his forehead again; his elbow dug into the arm of the chair. His emotions were too raw, and the events too personal to discuss. Plus, he didn't want his mother to know what he'd said to Sofie amid his shock and anger. “This whole thing is too upsetting and personal. I don't want to discuss it. All right?”

“It's important that you do, and there's a reason why I want to know. So I'm asking you, please tell me what happened. After I hear it, you and I need to discuss something I should have mentioned long ago.”

“You're being cryptic.”

“I promise it will all make sense when I'm finished.” There was a sadness in his mother's eyes, something buried underneath. She wasn't the cool and calm businessperson usually sitting behind the desk.

Reid didn't know what it was, but something in her was compelling him to talk about it, almost like there was a mutual need between them. He straightened in the chair and told his mother everything, including his horrible words to Sofie. Finished, he noticed his mother's usual stoic countenance had softened, and she looked pained.

“I understand what Sofie's gone through, having experienced some of it myself, although not to the same degree. And I feel devastated knowing how she must feel right now.” The look on his mother's face was suggestive of heartache and despair, their conversation appearing to have brought distant memories to the forefront of her thoughts.

“I've never seen you like this, and I don't understand what you meant when you said you'd experienced something similar,” Reid said quietly. He got up, feeling like he needed to hug his mother.

She held her hand up to stop him and motioned for him to sit back down.

Reid complied. He tilted his head at her, confused by what was happening.

“I was married to another man before your father.” His mother clasped her hands on her desk, a faraway look in her eyes. “Like Sofie, my marriage wasn’t good, and I’d entered into the contract to escape from something else. The details aren’t important right now, but the outcome is pertinent. I ran from my husband and ended up in a women’s shelter. I managed to secure an interview with a software company while there, and your father was one of the executives on the panel. Based on my history and lack of experience, the other two men on the panel were passing me over, like all the other companies I’d interviewed with had done before. But your father looked beyond all that and saw something in me. He talked the others into giving me a chance, and the company hired me. I blossomed in the job, proving myself and eventually becoming their human resources manager.”

Reid leaned forward, his voice delicate as he said, “I understand the correlation with Sofie, but this is different.”

“Let me finish, please.”

He nodded and sat back in his chair.

“Your father and I fell in love with each other, and I told him everything about my past and what I’d gone through. And this is the most important part. Your father never rejected me or made me feel bad or inferior. He didn’t judge me by what others had done or the decisions I was forced to make. He loved me for who I was, told me he was proud of me, and completely supported my goals and desire to stand on my own two feet and become the person I wanted to be. Those actions, Reid, have the power to change someone’s life.”

“Are you saying this is what I need to do for Sofie?”

“Yes. Put yourself in Sofie’s shoes. Can you imagine what she’s been through and everything she’s endured? She has grit, determination, and an abundance of perseverance. She’s managed to get back on her feet and move forward where

many others have failed. You can't blame her for what others have done. We don't get to choose our families, and their degenerate personalities and behaviors shouldn't be an automatic reflection of ourselves. If that were the case, you'd be just like Geoff, wouldn't you?"

"I see your point. And I know I shouldn't have been so hard on Sofie last night. I was just so blown away and shocked by what was happening. I still am, but I shouldn't have pushed her away. That was wrong. I need to talk to her. She must feel as awful today as I do. Before I go, I have to ask. Did you create the company's employment assistance program with the women's shelter because of what you'd gone through?"

"I did. The shelter helped me when I thought there was no hope, and I wanted to give something back and help others who found themselves in my situation. I told your father what I wanted to do, and he supported me one hundred percent. Mavin was my first hire."

"Mavin? Seriously?"

"Absolutely. Mavin's been with me for twenty years and is one of my most valuable employees besides becoming a dear friend. She's as dedicated and loyal as I knew she could be. All she needed was for someone to give her a chance. I did, and she's proven herself multiple times over."

"Excuse me, Mr. Morgan," Mavin said from the doorway as if on cue. "Mr. Kingsley is here and says he needs to speak with you. He says he's been trying to call you."

"That's strange. I haven't heard my phone ring." Reid pulled it from his pocket and looked at it. "Dammit, the battery is dead." He looked at his mother and frowned. "I needed to charge it last night, but with everything that happened, I got completely sidetracked." He swung back toward Mavin. "Can you bring Armand in here, please?"

"Yes, sir." Mavin backed away from the door and disappeared.

“Reid?” Armand said a moment later, standing in the doorway.

“Take a seat, please,” Reid said, motioning to the guest chair next to him. “Mavin said you’ve been trying to get a hold of me. What can I help you with?”

Armand took a seat in the chair. “Well, I was somewhat shocked by Sofie’s email this morning since it was so unexpected. I wanted to talk to you about it. I’ll need to know if her decision is permanent and if I should be filling her position.”

Reid narrowed his eyes at Armand, a puzzled look overtaking his face. “I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. What email did Sofie send you?”

“Her resignation email. She sent it to me this morning.” Armand looked uncomfortable and shifted in the chair. “I apologize. I thought you knew. She sent me an email saying she was resigning her position, effective today.”

“When did she send it?” The urgency in Reid’s voice was unmistakable.

“An hour ago. Sofie sent it from a mobile phone.”

Reid stared at Armand, the color draining from his face.

“Armand, you’ll have to excuse us. Reid and I have some family business to discuss. Please do not fill Sofie’s position,” Reid’s mother said.

“I understand. Please get back to me with any information you deem important.” Armand stood and quietly left the room, seeming to understand that Sofie’s email was a surprise, and it wasn’t a good one.

“Reid?”

He jumped up from his chair and paced the floor. “Christ, what did I do?” he said, his face crumbling. “I need to call home.” He rushed to the chair and pulled his mother’s desk phone toward him. He dialed his home number and put the call on speaker.

“Morgan residence. May I help you?”

“Anderson, I need to talk to Sofie.”

There was a pause on the line, then Anderson said, “Sir, she’s not here. I’ve been trying to call you.”

“What do you mean she’s not there? Where is she?” Reid scooted to the edge of the chair.

