The Letter

by Boatise

Summary

Sophie tries to find a way to let Paula know how she feels.
Chapter 1

Sophie writhed with pleasure as Paula’s mouth and lips traversed her body, taking her time to bring the younger woman higher and closer to sweet surrender. Those beautiful, strong hands were caressing her body so gently Sophie thought it felt like feathers holding her. She had never felt happier than in this moment, fully in love and fully content and getting closer to ecstasy with every movement of Paula’s tongue. Sophie pulled her lover up to kiss her sensual mouth and Paula looked Sophie in the eyes and said “Why did you betray me, Sophie? I loved you so much but that just wasn’t enough for you. If only you had trusted in me, in us …” Then she vanished from Sophie’s arms. “Paula! Paula, please! Come back, Paula. I love you. I’m sorry … I’m so sorry, Paula, please …”

Sophie sat upright in bed, sweat pouring from her brow, the heavy feeling of dread saturating her every pore. The nightmare. Again. This was the third night in a row that Sophie had the same dreadful dream of losing Paula, the feeling of complete fulfillment disappearing from her arms and the ensuing sorrow that inevitably consumed her. When Paula had walked out of Speed Daal, angry that Sophie had called her round only to rehash the appeal, Sophie felt she had finally lost the older woman. She had finally pushed too hard.

The young woman tried her best to steady her breathing, trying to tamp down the panic sitting squarely in her chest at the fact that Paula was indeed gone. Gone from her bed, gone from her life, but still dreadfully clinging to, and pulling at her heart. How was she going to survive this? Her life was in ruins and she knew she need only look in the mirror to find the culprit and the place to lay the blame for the tatters.

Sophie swung her legs around and perched on the edge of her bed, taking in the time from the clock across the room – 2:13am. Sigh. She could try to go back to sleep, but she knew it would be futile. She would only toss and turn as she mulled over, again and again, where all the decisions she had made had taken her further and further away from Paula.

She went downstairs for a drink of water, opting instead for the bottle of whiskey her dad kept under the sink in the back with the cleaning supplies. Sitting on the couch, grasping the glass in her hand, her thoughts traveled back to the day everything began to unravel. She had beckoned her new lover to come around to continue what they had started only a few hours before in Paula’s bed, knowing it was dangerous, but not at all able to control her want. She was completely consumed with the lawyer. Everything about Paula Martin pulled Sophie in, like heroin to an addict. They had only just discovered each other physically, and frankly, Sophie could just could not satiate her need for this woman. She felt so happy that their feelings were mutual. And it didn’t take long for Paula to arrive on her doorstep, despite Sally’s impending hearing. Neither of them knew what was about to happen or the carnage that would result from their decision to pursue their attraction to one another.

Sophie swallowed at the bitter liquid that was finally beginning to dull her senses. She sat back in the dark, trying to get her head around it all. Where was the sense in any of this? Why did people fall in love at all? All it brought was doom and heartache. All Sophie had ever experienced was pain from being in love. It just wasn’t worth it.

Or was it?

Paula’s face flashed in her mind and her body had a physical reaction. She loved her. Her smile was heart stopping. Her body made Sophie melt. Her beautiful dark brown eyes captured the young brunette heart and soul. Shit!
She had to do something. She couldn’t just walk away from this amazing woman, even if Paula had done just that. Sophie couldn’t really blame her though, considering all the stupid things she had done. She had been so desperate to get Sally out of prison, she hadn’t stopped to think about her actions when it came to her partner. She had let her down, put her last … betrayed her love. And every time she had seen her since Paula split up with her, there had been nothing but talk of Sally and how to get her out.

_God, Sophie, you’re an idiot. What have you done? And what can you do to get her back?_

She could go see her, again, and ask for forgiveness, try to explain, again, her motivations for her decisions.

Sophie knew it wouldn’t work. She would only screw it all up like had already done so many times, the words never coming out right.

She sat her glass down on the table, head in hands at the hopelessness she felt. She had to do something, or lose Paula forever. She had loved Sophie once, maybe she could love her again, if Sophie could make her understand how much she wanted her, needed her back. If only. But how?

It would take some time and thought to let her know exactly how she felt about her, to make some sense to Paula. How could she convince her ex that she loved her more than anything?

Sophie sat back in the chair and eyeballed a notepad on the table. That’s it! A letter! Sophie would write it all down in a heartfelt letter, pour her heart out and let the chips fall where they may. If Paula walked away, at least Sophie will have tried to win her love back. And that she could live with.

Sophie grabbed a pad of paper and a pen and began to write.

_Dear Paula,

I’ve never written a letter in my life, if you don’t count Santa, so bear with me as I attempt something new. I thought this would be the best way to try to tell you how I feel, because every other time I have tried to explain things to you, I have done nothing but stick my foot in it and mess everything up.

