



SOPHIE'S SECRET

TARA TAYLOR QUINN



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Tara Quinn
Sophie's Secret

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One secret leads to another Sophie Curtis lives a big secret. She's been having an affair with Duane Koch. Their days and nights together are their own oasis away from the world. It's unconventional but, given the difference in their ages and her troubled past, it works for them. Then Sophie finds out she's pregnant. An instant family could lose Duane his once-in-a-lifetime career opportunity. The right thing would be for her to bow out of his life. But when he surprises her with a proposal, will she have the strength to walk away from the man she loves?

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“Welcome home, babe.”

With knees gone uncharacteristically weak, Sophie managed to take the two steps to reach Duane and leaned forward to kiss him.

Long.

And again.

Her mouth opened, her tongue meeting his, and she didn't want to let go, to break away from this perfect moment.

Time, society, ages, past mistakes and bulimia all faded away, leaving only what mattered most, what would go with her into the next life – her heart. And the heart to which hers was irrevocably attached.

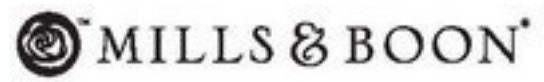
“I missed you,” she said, finally pulling back far enough to reconnect with those deep chocolate eyes that could look at her with such warmth.

“Here.” Duane held out her glass, the smile on his lips completely genuine. “Here's to you coming home to me.”

Sophie's Secret

By

Tara Taylor Quinn



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About the Author

With more than forty-five original novels, published in more than twenty languages, **TARA TAYLOR QUINN** is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author with over six million copies sold. She is known for delivering deeply emotional and psychologically astute novels. Ms Quinn is a three-time finalist for the RWA RITA® Award, a multiple finalist for the National Reader's Choice Award, the Reviewer's Choice Award, the Bookseller's Best Award and the Holt Medallion. Ms Quinn recently married her college sweetheart and the couple currently lives in Ohio with two very demanding and spoiled bosses: four-pound Taylor Marie and fifteen-pound rescue mutt/cockapoo Jerry. When she's not writing or fulfilling speaking engagements, Ms Quinn loves to travel with her husband, stopping wherever the spirit takes them. They've been spotted in casinos and quaint little small-town antiques shops all across the country.

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For the three penguins:

we know who we are and we know what we do.

In this life and beyond.

Chapter One

“GO, 344. GO 345.” Sophie Curtis spoke sotto voce into the microphone protruding from the headpiece she wore. She stood in the pitch-black area left of stage, reading the sheet on the podium by a penlight. Just three more cues and...

“Fade lights. Go curtain.” The heavy, velveteen drape slid quickly down.

Dancers, singers and actors scrambled, bumping into each other, cursing, mumbling, then, three seconds later, fell into place, a perfect shape of bodies and colors, all smiles and glitter and...

“Go lights. Go curtain.”

Applause thundered through the large, Midwestern university theater, the crowd at this January fund-raiser growing louder with each carefully choreographed bow. The sound rumbled inside her. Like bilious waves on a rocky sea.

The applause reached excruciating heights when Damon Adrian, off Broadway’s newest heartthrob—a sure star for the silver screen—stepped forward.

One minute. Two. And then...

“Go curtain. Go house lights.”

Sophie pulled off her headset, dropped it on the podium, then desperately pushed her way through the throng of moving bodies high on adrenaline. Pushed all the way through the dancers’ dressing room, to the restroom then to the farthest stall.

Where she promptly threw up.

FUNNY HOW BATHROOM TILE all looked the same. Did the world have an agreement—everyone use the same tile so people would immediately recognize the place for what it was? Feel at home there? Or was it simply the cheapest flooring material that could withstand public use?

This stuff needed to be re-grouted. But then—

“Soph?”

Recognizing her friend’s voice, Sophie grabbed some toilet paper, wiped her mouth again—then pulled another wad for her eyes—and stood. Prayed she was done.

“Yeah?”

“Hey.” There was a tap on the stall door. Annie’s bluetipped tennis shoes, her strong dancer’s ankles, were planted on the other side. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Sophie swallowed. “I’m fine.”

But she wasn’t. She was scared to death. And as soon as Annie saw her face, she’d know it.

“Soph? Open the door.”

Déjà vu. Like old times. Sophie had thought she was done with all that. Had confidently told Annie so just the night before.

“Sophie...”

How concern and authority could blend so painfully in one word, Sophie didn’t know. Had never known.

But she recognized the tone as though she was still that twenty-year-old undergrad at Montford University in Shelter Valley, Arizona, rather than the twenty-eight-year-old successful theatrical producer she’d become.

Like that twenty-year-old she’d once been, she opened the door. And couldn’t meet her friend’s eyes.

How many times, during those years of doing shows together—Annie as a dance major and Sophie majoring in theater production—had she had to face her friend on the other side of a stall door?

“Oh, Soph. You said you were done with all that. That it had been years—”

She glanced up. “It has been.”

“Show me your finger.”

Sophie's long nails were legendary, though they were shorter now than they had been in college, and the bold colors they used to be adorned with had toned down to pale pinks. She held out her right palm—middle finger extended straight up.

"It's not broken off." For years the nail of that finger had been a short stub necessitated by Sophie's addiction to sticking it down her throat. Tonight, it was even with the rest—an eighth of an inch beyond her fingertip.

"I know."

"So..."

"I didn't consciously do it," Sophie said, fighting panic—and myriad other emotions that were what got her into trouble in the first place. And every place after that, as well.

If she could keep the different parts of herself neatly packed away in their respective compartments, she'd be fine. It was only when the emotions took over, spilled over, that she had problems.

They hadn't spilled over in years.

"I...really...I didn't know what was happening." At least not that she'd been able to acknowledge to herself.

She wanted to go home.

To lock herself inside her two-bedroom stucco abode on her acre of desert and sleep until she was better.

Frowning, Annie grabbed Sophie's still-extended finger, holding on. "So you didn't do it to yourself? You have the flu?"

One shouldn't sound quite so happy at the possibility that one's friend was sick.

Sophie couldn't answer.

"Soph?"

"It didn't feel like the flu," she finally admitted.

"You were able to control it," Annie said, knowing the signs, having gone through all the symptoms with Sophie the first time. "Your thoughts made it happen."

When she'd been distracted with the show, the nausea had gone away. Did that count?

Sophie could have said the words aloud, but she knew the answer. Yes, it counted.

"I brought it on myself."

Which was ridiculous. Most particularly here—at a show. Here she was a successful, confident woman. Period.

With Phyllis, her Shelter Valley friend and onetime counselor, Sophie could let the little girl inside come to the surface. Maybe. If she had to.

"Ah, Soph, I thought things were great. These past two weeks, working on the show, you've seemed so happy. Why didn't you say something? We could have taken time away, really talked."

Why hadn't she said something? Why hadn't she told her friend the whole truth? Why hadn't she told Annie—someone who'd known her before, who would understand—that she was struggling? Why hadn't she admitted, even silently, that she'd allowed herself to return to a place she'd vowed never to revisit?

Bulimia-ville.

"I didn't know." Sophie answered her own last question first. "I swear, Annie, this is the first time. And it really wasn't a conscious choice. I just...I guess old habits really do die hard. Or don't ever die. They just lie there, waiting to attack you when you're at a weak point."

"You know the signs, Soph. The symptoms."

Nodding, Sophie thought over the past few months. The past two years. When her sexual being had come back to life.

She thought of Duane. And quickly shut that mental door.

“I didn’t see it coming,” she said. “I’m older. Successful. I have many reasons to feel good about myself. I really thought I wasn’t susceptible anymore.”

Another dancer, a guest performer in the evening’s closing performance, pushed through the door from the dressing room, said, “Sorry, I gotta pee,” then, with a smile in their direction, dashed into a stall.

“Let’s go find a place to get something to eat,” Annie said, pulling Sophie in the direction of the door.

“You’ve got a cast party to get to.” She’d been here two weeks and had managed to avoid any one-on-one personal conversation with the woman who’d once been such a close confidant. “And I really should hang around while they tear things down.”

“The local techies are going to get all of that.” Annie pointed out what they both knew. “And you’ve got time to finish up paperwork in the morning before your flight back to Phoenix.”