Reid’s mother got up and closed the office door. She returned to her desk, worry lines creasing on her forehead.

“I don’t know, sir. She left. She was still crying on the stairs when I retired for the evening, and she hadn’t moved an inch since you left. I woke up at two this morning and thought I’d check on her. I found her in the same spot. I asked if she needed anything, but she wouldn’t answer me. It was like she wasn’t hearing me. I got a blanket and put it around her. Then I called you. I got your voice mail and left a message. I checked on her again at six o’clock, and she was gone. I searched the house and couldn’t find her anywhere. The suitcase she brought with her is missing, and I found her engagement ring on the blanket on the stairs.”

“Thank you, Anderson. If Sofie shows up, I want you to call my office phone immediately.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get a hold of you if I see or hear anything.”

Reid hung up the phone and sat there with his elbow on the desk, his forehead resting in his palm.

“Reid, talk to me.”

“This is my fault. I did this.” He looked up, suddenly feeling lost and broken. Sofie was the world to him. He loved her, and she was everything that mattered. And he’d sent her away. *He’d* done it.

“We can’t dwell on that right now. We have to think. Where would Sofie go?”

“I don’t know. Sofie wouldn’t go to her family, that’s for certain. She clearly has a deep-seated hatred for her mother,

and she seemed afraid of her brother, especially since he threatened her.”

“What about Della and Adam? Would Sofie go to either of them?”

Reid stared at the floor, wondering if that was a possibility. He shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. This is all too personal, and Sofie is too private. She talks to them about some things, but nothing on this level. If she went to either of them, it would be like opening the door to her secrets. I don’t think she’d do that.”

There was a knock on the door, and then it slowly opened. Mavin peeked her head inside the office. She looked worried. “I’m hearing something happened to Sofie. Can I be of any help to either of you?”

“Yes, you can,” Reid’s mother said, appearing relieved at the offer. “You might have some knowledge that could help us.”

“In what subject area?” Mavin said, entering the office and closing the door.

“Sofie has left, and we need to find her. As you and I suspected, she’s endured years of abuse, and I’ve learned what she suffered through was far darker than anything I could have envisioned. Based on your experience and the things you’ve seen at the shelter where you volunteer, where do you think she’d go?”

Mavin looked alarmed for a moment, then said calmly, “It depends on what happened to make her leave.”

Reid turned to Mavin, ashamed to admit what he’d done but knowing he needed to put the situation into the proper perspective for her. “Sofie and I got caught in an awkward situation last night that got ugly. I was furious and called her out for lying to me and keeping secrets, although I see now that she had a reason.” Reid paused and ran his hand across his face. He took a deep breath. “I turned her away. I said horrible and cruel things to her to make her think I didn’t want her, that

I couldn't stand to be near her." Reid hung his head, hating himself for what he'd done to her. He desperately wanted to take it back, every word, every raised tone of voice, every touch pushing her aside.

"She's going to blame herself."

"Why? I did it. I said those things. I was the asshole, not her," Reid said.

"Self-esteem. It sounds like Sofie's been beaten down her whole life and had to find her way back to the top. I have to believe she's developed some self-esteem issues as a result. And what happened last night may have crushed her successes at overcoming them. Right now, I'd suspect she thinks she didn't deserve you or to be happy. In her mind, it's her fault, and she didn't do enough to make it work."

"But it's not her fault. That's crazy."

"Our minds are so complex, and sometimes the way people think and act make no sense until you understand the underlying issues or step into their shoes."

"I suppose you're right," Reid said. He was frustrated that he had been unaware of any of this and had inadvertently made things worse rather than better for her when she needed him. "Do you think she'd return to the shelter she was staying at when we met?" Reid was grasping for a sliver of hope that Sofie would feel safe and comfortable enough to return there.

"I don't think so," Mavin said, shaking her head. "It would take her full circle, going back where she started. It would be like admitting she failed and had to start over. I think pride and embarrassment would keep her from going there. I think Sofie will go to a shelter, but a different one. I'd look for her at shelters specifically for expectant mothers. The only thing is you normally have to apply and be accepted to get into one of those. That would mean Sofie would have to go somewhere else first."

"Thank you, Mavin," Reid said, his hope dwindling as a feeling of despair took hold of him. "Could you reschedule

those two meetings I have this morning? I need to do what I can to find Sofie.”

“Certainly, I’ll take care of it.” Mavin left the office, quietly closing the door behind her.

Reid turned to his mother. “I don’t want to lose her. I can’t lose her. She’s everything to me.”

“I know she is, sweetheart.”

Reid got up from his chair, the anger he felt at himself eating away at him. “I’m going to my office to put my cell phone on a charger. I’ll call all the hotels in the city and surrounding areas to see if she’s checked in anywhere. I’ll see if I can get a hold of Braxton Hennessey too. He’s with the Boston Police Department now. He might not be able to help since Sofie left voluntarily, but it’s worth a shot.”

“I’ll get a hold of Della and Adam in case Sofie did talk to them. And, Reid...”

“Yes.”

“Don’t give up hope. We’ll find her.”

“I hope so,” he whispered before walking out the door.



REID LEFT WORK early, unable to concentrate on anything all day except finding Sofie. He hung his head as he walked up his front steps. For the first time in his life, he felt helpless.

“Did you have any luck with your search?” Anderson said as he took Reid’s coat at the front door.

“No. I called every hotel and motel on my Google search, and all said there were no guests under Sofie’s name. Braxton Hennessey couldn’t help me either since Sofie left voluntarily, and my mother talked to Sofie’s friends without any luck. They were as surprised as we were that she’d left, so it seems I’m striking out no matter which way I turn.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I know this is difficult for you. Grace made you some chicken and dumplings. I doubt you’ve eaten anything today, so a hot meal in your stomach would do you some good.”

“Thank you, Anderson. I’m not sure if I can even eat anything. My stomach has been upset most of the day.” Reid went down the hall to wash up and then sat at the dining room table. He spooned some of the chicken and dumplings into his bowl and took a bite. As much as Reid loved Grace’s cooking, he didn’t seem to have much of an appetite. He forced himself to eat half a bowl and then retired upstairs, feeling drained.