The most important thing I need to say is that I am sorry. I am sorry for so much. I know I have made one bad decision after another, and I let you down. I didn’t support you or our relationship because I was too wrapped up in my own stuff, trying anything to get my mum out of prison, not listening to the one person I should have done. I was not a loving, considerate partner, as I should have been. I didn’t take your feelings into account and I know I put you in an impossible position with my actions. Then I got angry with you when you didn’t understand why I did what I did. You were right to walk away from me. You were right to put an end to your own suffering, suffering that I was causing. But in the end, it was me who lost out on the best thing that has ever come my way – you.

Paula, you changed my life in so many ways, ways you will never understand because you are so wise and confident and secure – all the things that I am not. I didn’t understand (still don’t) why someone like you would ever be interested in being in a relationship with me. But, for your own reasons, you did want me, and you showed me nothing but kindness and loyalty and love. And I threw it back in your face not really meaning to or understanding what I was doing. I never meant to hurt you. It makes me hate myself to think about the look in your eyes when you walked away from me. I guess I thought it wasn’t possible to hurt you really because I didn’t believe you could truly be
in love with me. I know now that I was wrong to think that. You showed me in so many ways that you loved me … I just didn’t see it. I wasn’t brave enough to see it.

I am brave enough now, even though it might be too late. But for my own sake, I need to tell you that I love you. I know it must seem like empty words, too little, too late, because of how I have behaved, the things that I have done that must have said otherwise to you, but the truth is that I am completely in love with you. And I have been for a long time. I knew I was in love with you when my mum was attacking you after she found out about us the day of the hearing, the day after we made love for the first time. When she tried to make our relationship dirty and wrong, I wanted to protect you, lash out at her and her judgement, fly away with you somewhere to hold you and tell you I love you. And then everything went pear-shaped and my focus shifted away from the love I felt for you, to the guilt I felt for loving you. I didn’t feel like I deserved to be loved. I tried to walk away from you then, but you wouldn’t let me. You had faith enough for us both. And I thank you for that. For not giving up on us, though it would probably have saved you heartache in the long run if you’d have let me run away.

I didn’t want this letter to be some kind of excuse for my actions. I am not asking for forgiveness. I wanted to make sure that you know that, though I didn’t show it, you were always important to me, always a priority in my heart, always loved. You are the most amazing, beautiful, sexy creature I have ever known, and I have loved every moment we spent together whether I was holding your hand, or sitting across the table from you admiring your smile, or making love to you – our time together has been the single most important thing I have done so far in my life. And though we are no longer together, I want you to know that I will always love you.

Now, before I go, I want to be clear about something. (Here is my chance to be brave.) I want you, Paula. I want us. I always have, and I just can’t walk away without telling you that I love you and I want to be with you. I realize there is a big chance that you may not ever want to speak to me again, but I have to take the chance that there might be a small part of you that still loves me. And if you are willing to try again, I will do everything I can to show you every day how much your love means to me. I will put you first, I will hold your hand, I will admire your smile from across the table, and I will make love to you the way you deserve. I will be your lover, your friend, your companion – your true and loving partner.

XXX

Your Sophie

Sophie quickly read over the letter, making sure she had said what she needed, folded it and placed it in an envelope. She knew the address by heart. Before she lost her nerve, she put a stamp on it and walked out to the corner and posted it.

Now it was up to Paula.
Chapter 2

Three days had gone by and Sophie had heard nothing from Paula. Was it just too early? Had the letter not reached her ex yet? Had Paula gotten the letter, read it and tossed it right in the bin? The silence was driving Sophie mad. Truth was she was terrified Paula was just over it all and done with her. She was just going to have to be patient and stop fretting. She had picked up her phone so many times in the last couple of days, wanting to send a text, reach out, grab her woman and ride off into the sunset, but this wasn’t a Disney movie, it was life. And unfortunately, Sophie’s experiences had taught her to look at the glass as mostly empty. But she clung relentlessly to hope.

Just then her phone chimed, and Sophie nearly jumped out of her skin. Please be Paula! It was only Alya seeing if Sophie could make it in to work a few hours early as they were rushed off their feet.

Disappointment filled her. Every text she got now took her to this place, hope – terror – disappointment. Just get on with your life, Sophie, or you’re going to go mad.

The young brunette trudged up the stairs to get herself ready for her shift at Speed Daal. She loved her work and it was a good way to take her mind off her love life and off her mum’s ordeal a few hours at a time.

Across town, Paula entered her house after a particularly grueling day, hands full of work she would tackle after a long hot soak and a glass of wine. Work had taken her life back over and she was grateful for the distraction. It kept her mind off the disaster her life had turned into over the past few months.