Sophie allowed herself to be pulled into the bustle of a quickly emptying dressing room. “But your party—”

“Is nothing compared to you,” Annie said softly. She approached her seat at the long, lighted dressing table, throwing things in her bag with an unusual disregard to orderliness. “It’s not like I haven’t performed with these people before, or like I won’t again.”

Sophie went to collect her things.

LIFTING HIS GLASS, Duane peered at the small, select group of men and women gathered in the living room of his Phoenix high-rise condo. The party was unofficial. A Saturday-night get-together of friends.

The friends just happened to be the most powerful political movers and shakers in the state of Arizona.

“You’re the one, buddy,” Robert Anvil said, touching his glass to Duane’s as the rest of the small group nodded.

Looking to Will Parsons, the one man in the room he truly trusted, one of the few people in the world he considered a friend, Duane waited. And only drank when he received Will’s quiet nod.

Any other evening he and Will got together it was at Will’s home in Shelter Valley, a small town an hour’s drive from Phoenix. Shelter Valley had been home to Will Parsons all his life, and a regular stopping place for Duane the past two years.

The two men had met in college—at Montford University, the Harvard of the West. Will was now president of the renowned educational institution. His wife, Becca, standing next to him tonight, was mayor of Shelter Valley.

Neither of those facts was the reason Duane considered them friends.

Toast completed, talk broke out among the twenty people who’d come together to informally offer Duane their party’s nomination for the senate seat in Arizona’s state election the following fall.

Relief seemed to suffuse the room, as though blown from the heating duct. Relief and anticipation, judging by the buzz of conversations Duane was catching. They’d made a good choice. Or seemed to think they had.

Duane wasn’t so sure.

“You don’t look like a man who’s in the process of realizing his greatest lifetime goal.”

Turning, Duane grimaced at Will, who’d maneuvered them into a corner of the room where they could speak without being overheard.

“I can do this job.” Hands in his pockets, Duane looked his friend straight in the eye. “After twenty years of applying the laws in this state, I know where we need changes, and how to go about getting them. I know our weak points and our strengths—”

“Yeah.” Will might be a fifty-something university president, but he was also a very involved father—one child five and another one eight—and more and more his vocabulary was relaxing.

“I just...”

“You’re worried about Sophie.”

Duane’s eighteen-years-younger-than-him girlfriend was no secret between the two men. She was the reason for his frequent visits to Shelter Valley.

She’d been a student at Will’s school not all that many years ago.

“You know as well as I do that half the people in this room would change their minds about backing me if they knew about her,” Duane said.

His relationship with Sophie didn’t come to Phoenix.

“When’s the last time you asked her to marry you?”

“Before she left for Chicago.” Two weeks ago.

“And she turned you down?”

“Of course.”

Will, the only man in the room wearing a suit jacket, sipped from his glass of soda water. He rarely drank these days—one of the many changes that had accompanied Bethany’s advent into his and Becca’s lives when, after twenty-plus years of trying, they found out Becca was finally going to have a baby.

“Better be careful, man,” Will said. “She might surprise you one of these times and accept.”

Now there was a thought. One that brought more reservations than the party decision to back him.

Will’s eyes narrowed. “What would you do if she did?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Maybe you’d better figure that out before you pose the question again.”

It sounded so easy.

With a quick glance over his shoulder at the men and women milling behind them, Will asked, “Do you love her?”

“You know I do.”

“I know you’re attracted to her. That’s a far cry from loving her.”

“Give me a break, man. I’m forty-six, not fourteen. And it’s been two years. It’s more than just lust.”

“So could you picture yourself spending the rest of your life with her?”

Who knew answers to such questions?

“I can picture myself at sixty, when she’s forty-two. In my mind, Sophie is full of energy and beauty and bored with me.”

“You don’t trust her.”

“It’s more than that, Will. I love my time with her, crave more time with her. But when we’re together we’re alone. The rest of the world, and things like generations, don’t matter. Can you honestly picture her here tonight? Hell, these guys would think she’s my daughter. Or they’d look at her like she’s on the hunt for a sugar daddy.”

Will seemed to commiserate with his chuckle.

“You don’t hold too high an opinion of the moral composition of our peers.”

Duane took in the room, the casually dressed men and women, and saw them for what they were. Intelligent, confident, successful. Many of them would do whatever it took to get where they were going. Use who they could. Stab who they had to. Some were quick to judge each other, while justifying, at least to themselves, their own sometimes questionable actions—and would blame others if someone got hurt.

He didn’t want to join the crowd. He simply wanted to change the world.

“I don’t want to make Sophie look like a whore.” He and Will talked straight. Which was one of the reasons Duane valued the friendship so much.

“Marrying her won’t do that.”

Whereas visiting her warm and vibrant home, leaving his car parked outside all night, did.

“And that’s not really the problem, is it?” Will asked softly, moving them a little farther away from the others.

“You of all people know her past, Will.” In his official capacity, Will had been apprised of the troubles of one of Montford’s most promising scholarship students. The invitations she’d offered to too many guys—including one of her instructors. The eating disorder that had almost killed her.

“It bothers you.”

“How could it not?”

“So you don’t trust her.”

“I don’t know.” Downing his Scotch, Duane turned away from a love life he couldn’t control, and stepped back into the persona he’d grown comfortable with over the years. The intelligent, confident, successful attorney who’d worked his entire life for this chance to make a difference. And who really believed he could.

Make a difference, that was.

Chapter Two

“OKAY, SPILL IT.” The Chicago pub’s late-Saturday-night crowd was the perfect size to allow Annie and Sophie to have a real conversation in privacy. Unfortunately.

Sophie wasn’t into comfy and cozy conversation. She wasn’t a kid anymore.

They had just shared a juicy hamburger, three quarters of which Annie made Sophie eat. She’d refused to do anything but encourage and watch until she’d witnessed Sophie chew and swallow every bite.

“I haven’t had a hamburger in ages.”

“And it was good, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.” But the weight she instantly felt on her hips wasn’t. Duane might not be so attracted to a hippopotamus.

“So if it’s been ages since you’ve had a burger, does that mean there’s been no bingeing?”

Scared at the recurrence of an illness she’d struggled so hard to beat, yet still falling prey to its symptoms, to feeling guilty for having consumed so much fat, Sophie shook her head. “None. I told you, I didn’t see any obvious signs.”

“So you haven’t been restricting your diet?”

Translation: not eating.

“I’ve been busy.”

“So you *have* been missing meals.”

“Some.” Theater work, making everything perfect in the two-day or two-week span allotted to them per show, wrought more tasks than hours in a day. And she could get twice as much accomplished during meal breaks, when the stage was empty.

Annie’s disappointed look didn’t weigh as heavily as the beef Sophie had consumed, confirming her fears that she’d fallen back to a day she’d promised herself she’d never see again.

She was feeling bad about herself for eating. And eating was necessary to sustain life.

“How many?” Annie’s question wasn’t a surprise.

Sophie glanced up, once again facing the truth of her weakness. “Too many,” she admitted as she thought back over the past weeks. She’d been careful not to eat. Hadn’t had a real meal since she’d arrived in Chicago. “I feel good, emotionally, when I don’t eat. Like I’m doing myself a great favor, you know? I’m strong enough to beat base appetites. I’m in control—”

She sounded like the pamphlets and books she’d read.

But she wasn’t speaking from them. Not eating truly gave her a sense of strength. Of control. Of power.

“There’s been no weight fluctuation outside of a fivepound range,” she offered softly. She’d been watching—weighing herself in the hotel workout facility. She cared.

And was determined to remain in control.

Of course, weighing yourself all the time was a symptom, too.

“What’s got you so down this time, Soph? You have a home you love, in a town you love and are incredibly successful in a career you love—” Annie broke off, eyeing her steadily. “It’s a man, isn’t it?”

Duane’s face came clearly into view, transposed upon Annie’s sweet, concerned features. “Maybe.”

“So is there someone serious? You haven’t mentioned anyone in years, other than that Duane guy who helped you with your LLC articles of incorporation. You said you two were just friends.”

Sophie had forgotten she’d told Annie anything about Duane.

And Annie had it right. She and Duane were just friends. All they ever could be. Friends who happened to sleep together. Several nights a week. But that was their business.

“No, there’s no one serious.” Serious meant a future. It meant a life together. And that definitely was not what she had with Duane.

Annie’s face, naked as it always was when not caked with stage makeup, struck a familiar chord—reminding Sophie of a day when she’d poured out her heart.