Reid took a warm shower and slipped into his pajamas. He tried watching a movie in bed, but he couldn’t concentrate. He turned off the television and lamp, but sleep eluded him, his mind consumed with thoughts of Sofie. Where had she gone? Was she scared? Was she safe? Not knowing the answers was devastating. Frustrated and filled with unbearable sadness, he got up and went into the nursery. He trudged across the floor to the rocking chair in the corner. The room was dark except for a sliver of moonlight that lit up the playpen filled with stuffed animals and toys. He pictured himself and Sofie playing with their daughter on the floor, a toddler’s soft laughter echoing in his mind. Reid leaned his head back in the chair and slowly rocked, whispering to himself, “Sofie, where are you?”

Reid opened his eyes, suddenly feeling cold. He’d dozed off in the chair. He got up, went to his room, and slipped into bed, tossing and turning the same as before. Sofie’s image was like a silent movie that kept playing in his mind. He rolled over and slid to her side of the bed, burying his face in her pillow, her scent giving him some semblance of comfort. He wrapped his arms around the feather-filled pillowcase. He had to find her.

CHAPTER 24

The Search

REID LOOKED UP from his laptop when he heard the knock on his front door. It had to be his mother based on the time displayed on the bottom of his computer screen. The private investigator he'd hired, Keith Vincent, wasn't due to arrive for another ten minutes. Anderson answered the door, showing Reid's mother into the parlor. Reid set his laptop on the coffee table and got up from the couch to greet her.

"Sweetheart, you look exhausted, and you've lost some weight. You're still not sleeping, are you?" his mother said, looking concerned. She set her purse on the coffee table and gave Reid a hug and kiss on the cheek.

"I haven't had an appetite, and I can't sleep. Every time I crawl into bed, I lay there and worry about Sofie and whether or not she's all right. It's agonizing not knowing."

"I know, sweetheart. At least you're doing everything you can to find her. I'll continue to handle everything at work until you return."

"Thank you. Keith should be here in a few minutes, and I hope he has some good news."

"Are you sure we can trust him? We need someone with a lot of experience in finding missing persons, especially since Sofie knows how to hide."

"I trust him. As I mentioned before, Braxton recommended him. They worked together on the police force until Keith retired and got his private investigator license. He has years of experience besides having some inside connections with the police department."

"You're right. I'm being overly critical. It sounds like the man has the qualifications we need."

The doorbell rang. Reid went to the door, calling out to Anderson that he'd answer it.

“Good morning, Reid.”

“Keith, I'm glad you're here. Come in, please.” Reid backed away from the door, holding it open. He motioned toward the parlor. “We're meeting in here. I'll introduce you to my mother.” Reid shut the front door and followed Keith into the room. “Mother, this is Keith Vincent. Keith, this is my mother, Virginia Morgan.”

“It's nice to meet you, Ms. Morgan.” Keith reached out and shook her hand.

“Please call me Virginia.”

“Certainly.”

Reid motioned Keith to a chair in front of the coffee table. He and his mother sat on the couch.

Keith set a folder down on the table and opened it, a picture of Sofie attached to the inside cover. “Thank you for sending me the picture of Sofie and the other documentation I needed so quickly.”

“Is there anything else I should be giving you?” Reid said.

“Not at this point. Of course, if you hear anything or think of something else that might help, get a hold of me immediately. Sometimes the smallest detail can be beneficial.”

“No problem. I understand. So where are we with finding Sofie?”

“As we know, she left sometime early Wednesday morning, which puts today at day number four of her disappearance. Currently, I have two investigators showing Sofie's picture to police at the transit centers and asking questions. Since it's only been a few days since she left, I'm hoping someone remembers seeing her. Sofie and her deceased husband lived with his brother in Rochester, New York, for a short period, so we've contacted him to see if he's seen her or heard from her. So far, he says he hasn't. We're rechecking all

the hotels and motels in the city. And we'll put together a list of shelters for expectant mothers in the Boston metropolitan area. I'll have someone check those in person to see if she's there."

"What about checking the activity on her bank account?" Reid said.

"We can't check it. Sofie left voluntarily, so she's not technically a missing person. And you're not married to her or on her account, which means you can't authorize us to look at it."

"I was hoping we could get around that," Reid's mother said, looking disappointed.

"Me too." Reid shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do about that." Keith took two documents from his folder and placed them on the table. "I pulled the arrest and conviction record for Sofie's mother, Bobbie Stevens. Here's a copy of it." He pushed the document toward Reid and his mother. "As you can see, she has a history of convictions for solicitation of prostitution, drug possession, resisting arrest, and petty theft. I found the guy you called Denny, linked to her. His name is Denny James, and he's fifty-four years old. He's from Philadelphia and has an extensive rap sheet." Keith slid the second document across the table. "His convictions include pimping, pandering, human trafficking, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, drug possession, and assault. He's being released from prison on Tuesday after completing a ten-year sentence for voluntary manslaughter."

"Shit, who did he kill?" Reid said, the color draining from his face.

"A prostitute named Kesha Allen. She allegedly worked for him. Sofie's witness statement and testimony in court put him away. Sofie was fourteen when she witnessed Kesha's murder."

“No wonder Sofie’s mother threatened to disclose her location to this man. He must want retribution against her,” Reid’s mother said, sounding frightened. She glanced at the photograph of Denny James and put her hand to her mouth. “My God, he looks like a gangster version of that heavyweight fighter, Terrell Banks, with an added scar down his cheek. He looks terrifying.”

“With good reason. Denny James is a dangerous man,” Keith said.

Reid got up and walked to one of the windows facing the street. He stood there with his back to them as he stared out the pane of glass. “Tell me what happened to the prostitute.”