She dropped her brief case and her files onto her home office desk and threw the post into the inbox on its corner. She had let the post build up and there was a substantial stack staring at her. Dread filled her at the thought of going through it all. She knew there were bills to pay, holiday cards and other things that needed her attention. Right now, though, she needed to try to relax and wash off the stress of the day. She would get to it all later. She poured herself a substantial glass of her favorite white and headed up to her much-needed bathtub.

Shall I do bubbles? Yes, I think bubbles are called for tonight. Her thoughts drifted for a moment to Sophie and a bubble fight they once had, and it made the solicitor smile. Then it made her heart ache a bit. Oh, Paula. Let it go. She ran a nice hot bath and sunk her weary body down into the warmth of the liquid and let it envelop her. Relaxing back against the support, she took another large gulp of wine and closed her eyes. She mulled over some of the details of the cases she was working on, trying to figure out the best paths forward, creating arguments in her head for or against what she knew the prosecution would surely devise. As she relaxed more she let her mind wander away from work and to other things. Isla would be coming home in a little over a week and she had debated whether to even tell her about her relationship with Sophie. Would it even serve a purpose? It was over, and Sophie wouldn’t even come into conversation. On the other hand, Isla would surely question her mum about what she had been up to whilst she was away, and the solicitor didn’t know if she could hide the hurt that would surely surface on her features.

Thoughts of the young beautiful brunette entered her mind again and Paula felt arousal flood her body. Sophie had always had this affect on her, making her want her, need her physically. She ran her hand over her breast and her nipple hardened at the slight touch, thoughts of a naked Sophie swirling around in her head. What Sophie could do with her mouth still astounded the older woman. Her had slid lower down her body, a need building in her, wanting release …
Paula’s phone shrilled loudly, startling her out of her sexual haze. She glanced at the phone sitting next to her to see if the interruption was important or not. There was a number on the display she didn’t recognize so she decided to ignore it. *Damn it! I needed that release … but probably for the best that I not take care of that issue whilst thinking about Sophie. Not productive at all, Paula.*

She finished her wine as she dried off and put on her favorite pair of pjs. Now for a bit of dinner, then more work!

Sophie could not keep her mind off the letter and her desperate hope that Paula would at least maybe want to talk. She had been all thumbs that evening - spilling drinks, dropping dishes, forgetting orders – and Alya couldn’t help but feel for her. She tried to send Sophie home, but the young Webster would have none of it. She had to carry on with her life no matter the obstacles. Nothing seemed worse to Sophie than sitting at home, alone, pining for the gorgeous woman she wanted more than anything. She had not checked her phone all night, dreadfully afraid to find nothing from Paula. *Do NOT check that phone, Sophie!* She did her best to focus on her work and not let her thoughts settle on Paula Martin.

Tim came into Speed Daal and waved Sophie over frantically. “Soph, Soph, come ‘ere!”

“Tim, I am working! What do you want?” Sophie asked with contempt. She wasn’t really mad at Tim anymore, he was just a reminder of the mess she had made of her life and that her mum was still locked up.

“Listen, Gina and I have been talking and we think she might be able to go see Duncan and record him telling her details about how he conned Sally. We just need to know how to make it all legal-like if he does confess, so we thought you could call Paula and …“

Sophie stopped him dead in his tracks. “TIM! I am NOT calling Paula with this rubbish. She already hates me because every time I get her to come round all I do is go on about this stupid stuff. She is not going to listen to anything you or I or Gina have to say. I have used her enough and I am done! We are just going to have to figure out how to get this confession on our own. Leave Paula out of it, do you hear me?”

“Jeesh, Soph, keep your hair on!”

Sophie wanted to slap him. This must be how Paula felt with her. It smacked of craziness and desperation. *It’s a wonder she stayed with me as long as she did. Jesus!* “NO, Tim, you need to back off! Go away, please, and let me at least keep the one thing I still have.” Confusion played on Tim’s face. “MY job, you idiot!”

“Alright, alright! I’m going. But if you talk to Paula …”

“Get out!” Sophie nearly screamed at her step-dad.

“Everything ok?” inquired Alya with genuine concern.

“I’m sorry about that Alya. Tim is just losing the plot.”

“It’s understandable. If you need anything or if I can help, you only need to ask, ok?” replied Alya.

“You’re a good friend, Alya. Thanks. But right now, I just want to get on with my work.”

Placing a caring hand on Sophie’s arm, Alya gave her a gentle squeeze and said, “Have you heard
from Paula lately? And not about the case, but about …” Alya couldn’t find the right words.

“You mean about us and our doomed relationship? No, no I haven’t,” stated an obviously upset Sophie. “I wrote her a letter and told her I was sorry and that I love her, but I haven’t heard from her.” Saying it all out loud caused Sophie to start crying. Alya pulled her over to the bathroom area and gave her a supportive hug.

“It’s going to be ok, Sophie. Paula is a very reasonable person. She knows you love her, you just might need to give her some time.”