She’d been such a pathetically weak little thing back then. It hurt to even think of that girl. Hurt more to think of the things she’d done.

“What’s wrong then?” Annie asked. “Surely you aren’t feeling bad about yourself for being unattached. My gosh, you’re only twenty-eight, Soph. You have your whole life ahead of you. And you and I both know you could have had any number of guys if you wanted to settle down to a family right away.”

Sophie shook her head. She’d changed a lot since Annie had known her. Gained confidence over the years, making choices she could be proud of.

So why did she feel like that lost twenty-year-old kid again?

“I’m in love with Duane.” She couldn’t believe she’d said that. Her feelings for him were her business. And his.

“Oh!” If Annie was hurt by the fact that Sophie hadn’t confessed about her love life, she didn’t let it show. “And he just wants to be friends? Did you tell him how you feel? I’d find it hard to believe that he doesn’t love you back.” As though everyone would have to love Sophie.

“He says he loves me.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Problems,” Sophie said. “Plural.” She hesitated. Speaking about Duane felt wrong. Maybe even disloyal. Duane and Annie occupied two completely separate parts of her life.

“Soph?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You’re in danger of falling back into a huge psychological health risk.” Annie’s voice was brisk. Firm. “Talk or you could die.”

Sophie couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face. And grew larger as Annie grinned, as well.

“I never claimed to be undramatic,” she said.

“And exaggerative.”

“That, too. But the point is—”

“I got the point. I already had it. And you’re right. I’m apparently not handling things as successfully as I thought I was.”

Or maybe they’d escalated to the stage that something had to be done. Which might be what was scaring her. If she and Duane couldn’t continue as they had, where did that leave them?

Annie’s smile faded and she leaned across the cleared table. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Taking a deep breath, Sophie glanced up. “Duane’s forty-six.”

“Oh,” Annie said again. A little less enthusiastically this time.

“That’s almost twenty years older than us.”

“I might have a degree in dance, but I do know how to add.”

“He’s old enough to be my father.”

“I get that. How’s that working out for you?”

Sophie hadn’t given a hoot about his age, hadn’t ever felt the difference in their ages. Until recently. “It hasn’t been a problem.”

“I’m not surprised about that,” Annie said. “You aren’t one to get caught up in the status quo. You’ve lived your whole life outside the stereotypical box. So, do you two ever struggle to find things to talk about? Or to find common ground in how you feel about issues?”

“Never.” If anything, the opposite was true. They seemed to view the world as one. They often talked long into the night, leaving them both struggling to get through work the next day. They talked

about life and the world. About society and family. And faith. About anything except their other relationships.

Duane had never even heard of Annie.

“How do you feel when you’re with him?”

Sophie pictured Duane sitting on the edge of her bed, putting on his shoes. “Comfortable,” she said. Then, seeing him at her front door, smiling as he said hello, she added, “And energized at the same time. It’s weird, really. It’s like excited peace. If that makes any sense.”

“It sounds like love to me.” Annie pushed her glass aside. “Sophie, you know more than most that sometimes life creates its own definitions,” she said, her voice intense. “Not too many girls celebrate each birthday with a different father.”

Stepfather, Sophie clarified silently. And it hadn’t been every year—sometimes the divorces took longer than expected. Still, it had been often enough.

Duane didn’t know about that, either.

“Nor do they have to be savvy enough to ward off advances from the father in residence by the time they’re thirteen.”

Though she shuddered, Sophie couldn’t let herself dwell on the past. She’d forgiven her mother for her weaknesses a long time ago. And moved on.

Now her father—the real one, the man who’d left before she’d even been old enough to remember him—was another story. Forgiving him was harder. Only a jerk would abandon an innocent child to a whore.

Or maybe it was easier for her to blame a nameless, faceless entity.

“In some ways, you were raising a child—yourself—when *you* were a child,” Annie continued more softly. “Which puts your maturity on more of an equal level with Duane than your ages would imply.”

She was right. In some ways.

“But you knew all this, didn’t you? Or you wouldn’t have gotten involved with him to begin with.”

Sophie nodded. “Our age difference is only one of many things that are wrong.”

Eyes narrowed, Annie sat back. “He’s not married, is he?”

“No.” Though Sophie couldn’t blame Annie for asking. “He was divorced years ago. Long before I met him.”

“Any kids who hate you because you’re closer to their age than his?”

“Nope. No kids.”

“He’s not an alcoholic, is he? Or abusive?”

“Of course not. Duane’s the most upstanding citizen I’ve ever met. And that’s a big part of the problem.”

“Because he’s a great guy?”

“He’s too good for me.”

“Bullsh—crap.” Red blotches stood out on Annie’s scrubbed cheeks.

“Or, rather, I’m not good enough for him.”

“Stop it. Right now. What’s gotten into you, girl? This isn’t the Sophie I know. The one who had the courage to look life straight in the eye, take it on and win. There isn’t a man alive who’s too good for you.”

Two years ago, while she’d still been celibate, Sophie would have agreed. Eight years ago, she’d have known the words for the lie they’d have been.

“Maybe not, if he were just a man. Trouble is, Duane’s so much more than that.” And before Annie could interject with another diatribe assuring Sophie that no man was more than any other—a reassurance she would love to hear, but that would net nothing—she continued, “He’s running for public office, Annie. For the state senate. He’s got so much energy. So many ideas. He’s smart and

savvy, openminded without being easily led. And most important, he's honest. Arizona—this country—needs him. And he's a shoo-in to win.”

She'd never met any of his friends. Didn't know many of their names. She'd never been to the condominium he owned. Or to his law office.

But she knew about his politics.

“And you think you're somehow going to hurt his chances?”

“I know I would.”

“How so? Because of the age difference?”

“That's part of it. How responsible is he going to look, at forty-six, squiring around a twentysomething blonde? One who's involved in the theater, no less? It's the typical midlife crisis. If nothing else, he'd lose the votes of all the middleaged women who've lost their husbands to younger wives.”

“But then, if you're going on that theory, he might gain votes from all of the men who understand, right?”

“Only those whose vote he'd have had anyway,” Sophie said, having stayed up far too many nights in the past weeks researching twenty years of Arizona voting demographics in an attempt to calm fears she'd only exacerbated. “Men aren't as likely to cast their vote based on emotions, or personal circumstances.”

“There are plenty of older politicians whose younger wives haven't kept them from office. There have even been some from Arizona.”

“My age isn't everything,” Sophie said, sinking into the helplessness that had been sapping so much of her mental energy these days. “My reputation leaves a lot to be desired, as well.” There were other things, but this one Annie knew about. She'd been there.

“You were a college kid, Soph. Lots of coeds get a little wild for a year or two.”

“Not as wild as I did. And most of them stick to guys their own age. Who aren't married.”

“You were looking for security. To be cared for. Protected.”

“I was acting like my mother's child.”

“But at the same time, you won a scholarship to one of the nation's most prestigious universities, from which you graduated with honors. And in a few short years, you've made a name for yourself in an industry that is almost predominantly male. Your net worth has got to be more than most middle-class couples when they retire.”

Sophie didn't discuss her income with anyone—including Duane. But Annie was in the business. She knew what kind of money was involved in production. And she knew how many shows Sophie did.

What she didn't know was that a good portion of Sophie's income went to organizations that provided older, sibling-type companions to troubled or lonely kids. And provided after-school facilities to them, as well.

“Have you and Duane talked about any of this?” Annie asked, after too long a silence.

“Some.” The age difference. Her past reputation, which he'd have learned from his friend Will Parsons. And the politics.

“And?”

“He asked me to marry him.”

Chapter Three

“HE ASKED YOU TO MARRY HIM?” Annie squealed, but not so loudly that other patrons looked over at them, thank goodness. “See, he’s not worried at all.”

Sophie didn’t share her friend’s excitement. “He’s asked before.”

“How many times?”

“I don’t know. Maybe six. Or seven. He knows I’m going to say no.”

But he didn’t know her middle name. And she hadn’t asked his.

She hadn’t asked to see his condo, either.

Duane had his place in her life. Nice. Neat. Clean. Controlled.

“And?” Annie asked again, as their waitress refilled their glasses of tea.

“He’s always relieved when I do.”

“He is? You sure about that?”

“Of course. I’m not alone in my fears, Annie. Duane feels them, too. Why do you think we’ve been seeing each other for two years and you’re only now hearing about him? Other than Will Parsons, he hasn’t told any of his friends, either. And he wouldn’t have told Will except that we see each other in Shelter Valley, which meant Will was going to hear about it anyway.”