“Kesha’s body was unearthed at a construction site four years after her murder. Police searched missing person reports and discovered Kesha’s mother had filed a report after her daughter’s unexplained disappearance. Dental records and a necklace found with the decomposed body identified her as Kesha Allen. Witness statements linked her back to Denny James. The authorities questioned Sofie several times, and she eventually confessed to witnessing the murder. She said she’d been hiding on the fire escape, so Denny wouldn’t know she was home. He had Kesha with him when he arrived at the apartment, and they argued about money. Denny slapped Kesha, and she pushed him. They scuffled, and Denny stabbed her. Sofie was too terrified to move from her hiding place and saw Denny hide the knife he used behind a vent in the living room. He called someone, and two men showed up to dispose of her body.”

“Why did Denny James only get ten years for such a heinous crime?” Reid’s mother said, her voice rising.

“Because he’d been found guilty of the lesser crime of voluntary manslaughter rather than murder, with the jury determining that Denny had acted in self-defense. Sofie had witnessed their physical altercation, and Kesha had two convictions for aggravated assault on her record.”

Reid turned around, looking completely distraught. He ran his hand through his hair while he paced the floor. Suddenly stopping, he turned to Keith. “We have to find Sofie. God only knows what he’ll do to her if he finds her.”

“I understand, Reid. I do. We’re going to do everything we can to find her. I better get back to the office unless you have additional questions.”

“I don’t have any at the moment. I’ll walk you out.”

“That’s not necessary. I can find my way out. Good day to you both.” Keith stood and made his way to the front door.

Reid waited until he heard the door close, and then he turned to his mother. “I’m sorry. This whole situation is too much, and I need to be alone. I’m going upstairs.” His voice broke as he spoke. The information from Keith was devastatingly painful, almost like a slow and agonizing torture. Feeling anxious, with his stomach in knots, Reid wasn’t sure how long he could keep himself together in front of his mother. He headed toward the stairs with one thought uppermost in his mind. They had to find Sofie before Denny James did.

CHAPTER 25

A Welcome Lead

REID'S CELL PHONE rang, waking him as he dozed in the rocking chair in the nursery. He pulled it from his pocket and looked at the screen. It was Keith. Reid hoped he had good news to share since, so far, there'd been no sign of Sofie in the eighteen days she'd been gone. He answered his phone. "Keith, any news?"

"Yes, some good news, in fact. We received a lead on Sofie."

"What did you find out?" Reid straightened in the chair, eagerly waiting to hear what Keith had to say. It was the first glimmer of hope he'd had since Sofie left.

"I was contacted a half hour ago by one of the transit police officers. He'd been on vacation and returned to work this morning to find the flyer we'd left at their office. He saw Sofie the morning she disappeared."

"Where?"

"The Fields Corner T station, south of here in Dorchester. The officer said he'd noticed her right away because of her appearance. She had a suitcase with her, and her eyes were badly swollen. He was concerned about her and asked if she needed help, but she wouldn't answer. According to him, she walked down the busway toward the Target store on Geneva Avenue. Since she got off the transit line at that station and was walking, I assume she's staying somewhere in that general area. I did some checking, and there's a hostel on Park Street about a block away from the shopping center next to the transit station, and there's a women's shelter a few miles west of there. I'm leaving my office in thirty minutes to check it out. I thought you'd want to come with me."

"Absolutely. Can I meet you down there?"

“Sure, meet me in the southwest corner of the parking lot on Geneva and Park. But don’t do anything until I get there. And Reid, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve received reports that a man is hanging around the downtown transit centers pretending to be with my company. He’s flashing around a photo of Sofie and asking questions. Two of my investigators encountered the guy at the Park Street station yesterday, and he took off when they tried to talk to him. His description matches what we have on file for Sofie’s brother Nick Stevens. At this point, I’m assuming he’d been at one of the transit centers when my investigators passed Sofie’s photo around and asked the transit police if they’d seen her. He must have heard and seen enough to know we’re looking for her and is pretending to be part of my team to get information on Sofie.”

“Do you know if he found out anything?”

“The lady Nick had been talking to when my guys approached said she’d told him she had seen Sofie on the T line but couldn’t remember which day or the station Sofie had gotten off. But she was pretty sure it had been one of the stations before Ashmont.”

“Fuck. We have to find Sofie.”

“I know, and we’re doing the best we can. Meet me at the shopping center in Dorchester, and we’ll go from there.”

“All right. I’ll meet you there.” Reid jumped up from the chair and hurried into his room to dress. He’d woken up at four this morning from a bad dream and gone into the nursery. It was now nine o’clock, and Reid had been there ever since. He was out the door in less than ten minutes.

Reid pulled into the lot and parked as instructed. Unable to sit still, he got out of his car and paced back and forth, impatient to get going since the hostel was so close. Curious, Reid pulled his cell phone from his pocket and searched the internet for the hostel’s address. He was heading down the

street on foot a few minutes later, no longer willing to wait for Keith. After finding the building, Reid climbed the front steps and entered the lobby, briskly making his way to the small reception desk.

The young man sitting at the desk looked up as Reid approached. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Sofie Fletcher," Reid said, trying to stay calm.

"I'm sorry. We have no guests staying here by that name." The man's hands shook as he shuffled a stack of papers and quickly looked away.

"Are you sure? She asked me to meet her here." Reid eyed the man, thinking he was acting strangely.

"Look, she's not here. I don't know what to tell you."

"All right. Fine. If Sofie does show up, can you tell her Reid was here looking for her?"

"Sure, man. I'll do that."

"Thanks." Reid walked away, the feeling in his gut telling him something wasn't right. He'd reached the sidewalk when he heard someone behind him.

"Mister. He's lying to you."

Reid turned around to find a young dark-haired woman in a pair of tattered jeans standing at the bottom of the stairs. "Excuse me?"

The woman walked toward Reid. "Paul's lying. Sofie is here. She's sharing a dorm room with me. Two guys were here looking for her about fifteen minutes or so ago. They looked rough, and the scary one threatened to hurt Paul if he told anyone they were looking for her."

"Shit. What did the men look like?"

"One guy was maybe in his midthirties. His head was shaved on the sides, and his hair was slicked back on top. He looked like a hustler. I heard the other guy call him Nick."