“I don’t know what to do, Alya. I love her so much and I just want her back. I have just made such a mess of everything and I can’t imagine that she would want to have anything more to do with me.”

“I saw her when she came in last week and the look in her eyes was so hopeful, Sophie. She still loves you. I just know she does.”

“God, I hope you’re right. I just need to be patient. It’s not my strongest trait, though,” Sophie giggled through her tears.

“C’mon. Let’s get back to work and put your mind on something else. And please know that I am here for you, whatever you need, ok?”

“Thanks, Alya. I need as many friends as I can get.”

The pile of paperwork Paula had sitting on her desk was not getting any smaller with her ignoring it, so she decided to just get on with it. She eyed the stack of post, knowing she could tackle that and feel like she had gotten something completed and off her list once she had handled it, so she grabbed the substantial pile and began to sort through it – bills, junk, holiday cards. Most of it was holiday sale circulars, taking the number of things that she would actually require her attention down to a manageable pile. Bills first. She fired up her computer and spent about 30 minutes getting through the mundane task of catching her bills up. She had drained her glass, so she traipsed back into the kitchen for a refill and headed back to her office to go through the personal post.

As was expected, one after the other, Paula opened holiday greeting cards from friends and colleagues, all with the same Christmas and New Year’s wishes. Paula had been so busy, she hadn’t even put up a tree or celebrated much at all. She spent most of her time working. There really wasn’t much to celebrate this year anyway. The final piece of mail was hand written with no return address on it. The handwriting was vaguely familiar. Then Paula saw the postmark and her breath caught – Weatherfield.

Sophie.

Paula held the letter, unopened, in her hand for what seemed like forever, a multitude of emotions flooding through her. Her heart was racing. What was inside? Payment of some sort on the bill from the firm? Well, surely that would be sent directly to the office. There’s only one way to find out, Paula.

The letter opener sliced through the envelope swiftly, revealing a single piece of paper folded into thirds. Paula pulled it out, unfurled it, and began to read … Dear Paula …
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

For those of you kind enough to post such nice comments. Cheers!

Paula sat back in her plush leather chair, tears rolling down her face at the sincerity of the words written on the paper she held in her hand. For someone who had never written a letter before, Sophie had done quite a job at it. The usually in control of all emotions solicitor sat there not knowing what to do. She wanted so badly to ring Sophie and have her come round immediately so they could rediscover one another, hold each other, reconnect their bodies, but she knew that would not fix anything. She wanted the young brunette, always had, but their physical relationship had never been the problem. Sophie’s naivety and sheer inability to regulate her emotions had lead her to make horrific judgement calls, decisions that turned Paula’s stomach. This had lead to her decision to end things with Sophie. And there was no guarantee that anything would change. Sally was still imprisoned, and each time Paula had seen Sophie since the sentencing, Sophie had only been interested in talking about the case, the smack of desperation heavy in the air. How could she be sure Sophie had really changed and would not continue to be so immature?

Paula felt utterly torn. She just didn’t have any answers.

She read the letter again, and again, her desire for this young woman pulling at her heart. Should she just at least give Sophie a chance in person to say her peace? Or would that be cruel, knowing that at this point Paula was just not able to put her heart on the line again.

Frustration pulsed through the solicitor. Why did she have to go and do this? I was on my way to being ok. She knew this was a lie. She was burying herself in her work in order to distract herself from her pain, from her want. And that was very different than being ok. Her heart was broken. Could she let Sophie piece it back together?

More wine was needed, so Paula grabbed the open bottle from the kitchen and headed upstairs to her bedroom to mull this situation over some more.

Sophie had managed to pull herself together and finished off work without any more tears or fumbled dishes. And she had successfully avoided checking her mobile all evening. She checked the time – 22:37 – maybe, just maybe she would have some response from her ex. She grabbed her stuff from her locker and shrugged into her coat, grabbing the phone out of her pocket. She held it in her hand, her eyes closed, not quite ready for the flood of disappointment she was expecting.

C’mon Sophie, be brave.

She flipped her phone over in her hand and her heart sank. No messages. Tears began to well up in her eyes and she wiped at them with frustration. Please, Paula. You have to give me another chance. I will make it up to you, I promise I will.

Sophie shoved her phone into her pocket and headed out onto the street to make her way home, her heart heavy with dread at the thought that Paula was out of reach.
Paula had tried to make some sense of her feelings, tried to figure out what the hell to do, but couldn’t. So, after a bottle of wine and no progress, she decided to sleep on it and deal with it all in the morning. It was well after 10 o’clock and she was just emotionally spent. Sleep would do her good. Plus, she had a heavy day tomorrow and she needed to have a clear head.

She snuggled down into bed and closed her eyes, willing sleep to take her. Thoughts of Sophie consumed her mind, all the wonderful, beautiful things about her kept flashing before her. Stop it, Paula. Go to sleep. Her ice-blue eyes quirking an eyebrow when she wanted sex, her laughter at the silliest of jokes, her tongue tracing her top lip when she concentrated on something … Oh my god, Paula, just stop for heaven’s sake. This is getting you nowhere!