“He’s been keeping you a secret?” Annie’s words held accusation.

“We decided together to keep quiet about our friendship.” No one would understand. But their choices suited them. Until they didn’t.

“Do Matt and Phyllis know?”

Like Sophie, Annie had taken several classes with Matt Sheffield—the Montford Performing Arts Center director and instructor who Sophie had once tried to sleep with. Annie knew his wife, Phyllis, too.

“Of course.”

Phyllis, a psychology professor at Montford, had been largely responsible for Sophie’s chance at a healthy life. While Sophie had been busy convincing herself that Matt was in love with her, Phyllis had been diagnosing Sophie’s bulimia.

“So you’re still seeing them as much?”

“Mmm-hmm. We go back and forth with each other almost every day when I’m home. I can’t seem to go much longer than that without seeing the twins.”

“You’ve been here two weeks and haven’t even mentioned Calvin and Clarissa. How are they?”

“Good,” she said, wondering how soon she could excuse herself and go back to her hotel room. She had some serious business to attend to. A head to get under control. Immediately.

And maybe a decision to make? Was her relationship with Duane coming to an end? They’d both known it would have to happen eventually.

Hadn’t they?

“They’re six and a half now, can you believe that?” Sophie said, to continue the innocuous conversation.

“No way!” Annie’s surprise mirrored Sophie’s own. Even seeing the kids so often, it was hard to believe how quickly they were growing up. How quickly life passed. Phyllis had just found out she was pregnant when Sophie had first met her.

Sophie grabbed her digital camera from her purse, clicked in view mode and scrolled through the photos. “Here,” she said, handing the camera to her friend. “That was taken Christmas afternoon.” Only a few weeks ago. The kids, with Sophie in between them, were standing in front of their Christmas tree.

“Clarissa’s a looker already, with those big brown eyes and that long hair.”

“Yeah, she turns heads everywhere she goes. A real princess, but you wouldn’t know it by talking to her,” Sophie said, not that she was proud of the kids or anything. “Phyllis has them both in karate.”

“I’m not surprised after everything Calvin went through.” The boy had been abducted when he was two—by another ex-student of Matt’s. “What happened to that girl? Shelly was her name, right?”

“Yeah, Shelly Monroe.” Sophie had never met the girl, but had a love-hate relationship with her. In some ways, she’d been a clone of the girl—clinging to Matt for security in the aftermath of an abusive childhood. But thankfully, that was where their resemblance ended. “She’s in prison, doing twenty years for an assortment of charges. I missed the day of sentencing so I’m not sure what she was convicted of.”

“Her twelve-year-old son had been killed in a gang shooting, right?”

“Apparently, she was living in a pretty rough area and somehow blamed Matt for all of her unhappiness because he hadn’t saved her from herself. She figured he owed her, and took Matt’s son to replace the one she lost.”

There’d been a car wreck as she’d fled. But other than bruises and a broken arm, Calvin had been okay.

“What about Phyllis’s newfound twin sister—Caroline, wasn’t it? Is she still around?”

“Oh yeah, she and John were over for Christmas dinner along with their three-year-old daughter, Sara, and Caroline’s son, Jesse. He’s twenty and just graduated from Harvard.” When Sophie had told Duane about him later that evening, during their own private holiday celebration at her house, he’d asked too many questions, stopped just short of making an accusation that would have changed the tenor of their relationship. Hard to imagine he’d been jealous of a twenty-year-old kid.

Sophie didn’t want to think about that right now. “Caroline’s this really shy woman from Kentucky, and I thought she was going to melt to the floor when she heard her three-year-old ask for more presents.”

“Kind of like the girl I knew who wanted to sink beneath a front porch one Christmas day after the older man she’d just publicly confessed her love to confessed his love to their pregnant hostess?”

Annie was referring to Sophie and Matt and Phyllis Sheffield before they’d been married. Almost eight years ago. The worst—and best—day of Sophie’s life.

They caught her throwing up the Christmas dinner Phyllis had prepared and Sophie had consumed in humongous quantities.

“Until tonight I hadn’t thrown up once since then,” she said now, softly.

“And you’ve been friends with Duane for two years,” Annie said. “So why now?”

Sophie wasn’t sure. Or didn’t want to be. But she had learned a lot of painful lessons on her road to recovery. The first and foremost being you didn’t hide from anything. Didn’t push anything away. Because issues, problems, really didn’t go. They stayed buried inside you where they could attack from the inside out.

“Duane’s said a few things... I don’t know. I just get the idea he’s worried that if there are hard times, I’ll revert to the... woman I was.”

“What? A bulimic? He might get bronchitis someday, too. So you treat the illness and move on. I don’t—”

“It’s not about the bulimia,” Sophie interrupted. “Or, at least, not really. I think he’s afraid that I’m emotionally weak, and sees the bulimia as evidence of that. But that’s not the part that bothers him. He knows that I’m responsible and would get help if it ever arose again.”

But would he really stand by her? What would Duane say if she called him right now? Told him what had happened tonight? Would he still be at her house tomorrow? As he’d promised during their last intimate call?

“Then what—”

“I think he’s afraid that deep down I get my confidence and self-worth from men. That he can’t trust me to be faithful to him.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He gets really quiet sometimes. Usually when I’ve mentioned talking to some other man. Then I don’t hear from him for a day or two.”

“Do you ask him about it?”

“Of course. He always says nothing was wrong, and he’s got an excuse as to why he didn’t call. They’re usually good excuses.”

“You were never once unfaithful in a relationship.”

“I was never in any real relationships.” Duane was the first. Hard to believe from a woman with her experience. “And, considering how many lovers I’ve had, how can I expect him to see me as anything but a woman who needs multiple men?”

“You haven’t had a lover, other than Duane, since Matt and Phyllis helped you acknowledge the bulimia, have you?” Annie asked.

“No.”

“Does Duane know that?”

“I told him.”

“And?”

“He says he believes me. He says my past is past.”

“But you don’t believe he means it.”

Sophie shrugged. “I wouldn’t blame him if he doubted me.”

Annie watched her. “Is that because you doubt yourself?”

“I know I can be faithful to him.”

“Of course you can. You know your worth now, Soph. You know that it’s not found in some man’s arms. Or in any man’s opinion of you.”

She’d thought so—until the fear of losing Duane had started to take hold of her. She’d seen the writing on the wall—several times—over the past months as Duane’s political backers became more obvious in their intentions to name him as their candidate in the upcoming election.

People would want to know about the man who sought the power to pass laws in their state. The press would start to dig.

Her and Duane’s safe little world would be exposed. Her past would be exposed.

And she’d lose him. Would be completely alone again.

And she’d started to be more concerned about how she looked. Needing to be certain, if she was going to be single again, that she was still attractive.

She didn’t feel attractive.

“So why do I suddenly feel so unworthy? So...ugly?” she asked, a question reminiscent of the olden days. Certainly the Sophie she’d become would never have allowed herself to be so vulnerable.

Another sign of the depths to which she’d sunk?

Annie’s gaze grew shadowed and she leaned forward. “It has nothing to do with the way you look. You couldn’t be ugly if you tried, Soph. You’re one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever known. You always have been. Those long legs and flat stomach are the envy of every dancer on your stages. And your features are classically perfect.”

She liked her nose. The rest was too...this. Too that.

“You have all those things going for you, but it’s never enough,” Annie continued. “You seem to think you have to be physically perfect to be good enough, and that’s a lost cause. No one is perfect. We’re all flawed. And we’re all beautiful, too.”

“What matters is what’s inside the package,” Annie said, her eyes softening. “You know that. And you’re beautiful there, Soph. Even more than on the outside. You keep to yourself too much these days, but the you that’s in there still comes out through your work. You know precisely what lights to use, precisely what shadowing or backdrop, what depth, what timing, what colors to make everything onstage look like more than it is. You take the art we work so hard to perform and make it magic.”

“I went to school to learn how to do that.”

“So did a million other people and no one does a show like you do. Even you can’t argue with the amazing success of Sophie Productions. Your shows have heart, depth. They speak to every single sense every single minute, engaging the audience’s full attention. Performers, directors want you for a reason, Soph, and it’s not your great bod.”