“What did the other guy look like?” Reid said, a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Oh, man, that guy was bad news. You could tell. He was much older, with a shaved head and several tattoos on his forehead and face. There was a big scar on his cheek. He scared Paul half to death when he threatened him.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“Yeah, dumbass Paul told them Sofie was at work. He said they could find her at the retail pharmacy on Washington and Southern.”

“Thanks,” Reid called over his shoulder as he turned to run back to his car.

“Sofie’s not there,” the woman called out to him.

Reid stopped and turned back around. “What do you mean she’s not there? Where is she?”

“Sofie’s barely getting any hours at the pharmacy, so she took a second job at the market by the Target store up the street. She’s there right now.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your help,” Reid said before racing up the street.

Reaching the market, Reid rushed through the sliding glass doors and abruptly stopped, his eyes darting back and forth across the front checkout lanes. He didn’t see Sofie anywhere. He ran down the line of checkout stands, peering down each grocery aisle as he passed it, skidding to a stop halfway across the store.

Sofie was placing a can on one of the shelves and paused, her eyes locking with Reid’s. The commotion he’d caused when he’d bumped into a customer and her grocery cart had caused Sofie to look in his direction. She backed away down the aisle.

“Sofie, stop! They’re behind you. Run to me, now!”

Sofie looked over her shoulder and shrieked. She hurled the can of stewed tomatoes in her hand at Denny and bolted toward Reid.

Denny fell to the floor, hit in the forehead by the can. Nick rushed up the aisle after Sofie.

Reid grabbed her and pushed her toward the checkout stands. "Run and hide. I'll hold them off as best I can. Go!" he shouted.

Sofie sprinted toward the front of the store.

Reid rushed toward Nick, the two of them instantly scuffling. Denny got up from the floor and staggered past them, heading toward the exit.

Reid and Nick continued to fight, knocking each other into the shelving and throwing blows. Reid landed a solid punch, sending Nick tumbling into a small display. Then he ran toward the exit. He had to stop Denny.

Reid reached the sidewalk, suddenly hearing a car's tires squealing on the street, a woman's scream following the sound. He ran toward the commotion, spotting a group of people gathering around a body lying partially underneath the front end of a car. Panicked and gasping for air, Reid stumbled through the crowd. "No, no, no," he cried as he neared the body. He looked down as a man checked the person's pulse and then shook his head.

It was Denny.

Relieved, Reid scanned the crowd of people standing there gawking. He had to find Sofie before Nick got to her. He spun in a circle, unsure which way to go. He'd told her to hide. *But where?*

A police cruiser pulled up, followed by a second one and then a third. Reid saw Keith leading Nick to one of the patrol cars, his hands behind his back in cuffs.

Reid stepped back from the crowd and frantically scanned both sides of the street. He spotted Sofie on her knees against

the wall of the gas station on the corner, her arms wrapped around her body as she rocked back and forth. Reid rushed to her and knelt on the concrete.

“Sofie?” he said softly.

She didn’t seem to hear him and stared at the ground, a blank look on her face as she continued to rock.

Reid reached out and gently took hold of her upper arms. “Sofie, it’s Reid. You’re safe now. I’ve come to take you home.”

Sofie lifted her head, appearing to recognize Reid. She collapsed in his arms and sobbed.

“Shh, it’s all right. You’re safe. Everything is going to be okay. Denny can never hurt you again.” Reid held her as tight as he could without hurting her. He didn’t want to let go.

Sofie tilted her head up and looked at Reid, tears streaming down her cheeks as she whispered, “I want to go home.”

CHAPTER 26

Back Home

REID RELAXED IN the upholstered chair in the family room, listening to the music streaming through the stereo speaker he'd bought a few hours earlier. He'd purchased it for Sofie while she slept upstairs, recovering from this morning's ordeal with Denny and Nick and the traumatic events of the last few weeks. Remembering her saying that music soothed her soul, Reid thought it might help make her comfortable and provide some measure of peace. Still riddled with guilt for his part in unwittingly pushing her away, he'd do anything he could to help her heal.

He closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. He had to agree with Sofie. The music had a calming effect, almost like it was reaching into his subconscious and telling him everything would be okay. Reid smiled as he thought about her. Sofie was so much wiser than she gave herself credit for and such a loving and caring person once you cracked through her outer shell. It was only now that he fully understood the reasons for the wall she'd built around herself and her need for secrets.

Reid's cell phone rang, pulling him from his reverie. He picked it up from the coffee table and looked at the screen. It was his mother. "Hello, Mother."

"Reid, how is Sofie?"

"She's been sleeping all afternoon. This morning was terrifying for her, seeing Denny after all those years and knowing all he wanted to do was hurt her. I hate wishing others ill, but I can't feel anything besides satisfaction and relief that he's gone. At least he'll never be able to hurt her again."

"What about her brother?"

“Charges will be filed against him for breaking into our home, assaulting Sofie at the shopping center, and making all those threats to her. It’ll be difficult for her since she’ll have to testify against him, but I’ll give her all the support she needs to get through it. I only hope this doesn’t become a long, drawn-out process.”

“I hope it doesn’t either. The longer the legal process, the harder it will be for Sofie.”

“On a side note, I had an informative discussion with Keith earlier about the possibility of additional charges against Sofie’s brother. Keith thinks conspiracy charges might get filed against him because of his involvement in helping Denny go after Sofie. We’ll have to wait and see how this whole thing pans out.”

“The more charges, the better, I would think. It’ll keep Sofie’s brother locked up longer and away from her.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Reid said.

“You haven’t mentioned Sofie’s mother. What happened to her?”

Reid took a deep breath as he rubbed his temple. “We don’t know. The police went to the motel she’d been staying at with Sofie’s brother, and the desk clerk said she’d hurriedly checked out. So at this point, we have no clue where she’s gone.”

“That can’t be good. I hope Sofie’s mother isn’t lurking somewhere waiting for a chance to come back and do something to her.”

“We hope not. Keith said the police would keep looking for her. Well, I better check on Sofie. I need to see if I can get her to eat something.”