Paula flipped over and stared into the darkness. This was futile. She should just call her and figure out how to deal with this all. They could at least talk. Or was that just her libido prompting her? UUUGHGHG, Paula, what the hell. She sat up and turned the light on. This was ridiculous. She certainly couldn’t go on like this; something had to be done and it was up to her at this point.

She grabbed her phone and dialed. Her heart was racing, but she knew she had to this. Answer phone. “Hi, this is Sophie, leave a message for me and I will call you when I can. Oh, and babe, if that’s you, I will call YOU back immediately! Mwwwwah!” The message caught Paula off guard. Sophie hadn’t changed it since their break up and it was odd to hear her call her by her pet name – babe – she always called her that. Paula liked it.

Beeeeep

“Oh, hi Sophie, it’s me. I got your letter, so I thought we should talk. I guess you are busy or asleep or something, so just reach out tomorrow if you want. Ok. Well, I’ll talk to you … I guess. Bye.”

Well, that wasn’t at all awkward or forced. Nice one, Paula. Now go to sleep!

The older woman plopped back down into her dent in the bed and pulled the duvet up. She sighed heavily, not knowing what tomorrow would bring, and not really knowing herself what she wanted, if anything, from her ex. She did know one thing. Hearing Sophie’s voice made her feel warm inside and she missed that feeling. A lot.

Sophie turned the key in the lock quietly then closed the door behind her to see her dad and Jack were already asleep. It was almost 11, so it wasn’t a surprise to enter a dark and quiet house. It matched the feeling in her gut. Paula’s silence played on her mind. She had to have gotten the letter by now, so she must just be furious with her still. There was nothing more Sophie could do at this point, except wait to see if Paula would contact her.

The young brunette climbed the stairs and headed to her room to get ready for what would likely be another sleepless night, or a repeat of the recurring nightmare. Either way, Sophie wasn’t looking forward to it. She put her phone on the beside table and took her clothes off, reaching for her pajamas. She headed to the bathroom to remove her makeup and clean her teeth. She looked at herself in the mirror, noticing how tired her face looked, black circles under her eyes. Oh, Sophie, you look like hell. Something has got to give. You can’t keep going on like this. The young woman just sighed. She turned off the light and headed back to her room.
Sophie climbed into bed and stared straight up at the ceiling. Realizing she had forgotten to plug her phone into the charger, she sat up and grabbed them both to connect them. It was then she saw the flashing light indicating she had a message. Her heart leapt out of her chest, but she was confused. What the … when did that happen? She looked at the time the call came in – 22:46 – but that was before I got home. How did I not hear that? Then she realized that she had silenced her phone when she went to work and forgot the turn the volume up when she left work because she was so upset.

Sophie opened the voicemail app only to see what she had been praying to see for nearly four days – Paula had called her! Thank you, Jesus! She called me! She finally called. Then a bit of reality set in … what did the message say? Was it good, was it awful, was it over for sure? Oh, god, I think I am going to vomit.

She pressed play on the message and listened, her heart rate sky high. “Uh, hi Sophie, it’s me …”

Sophie didn’t know what to make of the message. She was filled with fear because she couldn’t figure out if Paula was happy or not. She listened several times, mostly just to hear her ex say her name and hear her oh-so-sexy voice. That voice was knee-melting.

Sophie looked at her clock. Was it too late to call? Should she leave it until tomorrow? Ugh, I hate this bullshit? Why can’t things just be easy and go my way? It would have been so much better if I had answered the call … oh my god, what if she thinks I didn’t answer on purpose? What if she thinks I was out on a date? Sophie’s imagination began to run away. Then she stopped herself cold. Sophie, you idiot, this is the exact stuff that drove her away in the first place. Get a grip on yourself. Paula called you, you div. Be happy about that. It means there’s a chance. There’s a chance! But, what do I do now? Do I call her? Do I wait until tomorrow? Oh god help me.

A scared Sophie decided to text Paula to see if she was awake. If she was, they could make a plan to meet up tomorrow? Talk on the phone now? Talk tomorrow? She typed out the text –

*Hi, Paula. I got your message – sorry, my phone was silenced from work and I didn’t hear it ring. I hope I am not bothering you too late, but I wanted to see if you were awake, so we could, I dunno, either talk or plan to talk tmr. S.*

She took a deep breath and hit the send button. And just like that, her future was once again in limbo as she sat and stared at her phone, hopes sky high that the woman she loved would reach back out, and soon.