“What about Sam Wynn?” Sophie interjected, needing to distance herself a little bit from Annie’s intensity. An intensity that matched the emotions churning inside her.

“He’s a jerk and should be arrested for the way he came on to you.”

Sam wasn’t the only one. He’d happened to be working on a show Annie was in, so her friend knew about that one.

Mostly the advances, the come-ons, didn’t matter to Sophie. She’d learned to take them in stride, to blow them off, years ago. Mostly.

A guy she’d once slept with told her she “exuded.” She couldn’t remember the guy’s name. Couldn’t really even remember what he looked like. But she remembered those words.

“Exuded what?” she’d asked.

He hadn’t been able to tell her.

She’d watched herself over the years, pulled inside herself more and more in an attempt to make sure she didn’t keep doing whatever it was she did. But it seemed to happen anyway.

And so she’d made certain that no one got too close. No one saw all of her.

Duane came closest. Sort of.

And he knew she exuded. He saw whatever it was she missed. He reacted to it.

Not that he’d said so.

But Sophie knew.

Was it also what drew him to her?

Was he, in his own sweet way, just like all the rest?

Sophie didn’t know, but she had a feeling that whatever it was she did around men was something she’d been doing since birth. Inadvertently inviting them, tempting them, to hurt her.

Chapter Four

DUANE GLANCED AT HIS ROLEX, a gift from the other partners in his firm a couple of Christmases ago. Six-fifteen.

The table was set. With her regular dishes and silver, the ones he'd used with her many times in the past. She had china and table linens—he'd been treated to a couple of anniversary celebrations on them—but Duane felt uncomfortable enough about being in Sophie's place without her. He couldn't bring himself to look through drawers and cupboards that she hadn't specifically invited him into.

He'd had the key to her place for over a year—to let himself out those days he had to leave before dawn to get to court in Phoenix, and hadn't wanted her to have to drag herself out of bed to lock the dead bolt after him. But he'd never been in her small home without her before.

She'd invited him to use the place like his own. To stay there, if he wanted to get out of the city, when she was out of town.

He hadn't.

After another peek at his watch, he checked the foilwrapped potatoes he'd put in the oven almost an hour before. They were softening nicely.

A glance in the refrigerator assured him that the steaks had stayed right where he'd left them, soaking in his own special marinade recipe in the Ziploc bag on the second shelf. And the salad still looked crisp.

Six-twenty. The table might not look like much—certainly nothing resembling the lavish, something-from-a-magazine settings Sophie had made for them over the past couple of years—but the flowers were noticeable. He'd personally chosen every single bloom—going heavy on the red roses. Chosen the delicately colored, handwoven basket they were in, as well.

And waited at a specialty importer in Phoenix, one of few florists open on Sunday, while they were arranged.

He might be a man—a lawyer and not talented in the ways of his artistically creative lover—but he could still manage to pull together something special.

For Sophie.

Something in the woman made him capable of moving mountains.

For her.

Six-thirty.

Her flight had been scheduled to land in Phoenix at five. If luggage had arrived in a timely fashion, she could be driving up any minute.

And somehow he had to pull this off. This dinner. This life. He wasn't ready. It didn't take a genius to figure that out. But time wasn't waiting for him. He might not have what it took to be there for Sophie in the long run, might not have the confidence to squire a young beauty around town and not get jealous when other men paid attention to her. He might not be man enough to keep her interest, her faithfulness, in the years to come, but if he didn't try, he wasn't going to have Sophie.

Patting his jacket, feeling for the thickness of the card he'd slipped into the inside pocket, Duane paced for the umpteenth time from the dining area into the living room and back. Straightened the knot in his tie. Now wasn't the time to ponder things that were out of his control. Things that were probably not worth pondering.

Now was not the time to get himself worked up over what could go wrong.

Now was the time to think about what was.

Sophie Curtis was a nationally acclaimed theatrical producer who'd put herself through college, owned her home and had true friends who stood by her.

She was also the only woman who'd ever been able, or cared enough, to scale his walls and find his heart.

Six-forty. One more glance out the window on his way through the living room.

“This is ridiculous.” His voice, sounding so loud in the silence, startled him.

And reminded him that he needed some tunes. Mood music. Turning on the stereo occupied about ten seconds. He went for the light-rock station that he and Sophie preferred.

Though he'd tried a time or two, he'd not been able to entice her over to his jazz station. She and Jean Luc Ponty had yet to bond.

And if they never did, that was fine. Lots of couples—longtime married, happy couples—had different tastes in music.

Duane slid a hand into his pants pocket, seeking and finding its sole occupant—the ring he'd purchased a week ago, and picked up that afternoon. Turned out jewelers in Phoenix were open even on Sundays. The velvet-lined case, a dead giveaway, was out in his car.

He wanted to surprise her.

Life presented a lot of unanswered questions, but, finding himself at a crossroads that was going to make decisions for him if he waited too long, Duane had done some heavy thinking.

And come up with one sure thing.

He wasn't ready to tell Sophie Curtis goodbye.

Six forty-five. Noticing the path he was wearing in her freshly vacuumed cream-colored carpet, he sank into the leather chair in front of the fireplace. When she was home, they sat on the love seat.

Unless they were lying in front of the television. Then they used the sofa.

Raising his ankle to his knee, Duane studied the shine on his wingtip shoe. As far as he could tell the day had produced only one smudge.

He tried to care, but couldn't work up the focus. Where was Sophie?

Would she be as glad to see him as he would be to see her?

Had she missed him as much?

Would she accept the ring?

And was that someone at the front door? Was she looking for her key? Had she lost it in the bottom of her bag? Why hadn't he heard her car? And why hadn't she pulled into the garage and come in through the kitchen like she usually did?

Like he'd planned?

He'd wanted her to see the flowers first.

With nerves tensing his stomach, Duane strode to the front door, a smile of welcome on his lips—in his heart—and a full-carat solitaire diamond burning against his leg.

“Welcome ho—” His voice broke off as he saw the inexpensively dressed, fiftysomething man standing there with a warm smile spread across his face.

“Oh, sorry.” The man straightened, and Duane noticed the brown paper bag he'd just left next to the decorative stone beside Sophie's front door. The stranger seemed surprised to see Duane there.

The feeling was mutual.

“I, um, left some welcome-home cookies. Chocolate chip.”

Sophie's favorite. And how did this man know that?

For that matter, how did he know Sophie at all?

Intending to grill the stranger as though he were on trial, Duane affected the proper, intimidating pose, and intended to deliver his first put-the-witness-firmly-in-his-place question.

“You from around here?” he asked when his brain let him down.

“For now.”

What in the hell did that mean? He waited for the older man to expound. And wasn't sure what to do when, instead, the man turned and walked to an older blue pickup parked opposite the house, climbed in, gunned the engine and drove off.

Without another glance at Duane.

As though Duane didn't matter at all.

SHE'D MEANT TO DRIVE slowly, to use the hour between Phoenix and Shelter Valley as a calming time, a reconnection with personal peace and the self she'd come to know and love over the past eight years.

Instead of keeping her mind on the things she'd intended, all she could think about was getting home by seven. To be there when Duane arrived.

To feel his arms around her.

It had been a long two weeks.

Too long.

She'd missed him horribly.

And knew their days were numbered.

They couldn't keep pretending that what they had was working.

Dressed in one of her nicer pairs of jeans, black suede boots and a black sweater that was a favorite of Duane's, Sophie pushed her Ford Explorer Sport Trac as much past the speed limit as she dared without risking a ticket. She thought about stopping for Chinese takeout rather than going to a restaurant near Tucson as they'd planned. She didn't want to share him with waitresses and other patrons tonight.

In isolation they were perfect together.

And reality was intruding. Making her ill.

Because reality was not a part of life she could avoid, because she knew her fantasy life with Duane had come to an end, Sophie drove straight home, watching for his car as she pulled off the highway, through town and toward the secluded street of custom homes not far from Matt and Phyllis's place. Hers was the smallest house on the block, but it was all hers. She'd contracted it, chosen the floor plan and every single color and fixture inside. She'd spent evenings and weekends on-site, checking the progress, and even some days, watching the men work.

And right now, with Duane's silver Mercedes parked out front, the small, stuccoed structure with its vibrantly colored landscaping had never looked better.

Even with things falling apart around them, she was glad he was here.

It was better to see him than to not see him. For the moment.