“I’ll let you go then. Give Sofie a kiss and hug for me.”

“I will. I’ll talk to you later. Love you,” Reid said.

“I love you too, sweetheart. Bye.”

Reid hung up his phone and went upstairs to check on Sofie. She was awake, lying in bed and staring out the window. She turned to look at him when he sat on the bed.

“How are you feeling?” Reid reached out and held her hand.

“Much better.” Sofie gave him a faint smile.

Reid studied her face. Even though she’d slept for hours, she still looked exhausted. He couldn’t imagine what she must have gone through over the last few weeks. He was sure about one thing, though. He’d apologized a dozen times since he’d found her, and a million more apologies could never make up for the cruel things he’d said and done to her. She hadn’t deserved any of it. He squeezed her hand. “Are you hungry? I stopped at Panda Imperial earlier when I went on an errand.”

“Barbeque pork fried rice and sweet-and-sour chicken?”

“Uh-huh. I got your favorites.”

“I am a little hungry, and that does sound good. I’ll go downstairs to eat after I take a warm shower. Do you mind?”

“Of course not. I’ll leave you alone, and you can come downstairs whenever you’re ready.” Reid leaned forward and kissed her. As he pulled away, he murmured in her ear, “I love you, and I missed you.”

Sofie smiled at him, the light coming back into her sapphire eyes for the first time since she’d been back. “I love you too.”

Reid stood and walked to the door. “I’ll be in the family room.” He turned away and went downstairs.

Sofie’s face radiated a mixture of pleasure and surprise when she entered the family room a little later. “I thought I was imagining things when I heard music a while ago.”

“You weren’t. I bought the stereo speaker when I went out earlier. I remembered you saying music was soothing to you.”

“It is. It always makes me feel better.”

“That’s what I hoped. Well, we should eat. I heated dinner and set it on the dining room table a few minutes ago.”

“I can smell it, and it’s making my stomach growl.”

Reid helped Sofie with her chair in the dining room, placing a kiss on top of her head before taking his seat. They awkwardly filled their plates in silence. It was as if they were treading cautiously around each other after their momentous fight and Sofie’s disappearance, neither one quite sure what to say.

“The rice is good,” Sofie said, breaking their silence. “I developed a craving for it over the last couple of weeks. It doesn’t matter what kind, either. They all taste wonderful. I read it’s because of the pregnancy.”

“Have you developed any other cravings? Maybe pickles or ice cream?” Reid chuckled as he watched Sofie attack the pile of pork fried rice on her plate.

“Pepperoni pizza and strawberries, but not together. That would be gross.”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should try it. It could be the next exotic dish.”

“I’ll try it if you will,” Sofie said, giggling.

“That’s it. We’ve got a dinner date for tomorrow night in the Morgan household dining room. Pizza à la Sofie, otherwise known as pepperoni pizza with sliced strawberries.” Reid stabbed a piece of chicken poking out from his chow mein noodles. He held up his fork. “Maybe we can figure out something exotic to do with the chicken, too?”

“Ooh, I have an idea. I’m also craving peach yogurt. We can have grilled chicken dipped in yogurt.” Sofie took a bite of her chow mein and closed her eyes, pretending to savor her imaginary concoction.

“I don’t know about that one. Yogurt doesn’t exactly hit the spot for me.”

“I know what we can have,” Sofie said, getting up from her chair. She came around to Reid’s side of the table and pulled out the chair next to him. “Egg rolls dipped in sweet-and-sour sauce.” She grabbed an egg roll from the table and dipped it in the sauce, then held it to Reid’s mouth, getting some of the condiment on his lips.

Reid took a bite and cocked his head at her. “And what is supposed to be so special about this dish?”

“It comes with a kiss.” Sofie licked the dab of sauce off Reid’s lip with the tip of her tongue. Then she kissed him.

Reid pushed his chair back and pulled her onto his lap, his arms going around her as he kissed her.

Sofie pulled back and gazed into his eyes, her hand caressing his cheek. “I missed you. Everything was so horrible without you.”

“For me too. I was devastated when I found out you’d left. It wasn’t what I wanted, and I didn’t mean to hurt you. I agonized day and night about whether you were safe and where you’d gone. We can never do this again.”

“Never again,” Sofie said softly. She kissed Reid, her arms wrapping around his neck. Then she nestled against his chest.

She felt so warm, soft, and comfortable in his arms. Reid looked down at her and kissed her forehead. This was how it was supposed to be—the two of them together.

Sofie looked up at him and smiled. “Ooh, I love this song. I think of you whenever I hear it, the way you drive me wild when you make love to me and always make me feel so special.”

“Dance with me to the song.” Reid slid Sofie off his lap and stood, extending his hand toward her.

Sofie giggled and took his hand.

Reid reached over and dimmed the chandelier. Then he danced with her, holding her close as their bodies swayed to the music, his voice in her ear as he sang the chorus.

Sofie stared at Reid, her eyes wide with surprise. “I didn’t know you could sing. Your voice is so soft and sexy.”

Reid gave her one of his devilish smiles. “You’re the only person I’ve ever sung to, so I’m glad you like it.” He sang the chorus again as he twirled her and pulled her against his chest, giving her a deep, sensual kiss when the song finished.

Sofie’s cheeks were flushed when she pulled away. “Take me upstairs. I want you to make love to me,” she whispered.

Reid scooped her into his arms and carried her up the staircase. He didn’t need her to ask him twice. Reid wanted her. His body burned for her. He laid her on the bed and slowly undressed as she watched him. Then he lay beside her, slowly undressing her while kissing her shoulders and neck. He took his time caressing her, feeling every inch of her body. There was no need to rush. He wanted to enjoy every second of having her in his arms.

Reid was slow and gentle as he made love to her, touching and holding her as if unwilling to let it end. He held back, restraining himself so he could fully satisfy her first. Reid closed his eyes, savoring the way her body felt as he pushed her toward that pleased peak, feeling her shudder as she toppled over its edge.