Paula could not find sleep. She tossed and turned, just couldn’t get comfortable. She was too keyed up, so she decided to take a hot shower to try to relax her tight shoulders. She got up and moved her way into the bathroom to turn on the shower. She thought she heard a faint chime from her phone and she froze. Maybe it was Sophie? Who else would it be? She turned the shower off, moving her way back to her bedside and to her phone. It was Sophie. Oh, shit, it was Sophie. She took a deep breath in and opened the text. Now what? Do I call her, and we talk? Do I leave it until tomorrow? I am too old for this shit. But her heart felt less heavy somehow, and she decided to text back. This conversation would have to take place in person if they were going to be able to hash anything out.

*Not too late. I am still awake. But I don’t think we should do this over the phone, so let’s find some time soon to talk face to face. I will call you tomorrow, if that’s ok? P.* Send.

It was only a minute before Sophie’s reply came through. *Yeah, sure, that sounds fine. Call me when you can. And Paula, thank you for, well, for reaching out. Sleep well. Love, S.*
Paula’s breath hitched as she read the end of the text. She didn’t know what to feel or how to deal with this. If she was honest with herself, she knew she was still in love with the young woman, she just didn’t know if she wanted to be in love with her anymore. Time would certainly tell.
Paula’s body was on fire, her arousal reaching a pinnacle as Sophie pinned her up against her office door, one hand under the solicitor’s blouse and bra, the other in her hair, mouth fused to her neck. “Oh god, Sophie, don’t stop. Please, don’t stop,” Paula pleaded heavily into the young woman’s ear. She had missed her lover’s touch and the way she could always bring Paula to edge of ecstasy with such ease. This was pure bliss and her body screamed out for more. Suddenly, Sophie was pulled away from her, reaching out for Paula, but fading slowly from her sight. “Come back to me, babe. Please, come back to me,” Sophie whispered, then she was gone.

Paula’s eyes shot open, her breathing heavy, her body still fully aroused. The dream was so real that it caused the older woman to sit up and reach out, thinking she could touch Sophie if she extended her arms far enough. But she grasped at only air. It took a moment, but she was able to shake the sleep from her brain and gain her faculties, now realizing that she was not in her office, but in her bed, dreaming. *What the fuck! My god, that felt so real.* She sat on the side of the bed, hand on her chest, where she could feel her heart beating heavily. She moved into her bathroom where she splashed some cold water on her face and looked at her reflection, her body still humming on the edge of orgasm. *Whew! Damn that felt good. What now, Paula?* She shook her head and almost laughed at herself. She was beginning to lose the battle in her head, the one protecting her from further heartbreak by keeping a certain brunette at bay. But the dream meant something, and she couldn’t deny that the thought of having Sophie back in her arms was dangerously appealing. And the letter had re-ignited the gravitational pull that always ruled her emotions when it came to Sophie. *You’re in trouble, and you know it!*

It was just past 5am, so she decided to get her day started with a shower where she would either quash the arousal inhabiting her body, or satiate it. Today was a big day for several reasons and she needed to be on her best game, so it was likely that certain memories of Sophie would be used to achieve the release she so desperately needed. Paula flipped the shower on, anticipating the orgasm that was in her near future.

Sophie was startled awake. She sat up and looked around, but nothing was there. It had felt like someone grabbed her. She hadn’t had the nightmare, but she had no idea what had roused her from sleep. The clock read 5:07am. She laid back down and drifted back to sleep, feeling unusually content, Paula’s smile firmly secured in her mind.

Paula felt surprisingly well despite not having a restful night’s sleep. Perhaps it had something to do with the sex dream she’d had and the relief she was able to achieve in the shower this morning. She entered her office and closed the door, hoping to get some of the ignored paperwork from the prior evening managed. She glanced up at the back of her door, memories of Sophie pinning her to that door played on her mind and she felt a twinge of arousal again. *Enough of that, Paula. Get to work.* A smile pulled at her mouth.

A few hours and several cups of coffee later, Paula pulled out her daily calendar to review the meetings she had today, trying to figure out the best time to call Sophie and when they could actually meet up. Paula’s schedule was hectic, and she wasn’t sure when they would be able to connect. It might have to be the evening. Sophie could come to hers as she had done so many times before, but was that really wise? Paula didn’t want their physical pull to get in the way of them dealing with the real issue. They could meet in the Rover’s, but she knew that all Sophie’s neighbors would be
talking about them and speculating, which wasn’t fair to her ex. They could meet for dinner, but that wasn’t conducive to talking things through. **Damnit, Paula, just have her come to yours. You can behave, can’t you?** She wasn’t so sure after that dream, but this was too important to put off for long.

Paula’s desk intercom came to life. “Paula, you ready? They’re here and waiting in the conference room for you.”

“Yes, I will be right there. Make sure everyone has coffee,” Paula responded to her assistant. She grabbed her phone and typed Sophie a text.