Sophie waited while the garage door rose, then pulled in. She'd never had anyone to come home to before. Never had anyone waiting.

"And don't make too much of it, girl," she mumbled aloud as she grabbed her purse and climbed out. Her luggage could wait.

Duane's presence was a one-time thing—an occasional thing at most. She lived alone.

And when one lived alone, one came home to an empty house.

That's just the way it was.

The way she wanted it to be. Most of the time. The way she needed it to be. Anything else made life messy.

And messy made her sick.

But that didn't mean she had to ruin this moment, she reminded herself as she opened the door into the house.

Something smelled wonderful.

And not at all like the Chinese dinner she'd envisioned picking up on the way home.

The door hadn't fully closed behind her before Duane appeared at the end of the hall, holding two glasses of champagne.

"Welcome home, babe."

With knees gone uncharacteristically weak, Sophie managed the two steps to reach him, steadying herself, and him, with her hands atop his on the glasses, and leaned forward to kiss him.

Long.

And again.

Her mouth opened, her tongue met his, and she didn't want to let go, to break away and face reality.

Time, society, ages, past mistakes and bulimia all faded away when Duane's tongue was in her mouth.

"I missed you," she said, finally pulling back far enough to reconnect with those deep chocolate eyes that could look at her with such warmth.

They weren't letting her in. Not completely.

But then, it had been two weeks. And times were hard. Their struggles were not a secret.

"Here." Duane held out her glass, the smile on his lips completely genuine. "Here's to you coming home to me." The softness in his voice made up for the slight distance in his gaze.

Their glasses clinked. Looking at each other, they sipped.

"Mmm, this is the good stuff."

"Only the best for this...for you."

Duane turned away, saying something about steaks as he set his glass on the counter and rummaged in the refrigerator. Chattering about marinade, he made his way out to the grill on the back patio.

Something was underfoot. The champagne. An apparently very nice dinner prepared. The beautiful rose-filled centerpiece on the table. And...her companion. The completely self-assured, argue-with-God-in-court-and-win Duane Koch was nervous.

And that made her nervous.

Sophie's stomach clenched and there was no time for happy thoughts. For prevention. She barely made it to the bathroom before the champagne came back up on her.

LUCKILY, IT DIDN'T TAKE Sophie as long to tend to her illness as it did Duane to cook steaks. With too many years of practice she'd largely learned to hide her little forays into the darkness. Only Phyllis, Matt and Annie had ever caught her in the act.

And, on the side of preserving a moment, once she'd regurgitated, she always had an appetite.

Sitting with Duane at her kitchen table, her senses consumed with him, Sophie ate, took a few more sips of champagne. Laughed in the right places. Shared the highlights of this latest performance with him. Told him about meeting up with an old college friend—taking great care to stress that the friend was female.

And she caught up on the past two weeks of Duane's life.

He'd won his party's nomination for the senate seat.

Now she understood the celebration. And, most likely, the distance in his eyes, as well.

Her place in his life and his bid for office did not coincide. And the dichotomy was a symbol of all the other struggles their differences created. The ticking of their clock was growing louder.

So, tonight, this celebration was for Duane.

Tomorrow she was going straight to Phyllis.

The counselor, not the friend.

Chapter Five

THERE WERE SO MANY THINGS Duane had to say. And none of them were getting out beyond the inane, superficial conversation he and Sophie had fallen into—largely, he suspected, caused by him.

He reached for his napkin, and his knuckles scraped against that thin piece of metal resting against his thigh, and he took another sip of champagne.

The box was in the car because he'd wanted to surprise her, wasn't it?

And not so that he could change his mind without her being any the wiser?

"My friend, the one I saw in Chicago, has a show in Phoenix later this spring at the Orpheum. I want you to meet her."

Sophie's sweet green eyes met his, an unusual pleading in their depths that had absolutely nothing to do with her friend, and Duane's appetite receded.

"I'd like that," he said. "Very much." Sophie was an incredible woman. He wanted to know everything about her. Wanted to know everyone she knew, to have a chance to care about everyone she cared about. Yet his life had nothing in common with hers.

Her hand, so slim and delicate considering the ropes she wielded, the heavy travelers she pulled open and closed, the scrims and cycs she lowered, rested on the table next to her plate. Duane laid his palm over it.

"I... We need to talk," he started, then issued a silent curse when he heard the ominous way that had come out—as though he had bad news. "I mean—"

"It's okay." Her smile was more sad than anything. She shifted her hand and reversed their positions. "I'll make this easy for you."

She knew? How could she have guessed? He hadn't known himself, for sure, until today, when he'd actually picked up the ring. And he still wasn't sure. How could she possibly make this easy?

"No." He shook his head. "I'm going to get this right," he said, focusing on what he knew. On the man he knew himself to be. Once he committed to doing something, he was in one hundred percent. *Get down, man. On your knee. You know the drill.*

"I love you." That seemed to say everything he was trying to get out.

Which didn't explain the moisture in Sophie's eyes. She wasn't a crier.

"And I love you," she said. "But that's not going to be enough, is it?" Her whispered words were lost on him at first, caught up as he was in the haze of panic the moment wrought.

He wasn't ready to lose her. But as much as he loved being here with her, he wasn't sure he wanted her in Phoenix, too. Wasn't sure he could trust himself to risk the life he'd built there.

He was forty-six years old. Reaching goals he'd spent his entire life seeking. Forty-six, not twenty-six. He didn't have a lifetime stretching ahead to make something of himself.

Those years were streaming behind him. A path to where he was now. To what he might have to give up.

But that's not going to be enough, is it? Her words finally reached him.

"What does that mean? It's not enough?"

"We can be in love all we want, but love can't change the facts. When we're here, alone, you don't have to worry about other men looking at me. About me talking with other men. And I don't have to worry about how I appear to the people who matter in your life. Love isn't going to make you look any less like those fifty-year-old guys who drive convertibles with the tops down in forty-degree weather when you're with me. You'd lose credibility."

Duane didn't want to hear her.

"No one said it's going to be easy," he told her, "or that there wouldn't be problems."

He waited for her to help him out—mostly because he had no idea what to do here. She sat watching him, apparently waiting for more.

He wanted—needed—to give her more. But his mind seemed to be frozen. He'd come to propose. He had unresolved issues with proposing.

He cared about her a great deal.

"I know us being together won't be easy." He had to say something. They were both waiting on him. "But I can't walk away from you, Soph. That's it for me. My bottom line. I can't walk away."

Seconds passed. And then some more. God, he wished she'd say something. Anything. Give him some clue to what she was thinking behind that half frown and those tear-glazed eyes. But he made himself wait.

Made himself give her time.

Maybe the struggle wasn't worth it to her. She was young. Had her whole life ahead of her. Didn't need to settle for all the problems being with him brought her. Didn't—

"I..guess I'm not ready to walk away, either," she said.

Duane tried to tamp down the relief flooding through him. She was letting him off the hook. Again. But he had to be smart here. Responsible. Make sound decisions. "You don't seem too happy about that."

Sophie's shrug said so much. He only wished he could decipher what.

They were at a standstill. Staring at each other. Waiting for something to happen.

Duane dropped to one knee.

"Sophie Curtis, will you marry me?" The words came out exactly as he'd said them every other time he'd asked.

But he'd never had a ring in his pocket.

"Duane, get up." Sophie tugged on his hand. "You don't have to do this."

But their world was quickly crumbling. He had to do something.

"You're twenty-eight, Soph. You're going to be wanting kids. And if I don't start having them soon, I'm going to be too old to play with them. Or even make it to their graduation."

"You're forty-six," she said. "You've got a good forty years left in you. At least. I hardly think we have to worry about wheeling your chair to any graduation."

She was splitting hairs. And so was he.

But he couldn't stop the wheels from turning.

"Besides," she continued, while he tried to catch up with the situation, "I'm not ready to have kids yet. Not until I'm at the point where I can consult on shows, but not have to be on-site and produce them. For now, I travel way too much."

"So stop. Matt's the production manager at Montford, but there are other universities in the state. Or what about the Orpheum? Or Symphony Hall? Or Gammage? What about Herberger or the Celebrity Theater? Or even Cricket Pavilion? Instead of working for everyone, you could work full-time for one theater. Run your own show at home."

"It sounds as though you've considered my possibilities." The little smile tilting her lips snagged his heart.