No longer holding back, Reid abandoned himself to Sofie’s touch. He could feel her body tighten around him while her warm hands caressed his skin. His nipple was suddenly in her mouth, her tongue teasing him. He let out a deep-throated groan as he reached the peak and released, the burst of pleasure rocking his body to its core. Pulling away a few moments later, he lay quietly next to her, his head resting on her stomach while his hand roamed across her hip. There was a movement underneath his cheek. Surprised, he stared at her.

“That was your daughter.” She smiled down at him, running her fingers through his hair.

“Seriously?” Reid said in awe as his hand caressed her stomach. “When did it start?”

“A few weeks ago. It felt like a small flutter at first. Now I can feel the baby move.”

“We still need to pick a name. You said a while back there were a few you were favoring. What were they?” Reid said, his finger tracing a circle around Sofie’s belly button.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I want to name her after your grandparents. You said you were close to all four of them. I thought we could use your paternal grandfather’s and maternal grandmother’s names with a few little tweaks. Instead of Alexander, I want to use Alexa. And instead of Yvonne, I want to call her Yvelle. So her name would be Alexa Yvelle Morgan. What do you think?”

“I think her name is beautiful, just like her mother.”

“That was wise of you to agree,” Sofie laughed. “I remember you saying a few times that I like to argue.”

“Oh, you do indeed. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Reid smiled as he bent and kissed her stomach, so thankful to have his family back. He hoped they never suffered through anything like this again.

EPILOGUE

Four Years Later

WITH JASON'S CONTINUED mentoring and Reid's unwavering support, I'd blossomed in my job at Morgan Systems, having been promoted to the company's assistant marketing manager position last week. My new role brought me a multitude of new duties and responsibilities, and today had already been a busy one. By lunchtime, my tasks had included reviewing a marketing presentation, chairing a staff meeting, poring over a stack of reports, and approving several budget items and a significant expenditure for a conference. Ginny and I were to meet later this afternoon to discuss funding for our new project. And I had an interview with *Boston Local* magazine in fifteen minutes. I smiled to myself. These were the days I loved, where I got to dig in and be creative and interact with management and staff.

I looked up from my desk when I heard a noise in the doorway. It was Reid, and he was standing there with a large frame in his hand. He grinned as he held it up for me to view.

"It was just delivered. I had to unwrap it and take a look. Sorry, I should have waited for you, but I was too excited to see it." Reid eyed the document framed behind a sheet of glass.

"Oh my, it looks so professional," I said, getting up and walking over to Reid. I studied the piece of parchment and then read part of it out loud. "Conferred upon Sofie Olivia Morgan the degree of Bachelor of Science in Marketing. Wow, it feels so good to say that."

"And it should. You worked hard for your degree, and I'm proud of you." Reid leaned forward and kissed me. "I imagine you want it hung in your new office upstairs."

"I do. Jason said my office should be ready to move into on Monday, although I'll miss having my office close to

yours.”

“You can take the assistant marketing manager position and officially be Jason’s right-hand person or stay on this floor with me. Which do you prefer?” Reid teased.

“Oh, I’ll take the promotion. I’ve spent over four years as Jason’s apprentice, on top of all the administrative functions I’ve tried to learn. I’m ready to take it on.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

Mavin was suddenly in the doorway behind Reid. “The journalist with *Boston Local* is here. He’s a few minutes early. Do you want him to wait, or should I bring him in here?”

“You can go ahead and show him in.” I looked at Reid. “You can stay if you want.”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll take this frame upstairs and give you some privacy. I’ll be back in a while.” Reid left my office and headed toward the exit.

“I’ll bring Mr. Shaw in,” Mavin said before leaving. She was standing in my doorway again a few minutes later with a tall, somewhat thin, dark-haired man next to her. “Ms. Morgan, this is Howard Shaw with *Boston Local*.”

“Mr. Shaw, please take a seat.” I motioned to the chairs in front of my desk. “Mavin, thank you. I’ll let you know if I need anything.”

Mavin nodded and headed back toward her desk.

Mr. Shaw took a seat in one of the chairs. “Thank you for meeting with me. As you know, our magazine features a Bostonian every month that has been a positive force in our community, particularly those who have helped our underserved population. You are our featured person for our next publication.”

“Thank you. I’m honored your magazine chose me.”

“Thank you for all the work you’ve done. Your story is a unique one. I read the memoir you published recently,

Surviving My Family, which I understand is a *New York Times* bestseller. I have to say, what you went through growing up with such a violent and dysfunctional family is heartbreaking. But your story is also quite inspirational when we see how you've overcome all those obstacles and persevered, coming out on top and creating a better life for yourself. Your story gives hope to those who find themselves in similar circumstances. So I was curious. What prompted you to author your book and tell the world your story?"

"My husband, Reid Morgan, was responsible for that. He thought documenting my story by putting everything I went through down on paper, along with my thoughts and fears, would be therapeutic and help me heal. And he was right. Talking about it and facing it head-on helped me move past the pain and deal with it in a healthy and productive way. Both my husband and his mother, Virginia Morgan, helped me see that I didn't need to be embarrassed by my past. I didn't choose it, and we can't always control the hand dealt us, but we can certainly rise above it with the right resources. In my case, an abundance of love, understanding, and support from my husband and his mother helped make the difference."

"You are such an inspiration to those facing difficult and challenging times. Along that line, I understand Morgan Systems has partnered with a local women's shelter for more than twenty years. Your program trains and mentors women from the shelter in various jobs, hiring them full-time when possible. Your mother-in-law and company owner, Virginia Morgan, created the program. I understand it is now under your stewardship, and you've branched out, encouraging other Boston businesses to do the same. What made you get involved like that?"

"As you're aware, since you read my book, I found myself at a women's shelter due to circumstances beyond my control. It was yet another low point in my life, and I desperately needed help. I received that help when the shelter director sent me here to interview for a job. Morgan Systems, in particular Virginia Morgan, gave me a chance, and that chance turned

my life around. I wanted to do the same thing for others and to encourage other companies to get involved. There truly are not enough resources available, particularly for women needing help. I was also fortunate to have a manager here at Morgan Systems who believed in me. He saw I possessed an array of untapped skills and became my mentor. His kindness and encouragement were instrumental, along with my husband's support, in pushing me to continue my education, which I thought was out of my reach. And I'm happy to say I just received my bachelor's degree in marketing because of it."