*Sorry to text and not call as I said I would, but have a very busy day on with a meeting in just a few minutes. Are you free to meet this evening? At mine, say half 8? P*

She didn’t have time to wait for a reply. She had a huge meeting to manage, and if all went well, would have a reason to celebrate. Her mind shifted for a split second to Sophie, pondering how this might affect her ex, a feeling of uncertainty settling in her gut. **No time to worry with things that don’t exist, Paula. Time to get the show started.** She checked to make sure she looked good, then headed out of her office to find out what her future might hold.

Sophie was tidying up the kitchen and getting some laundry going when her phone chimed. She grabbed it quickly, hoping to see Paula’s name. A huge smile pulled across her face when she saw she was right. **Always a woman of her word.** She read the text and called Yasmeen straight away.

“I’m free, Sophie. But I need to trade my shift today with someone. I can work lunch, but I need to be free this evening. <> Yes, I know it’s not easy to find someone last minute … <> I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important! <> Yasmeen, listen to me … <> this is critical for me and I HAVE to have tonight off. I’m sorry. <> Yes, I will call around to see if anyone is available … <> yes, Yasmeen, I will call you back. Bye.” **She can be so difficult sometimes! Now, who will cover for me?** Sophie only had to think for a moment when Alya’s words popped into her head, “If there’s anything I can do …”

“Alya, it’s Sophie. <> I need a huge favor. <> Can you cover my shift this evening? <> Paula’s rung me and wants me to come round to hers at half 8. We are going to talk. <> Yes, hopefully she will listen and want me back! <> Yea, I know. It’s amazing, right? I just hope I don’t screw it all up. <> I can work lunch if you need me to. <> Ok, I will call your gran and let her know. And Alya, I owe you one! Thank you!”

Sophie texted Paula back as soon as she had rearranged her evening.

*Hope your meeting went well. I appreciate the text and will see you tonight at yours, half 8. I am looking forward it. S.*

Sophie couldn’t contain her happiness. Her heart was soaring. She felt hopeful for the first time in ages. It didn’t matter that her mum was still in prison or that the chances of her release were slim to none. It didn’t matter that her life was in shambles. She had taken a leap of faith and now she had a chance to win Paula back. She knew it was still a long shot, that it wasn’t going to be easy, but Sophie was willing to do what she had to do to get her Disney ending, or at least a new beginning.

Sophie’s Uber pulled up outside Paula’s at 20:26. The red Mercedes sat parked in its usual place and Sophie’s heart began beating rapidly. She wasn’t sure if it was from fear or nerves or excitement –
probably all of the above – but she could hardly contain herself. Her hands were shaking, and butterflies had taken over her stomach like Kamikaze bombers. She was going to have to get control of herself and fast. She rang the bell and could see a figure moving toward the door. She took a very deep breath and let it out as slowly as she could to calm herself down.

The door opened, and her ex stood there looking as amazing as she ever had, those dark brown eyes twinkling back at her, a guarded smile appearing.

“Hello, Sophie,” Paula greeted, stepping away from the doorframe, inviting the young brunette in with a sweep of her hand. “How are you?” Paula’s tone was even.

“Hiya. Yea I’m fine, I guess. It’s nice to see ya.” Sophie was a bundle of nerves. She stood in the foyer, not knowing exactly where to go or if Paula wanted her to come in any further.

“Uhm, shall we sit in the living room, then?” Paula asked as she tentatively moved toward the room. “Can I get you a glass of wine, or something else perhaps?”

“No, I’m fine, thanks. I want to be clear headed.” Sophie noticed Paula’s step hesitate just for a moment at this comment.

You need to do this right, Sophie. Be cool.

“Ok, well, you don’t mind if I continue with my glass, do you?” Paula asked.

“Of course not.” Sophie was having trouble controlling her breathing. She followed her ex into the living room, taking in the familiar surroundings. They had spent many nights curled up on the sofa together, watching movies, making out, tickling one another … making love. Sophie closed her eyes briefly then took a seat on the far end of the couch, not too close to Paula.

They both looked a bit uncomfortable, neither of them sure of what to say or how to begin this conversation. “How’s your mum?” came the ice breaker from the solicitor.

Sophie knew she had to rip the band aid off and not pussy-foot around. She looked her ex-lover right in the eye and said very matter-of-factly, “I don’t want to talk about her or the case or anything to do with any of that. I came here because I have to get on with my life, and I can’t do that unless I …” Her words began to fail her. How was she going to make Paula understand what she meant to her?

“I need for you to understand …”

“Sophie, I don’t need to understand anything. I am not angry with you and you don’t need my forgiveness or my permission to move on with your life. You did what you did, we broke up and that’s that.” Paula’s gaze was calm and collected.

Sophie hated Paula in this cool mood. She always saw things in black and white, whereas Sophie was full on shades of grey. She was going to have to find a way to crack through Paula’s icy demeanor.