"Of course I have." Duane leaned forward, grabbing both of her hands, that smile driving him in spite of his need to put on the brake. "I mean this, Sophie. I think we should get married." He paused. "If you want your future to be with me."

She was young and beautiful. What in the hell was he doing, thinking she'd want to tie herself to him permanently?

He'd lost his mind.

"Of course I want my future with you," she said, though she didn't sound any more sure than he felt. "You wouldn't have a key to my home, or have ever been invited back after that night we met, if I didn't want you in my life. Before you, I hadn't dated in almost five years, Duane. That was my

choice. Not because I didn't want to marry and have a family, but because I wasn't going to screw up again. I knew that when I met the man I wanted for keeps, I'd know it."

His heart pounding, Duane still felt something settle within him. Something good.

Until he started thinking again. "And did you know it? When we first met?"

"No."

He tried not to let the disappointment crush him.

"I knew it the morning after, when I woke up with you and didn't hate myself for being in bed with you. Being with you felt so right."

No wonder he hadn't wanted to get out of bed that morning. And why something about her had been calling him back ever since.

"Then it's time to get married."

"If it were time to get married, you wouldn't be having such a hard time getting through this."

Oh, he loved this woman. Loved how well she knew him.

And was scared as hell by it, too.

"I'm having a hard time because I know how important it is that we do this. I know how much is resting on it."

"What's that mean?"

"I've agreed to run for state office. You're right. People are going to be watching me. Judging me. Looking for smut. I don't care so much for myself, but I care for you. If we don't get married, we'd have to quit seeing each other, because it's unlikely we'd be blessed with a miracle and be able to keep our liaison secret. You'd be found out and called my whore."

"Your midlife crisis."

"Right."

"Which would hurt your chances of getting elected."

"Yes." And that bothered him.

"But maybe we aren't ready for scrutiny yet." Sophie paused, frowning. "Or maybe there's more that needs to happen in our individual lives before we can settle into being a generational couple."

Could she mean she had more seeds to sow?

A vision he'd been blocking for the past couple of hours haunted Duane, sending shards of dread through him all over again.

A simple brown bag on her front porch.

"If I promise to understand that this time you mean your proposal, and that you're serious about us getting married soon, can we postpone this conversation for a day or two? Let me have some time to settle in and think?"

Relief had been understandable half an hour ago, when he'd found out she still cared. It wasn't so forgivable now—not when she was postponing something he should want more than anything else on earth.

"Of course." He relented before she could change her mind. "I've been thinking about this since you left," he told her. "I'm a bit ahead of you."

"You're always ahead of me," she said with a chuckle. "I've never met anyone as clear thinking as you are. That's one of the things I love so much about you—your ability to see through the muck to what's really there."

"To cut to the chase," he murmured, recognizing what she was telling him about himself. He'd been praised for the talent many times in his legal profession.

So why, when it came to Sophie, were his thoughts anything but clear?

Sophie slid to her knees, the heels of her boots visible behind her. "Counselor, could you please give me a recess, just until tomorrow morning so that we can go into the bedroom and have recess for real?"

He recognized what she was doing. Diverting them, returning them to the world where they were perfect—alone, just the two of them.

Their fantasy.

It was what they always did when reality intervened. Retreated.

But the fantasy wasn't working anymore.

Sophie's hand on his thigh was. He was already hard. Anticipating. When it came to sex, she never failed to arouse him. Not ever.

"Please take me to bed, babe." Sophie's voice took on a note of quiet desperation. "Hold me and make the world's craziness go away. Long enough for me to get some rest?"

"You haven't been sleeping well?" She hadn't said anything. And he'd called her every single night she'd been gone.

"Honestly?"

"Of course."

"I never sleep well when you aren't with me."

She did have a way with words. Or, more precisely, her words had a way with him.

"Another reason why we should get married," he said, even when he knew he didn't want to push the point.

"I know."

But she still didn't say yes. And he wasn't any more sure he was ready for her to do so.

For tonight he needed to feel her skin against his, to lose himself in her scent, in her arms, in her center, and visit once again the heaven that had been created for the two of them.

Fifteen minutes later, after cleaning up, retrieving her luggage and turning off the lights, Duane walked hand in hand with Sophie down the hall to the master suite, thinking only of getting her warm body as close to his as he could.

Chapter Six

WIDE-AWAKE, Sophie stared at the ceiling—or what she could see of it in the moonlight. Her body was completely sated, satisfied, loved. She'd been consumed by Duane's lovemaking like never before. In tune with his every touch, she'd felt precious, powerful, the most beautiful woman in the world.

Then, with their hips pressed up against each other, they'd drifted off to sleep.

Problem was, she'd woken up. And with Duane's head resting on her shoulder, his hand still covering her breast, she didn't want to move and disturb him. She wanted him right where he was—needed him there. Where no one could see them. Disturb them.

Challenge them.

In bed with Duane, alone with him, she knew she'd never have to sabotage herself again. Never have to subconsciously prove her inner strength through carefully mastering of base appetites. She'd never have to fight feelings of emotional scarcity.

But she couldn't live her life in bed with Duane.

Tomorrow would come—as it always did. To shine light on things that went unnoticed in the darkness.

And while Duane was always an incredible lover, part of him had been more distant tonight. He was pulling away from her.

She knew that. Understood it.

And maybe he was withholding from himself, as well. Pushing himself into something he wasn't sure was right.

If he'd really wanted to marry her, they'd be married by now.

Wouldn't they?

She listened to Duane's even breathing. Counted the beats of his heart against her side.

Every instinct she had told her that for them to marry under pressure—because, with his nomination, they either had to marry or split—would be a recipe for disaster.

She couldn't afford another personal disaster. You could only bankrupt your heart so many times before it gave out on you. Or gave up on you.

“What are you thinking about?” His voice was strong, steady. Not sleepy at all.

He hadn't moved. And neither did she.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Most of the night.”

The fact that he wasn't resting any easier than she was scared her. Duane was usually out as soon as he lay down. And slept all night. He kept a schedule that would challenge a man half his age. He needed his rest.

He'd asked what she was thinking about. If she brought up the problems between them, would she lose him?

Was she ready to do that?

No. She wanted to bury her head in the sand. Be on vacation. Pretend. Live for the moment.

She couldn't run from her doubts. They'd only catch up with her. They always did. At far too high a price.

Running her fingers through his hair, she said, “I've been lying here trying to figure out what's different about you tonight.”

“Different how?”

“I'm not sure. It feels like you're holding back. And yet I can't give you any evidence to support the feeling.”

The hand on her breast slid away. “Feelings are the one fallacy of the factual system,” he said, rolling over until his head rested on the pillow right beside hers, touching hers. “So much of the time, they don’t make sense.”

“So I’m right. You’re holding back.”

“No. I don’t think so. At all.” The protest, though a little too forced, was at least something to clutch on to.

Her stomach, which had been working its way into a small frenzy, relaxed a bit.

“But I’m sensing something?”

“Nothing more than the confusion of having what I want be at odds with what I need.”

She didn’t ask which she was—the want or the need. Or if she was even what he was talking about.

A year ago, she would have been positive she knew both—his wants and needs. A year ago, when there’d been no visible cracks in their idyllic hideaway life, his wants and needs hadn’t been a threat.

“We shouldn’t have to work so hard to make this work.”

“Relationships, even the best of them, are hard work. Always.”

“You sound awfully certain about that for a man who’s lived alone most of his life.”

“I had the very best teacher.”

“Who?” She had no idea because, outside of her home, she knew very little about him.

“Will Parsons.”

“What does Will have to do with us?”

“You weren’t in Shelter Valley yet when Becca got pregnant, were you?”

“No.” But she’d come to know the couple well enough through Matt and Phyllis, and had been accepted into their peripheral family circle, in spite of her past.

“Anybody ever tell you their story?”

“I know the basics—high school sweethearts who married and weren’t blessed with children until Becca was in her forties.”

“That’s the public version.”

“It’s not true?”

“Of course it is. Every bit of it. But there’s more.”

There always was, wasn’t there? But what could there possibly be in that story that would emulate her with Duane? Becca and Will were obviously meant for each other. And everyone, including them, had known that from the time they were still practically kids.

“Becca was less than six months pregnant when Will came to me, discreetly, asking about divorce. Specifically, he’d wanted to know how he could end his marriage with Becca but still provide for her as though they were married—insurance, security, beneficiary of his will, that sort of thing.”