"That's quite a feat. I understand you dropped out of high school and pushed yourself to get your GED years later."

"I did, and following it up with a bachelor's degree feels wonderfully satisfying, especially after thinking for so long that it was an unattainable goal."

"What's next on the horizon for you?"

"Well, I'm currently collaborating with Virginia Morgan on finding sponsorships and funding for a day center for troubled teens. I grew up in a toxic and abusive environment, constantly scared and feeling cornered, with no escape hatch. I lived day to day with no hope of a happy or normal future. I was fifteen when I traded my body and self-respect to a man much older than me to protect myself from physical harm and a forced future of prostitution. It was humiliating and degrading, and something I would never have done had I had options and resources at my fingertips. If we can save just one teenager from becoming another negative statistic and put them on a positive path, then we've succeeded in our goal of making a difference."

"What do you envision this project to look like?"

"Our goal is to create a safe place for troubled youth where they can receive counseling, partake in a mentoring program if they so choose, receive referrals for shelters and housing if they need to escape from a toxic environment, take free classes that teach basic life and work skills, and offer employment assistance. It sounds like a lofty goal, but I want to offer

access to resources that I wish I'd had when I faced a future of hopelessness.”

“I commend you for your desire and dedication to take on this project. I understand you and your husband have a daughter and expect another child soon. Did having a child play into your decision to help troubled teens?”

“To a small degree, it did. Our daughter will be four years old in a couple of months, and she is such a treasure. My husband adores her as she does him, and we provide her with a balanced, safe, loving, and protected environment. I want to help youth who have no idea what that is like.”

“Again, I commend you for your contributions to the Boston community and desire to help our youth. I enjoyed meeting you and appreciate your giving me your time for this interview. I wish you the best in all your endeavors.”

“Thank you, Mr. Shaw. Let me walk you out.” I got up from my chair when Mr. Shaw stood and escorted him to the exit by Mavin’s desk.

“Thank you again, Ms. Morgan.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Shaw. If you have any other questions about our programs, please feel free to contact me.”

“I will. Have a good day.”

“You as well.” I watched Mr. Shaw exit through the door to the lobby, and then I turned to Mavin. “I think the interview went well. If we’re lucky, it might open the door to some added funding for the youth day center. Speaking of the day center, is Ginny here? We have our meeting to discuss the sponsorships and funding in a few minutes.”

“I’m here,” Ginny said, walking up behind me.

The door to the lobby opened right then, and we both turned, spotting Reid walking toward us with our daughter by his side, the two of them holding hands.

“Look who I found,” Reid said, grinning at us.

“You mean look who you just pulled from day care,” I laughed.

“Hey, her teacher didn’t mind. Besides, it’s Friday, and I’ve taken care of everything I needed to work on today and have no more meetings or conference calls this afternoon. I figured I could spend some time with Evie and have a warm bubble bath waiting for you when you get home, seeing how you deserve some extra attention after everything you’ve accomplished recently.”

“Oh, I won’t argue with that.”

“Daddy, can we read a story?” Evie looked up at her father and tugged on his hand. “I want the fish story.”

“Yes, sweet pea, of course. We can read some books while we wait for Mommy to get home. She and Grandma still have some work to do.”

Mavin and Ginny looked at each other and smiled.

“He spoils her, doesn’t he?” Mavin said in a teasing tone to Ginny.

“Yes, he does. My granddaughter has her father wrapped around her little pinky.”

“Hey, only a little. I do have my limits,” Reid said, laughing.

I shook my head and grinned, turning to Ginny and Mavin. “No, he doesn’t. He spoils her constantly.”

Reid gave me a mock scowl. “Fine, go ahead and pick on me. We’re going home. Mother, Mavin, I’ll see you later.” He looked down at Evie. “Let’s go home, sweet pea.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Reid turned away, the two of them walking to the door. I loudly cleared my throat, stopping Reid in his tracks.

“Alexa Yvelle Morgan, what do you think you’re doing?” I said in a playful tone.

Evie let go of Reid's hand and turned around to look at me. She put the tip of her finger in her mouth and giggled.

"Where is my hug and kiss before you go?"

She giggled again and ran toward me. "Bye, Mamma." She gave me a little kiss when I bent down, and then she hugged my stomach. She waved at my belly when I pulled away.

"Sweetheart, what are you doing?" I said, trying not to laugh.

"I'm saying goodbye to my brother. Daddy says he's going to play with me."

Ginny smiled and covered her mouth with her palm.

I looked down at Evie and grinned. I was so blessed to have her, and she was an absolute joy in our lives. We'd have our son in three months, and our world would be complete. I was hell-bent on making sure neither of our children ever knew or felt the hardships I'd endured as a child. And Reid was the best father to our daughter that I could have imagined and would protect her for the rest of his life. I ruffled Evie's mop of curly blond hair and kissed the top of her head. "Yes, sweetheart. Your brother will play with you one of these days, but it won't be for a while. Now, go with Daddy. I'll see you when I get home."

"Yes, Mamma." She skipped back to her father and looked up at him adoringly as she reached for his hand.

Reid looked at me and mouthed the words *I love you*, and then he was gone.

I stared at the door for a moment, thinking about how dire my life had been and how Reid had helped me turn it around. Those three little words, *I love you*, combined with his unending encouragement, understanding, and support, had changed my life.

THE END

OTHER TITLES BY LISA CATHERINE PARTEE

The Irish Blessing

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Lisa Catherine Partee

Thank you, dear reader, for allowing me to take you on this journey. I hope you enjoyed *Love From The Ashes* and that it provided an entertaining escape with its mix of characters and Sofie's bumpy and, at times, painful path.

Reviews are important for independent authors and can help readers find books they love. Please consider leaving a review for *Love From The Ashes* by clicking on the link below, which will direct you to my review page on Amazon.

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