Sophie sat up. Cold to the bone. “Will wanted to divorce Becca?”

Was nothing sacred?

“Under the circumstances, I don’t think Will would mind my telling you. When Becca first found out she was pregnant, the prognosis was pretty scary to her. An overforty pregnancy brought more risk of birth defects, and she’d already had several miscarriages. She had high blood pressure, plus she and Will had their careers, their busy schedules. The first doctor she went to recommended that she terminate the pregnancy.”

“I can see why.”

“So could Becca. She considered having it done.”

“And?”

“Will couldn’t understand. They’d waited their whole lives for this chance. He’d spent years comforting her, pulling her through depression when she’d lose another baby, spending huge amounts

of money on tests and fertilization efforts and now, when they were given a miracle, Becca wanted to throw it away.”

“Hardly that.”

“I know.” Duane turned his head on the pillow. Looked at her. “And eventually Will got it, too. But for a while there, he really struggled. He felt like he didn’t know Becca at all. This woman whom he’d always considered the other half of his mind and soul suddenly took on characteristics he didn’t understand. Then he started to question himself for questioning her. Did he love her, or was it only the image they’d built of the high school sweethearts meant for each other—an image that Shelter Valley had helped them build? That he clung to?”

“Wow.” Picturing Will, Sophie could hardly believe what she was hearing. He was Godlike to his students. Always in control. Always had all the answers. Always made the right choices.

“They actually separated for a while.”

She felt like a kid discovering that her parents had sex. Or at least, what she imagined that would feel like for most kids.

“Things were rough for a while, but, in the end, their relationship is far stronger than it ever was. I’ve never seen two people more devoted and dedicated to each other.”

Now that sounded like the Parsonses she knew.

“And the point is that relationships are hard work,” Duane said, pushing himself up to lean against the headboard. “Even the ones that have everything going for them and should be easy.”

Sophie sat up next to him, crossing her arms over her naked breasts.

“I’m not afraid of the work,” she said. “Nothing in my life’s been easy—except maybe knowing what lighting works onstage. But the kind of things we’re facing aren’t things we can change with effort. They’re feelings and instincts and facts.”

“Such as?”

“You’re nervous about tying your life to me.” He hadn’t said so. But he hadn’t had to. “And not in the way that guys get nervous when they’re contemplating marriage. Or, if you are, then that’s in addition to what I’m talking about. You’re nervous about me. Specifically. In ways you wouldn’t be if you were in love with a woman of your social class and age bracket.”

Duane was still, his gaze seemingly focused straight ahead.

After an excruciating minute she asked, “Aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

Sophie tried not to be crushed. Tried not to cry—all the while fighting the familiar feeling of not being good enough. Not being worthy. “What we’re contemplating here is going to change our lives irrevocably, one way or the other, Duane,” she said. “Whether we end up together or not. Let’s at least be completely honest. We’ve got no hope at all if we can’t be straight with each other.”

She *was* good enough. She *was* worthy. She didn’t used to believe that, but she did now.

Didn’t she?

The insecurities were old habits.

Nothing more.

Several years ago when Phyllis had still been her counselor, she’d warned Sophie that old habits often resurfaced.

Sophie’s thoughts chased themselves, her stomach rumbled and she waited for Duane to respond.

Waited to take whatever painful thing he had to say, to weather it and move on.

“Okay.” He finally broke the silence and turned toward her. “I do worry.”

Feeling like a masochist, she asked, “About what, specifically?”

“Aside from the fact that when I’m fifty-seven and you’re thirty-nine, you’re going to get turned off by my old man’s body and start yearning for someone younger?”

Had she been of a different nature, Sophie might have slapped his face for that one.

Instead she jutted her chin to stop it from trembling, and tried to accept the facts. Whether she liked them or not.

“So, you’re saying that I’m interested in you, attracted to you, because of your physical attributes.”

“Of course. It’s natural. Physical attraction is as old as the world.”

“And you think your forty-six-year-old body is as sexy as, say, the thirty-year-old dancer I watched onstage for the past two weeks?”

Maybe she was being cruel. Maybe even deliberately, a little bit. He’d hurt her.

She wasn’t a whore who jumped from bed to bed. Who jumped for the male body, period.

Maybe she had been. Once. But Duane hadn’t known that woman. He’d only known this one.

“Is this your way of telling me you’ve spent the past two weeks lusting over some other guy’s body? That when you had sex with me tonight you were thinking about him?”

He thought that poorly of her? That she’d do that? Pain seared through her, taking her to the darkness that had consumed her in her youth.

He’s showing you his insecurities, her rational mind asserted.

She wanted Duane to accept her with all of her issues. Didn’t that gift come with the obligation to do the same for him? To accept all of him, if she was going to commit to any of him?

Sophie took a deep breath. “No, Duane, I’m not telling you that at all. I didn’t feel the slightest twinge for the guy. Couldn’t even, after two weeks of setting lights on him, tell you his name. What I’m telling you is that it isn’t your body that attracts me to you. The fact that it’s gorgeous is a benefit, but I don’t get turned on because you have a nice ass.”

His eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

“I get turned on by you. By the way your hands hold the wrench when you tighten the connection under the kitchen sink. By the way you respond with a sigh and collective commiseration for everyone involved when you’re stuck in traffic. Or when someone knocks into you in the grocery store and you tell them they’re all right. I get turned on by your laugh, how it bursts out when something really amuses you. And I like that what makes you laugh most is tongue-in-cheek humor. I get turned on by your thoughts and theories, and not only by how quickly you think, but also by how your mind wanders off on its own tracks. You don’t automatically buy into what the world is saying, or accept the answers the world accepts. I get turned on by how you look at me...”

Sophie’s words drifted off. She was making it harder for him to walk away. And if he couldn’t stay without convincing, she didn’t want him here.

But then, in spite of admonitions to herself, she added, “All of those things will still be there when you’re eighty.”

“You’re telling me you’re in love with me.”

Was she? She loved him. But was she in love with him? Was she ready for something so consuming? “I’m telling you that I’m not going to turn to some other man when you’re fifty-seven and I’m thirty-nine.”

Still studying her, he nodded. “Okay.”

Okay.

She’d parried. Offered a way out of a conversation that had gotten more personal than either one of them could handle.

And he’d accepted.

Then she remembered the bulimia. She couldn’t keep doing this. Couldn’t keep running. If she didn’t face whatever was scaring her back into a physical disease she’d thought gone forever, she could end up dead.

But she wanted to lie back down. To pull Duane down with her. To cuddle up to his chest and know that she’d be safe there forever. Or at least until daylight took the sting of darkness away.

She sucked in as deep a breath as she could manage. “Now, let’s hear worry number two.”

Chapter Seven

WORRY NUMBER TWO. Duane didn't have them numbered. Or in any kind of order. They simply just popped up at will.

Like that damn brown bag still out on the porch. The one he hadn't touched. Or told her about.

"Kids is another one," he said, settling back against the bed, wishing he was dressed.

He'd be better at this with his pants on.

"Do you want to have kids?"

Feeling exposed wasn't something Duane did often. If at all.

"I'm assuming you want them, judging by how much time you spend with Phyllis's twins. How much you talk about them." Having kids was another subject they'd mostly avoided. It hadn't pertained to them in their safe little universe.

"I'm not ready to have children," she said slowly. "But you aren't, either. The next year's going to be crazy for you, with campaigning and your career. Then, assuming you win, which we both know you will, you'll have the added senate duties to consider. Certainly not a good time to think about doctor visits and building a nursery and birthing classes and midnight feedings."

He actually hadn't considered any of those things. Which probably proved her point.

"I'm not disagreeing with you," he said slowly. "But neither am I sure I'm going to want to become a father at fifty. Aside from all his friends thinking I'm his grandfather, I'm not sure it would be fair to the kid. I've already got bursitis in my elbow. Can you see me throwing a baseball ten years from now? Or running bases?"

"Who says he'll be a boy?"

"Softballs weigh more."

"So you're telling me you don't want kids?"

He wasn't telling her anything. She'd asked for worries. "I don't know," he finally said. "I've always wanted to be a dad, always thought I would be one. But the years have passed. I'm kind of like Becca. My goals are different. I don't want to be at risk for Alzheimer's when my child is a teenager and thinks he knows everything. Nor do I think it's fair to leave him hanging out there in his thirties when he needs business advice and I'm long gone."

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