“I’m not here for absolution,” the younger woman’s tone a tad chastised. She took in a breath and continued, “I told you in the letter that I need for you to understand that I take full responsibility for the decisions I made. I know I fucked everything up between us, Paula. And I am sitting in a pile of regret over it. I can’t move forward until I know for sure that there is no longer a chance for us, and that decision can only come from you, because I am still in love with you.”

It took every ounce of resolve for Sophie to keep her eyes directly on Paula’s. The young woman didn’t stop there, “I don’t want to not be in love with you. I know I’ve hurt you, I know I messed things up, but I didn’t do anything to intentionally hurt you, I was just, I dunno, blind with the need to help my mum. And I’m not saying it was right. I know it was stupid, but I really just didn’t think
anything through at the time.”

Paula remained stoic and said nothing, but Sophie knew she was listening and allowing her to get what she needed to say off her chest.

“Listen, I don’t want to rehash all the dirty details. We are both painfully aware of my naivety. I just could not live with myself until I owned up to hurting you and took responsibility for it. I am to blame for the entire destruction of our relationship, I know this. But mostly I want you to know, and hear it from my mouth, that I am sorry for ever hurting you, for ever making you doubt my love for you. And selfishly, I want you to give me, to give us, another chance. We are good together, Paula. You said it once, that we have something really special and I for one do not want to give up on it.”

Paula sat there, not saying a word, turmoil swirling around in her gut. She didn’t like that Sophie blamed herself for everything that had gone wrong. Paula knew all too well that she bore some responsibility for how things had gone down, her timing terrible when she had severed her romantic ties to her lover.

Sophie didn’t know what to make of Paula’s silence and tears were threatening at the backs of her eyes.

Paula took a drink from her glass and sighed, “Oh, Sophie. I don’t know what to say.” She was softening.

“Say you still love me. Say you’re not going to let this kill us. Say you’ll give us another go. Please. I am willing to take it as slow as you like. I just don’t want to give up on this.”

“You’re amazing Sophie, you are, but …” said Paula, crossing her arms over her chest, still palming her wine glass.

“Oh, no, no, no buts please. If it hadn’t been for all the crazy circumstances we would have been fine, Paula. And you know we would. Things just got out of hand and …” Sophie directed.

“Well, what’s to say this wouldn’t happen again, huh? We just see the world so differently. We are in two completely different places in our lives, Sophie. You are young and full of hope and willingness to try and fail. I’ve been through all that already. It takes too much energy and that makes things really hard, too hard,” Paula argued.

“Are you going to walk away because things are hard? When have you ever walked away from a challenge? Come on, Paula. Nothing easy is worth fighting for and you know that.” Sophie set her jaw, determined to talk her ex around. “I know I made you happy once and I can do it again if you let me. I know I’m young and still naïve, but I will try harder to be different.”

“That’s just it, Sophie. You shouldn’t have to change who you are just to be what you think I want. You deserve someone who wants you just as you are. You sell yourself short all the time and frankly, it makes me furious.”

“I am not sitting here telling you I will never make you mad at me again. No two people get along and see eye to eye all the time! That’s what makes relationships hard. It takes a lot of work and I know that. I’m not quite that naïve. I am not promising to be perfect, but I am promising to try to be as perfect as I can be for you, to be the kind of partner you need.” Sophie paused for a moment, then said, with a mix of terror and anticipation, “The real question here is, do you still love me?”

Sophie swallowed hard, her gaze shifting down to her hands that were sitting in her lap, and waited for the answer, fear gripping her chest.
“It’s not that simple.” The ultimate solicitor-answer. “Sometimes it’s not about love, Sophie. There are so many things a relationship needs in order to survive.”

“Like?” Sophie was not quitting.

“Mutual respect, selflessness, a common direction, the same value system, complete honesty, passion, to name a few,” challenged Paula.

“I can do that, Paula. I can do all that. I am here now, to show you that I want to do all that, with you. Only with you. And I promise I will always try put you first, like I should have done. We have always gotten on so easily and I have always respected you. I was short on the selfless part, but I am usually strong in that department, and I know we certainly want the same things. And I never lied to you and didn’t cheat on you, never wanted anyone else … and as for our sex life, geesh, the only problem there was keeping our hand off each other!”

Sophie was beginning to weaken Paula’s resolve. She wasn’t backing down.

“I don’t know, Sophie. Too much has happened, I think.”

She almost had her. “Please don’t give up on me, Paula. Everyone deserves a second chance. I am here right now showing you that I take full responsibility for all the mistakes. I can make it up to you, I know I can. I can make you happy again.”

“You’re such a kind soul, Sophie. But you’re missing a very important factor in all this.”

“What’s that?” asked Sophie with barely a whisper.

“The downfall of our relationship was not all your fault,” Paula confessed.

Sophie’s head shot up in confusion. “What? What do you mean?” Sophie was making ground now. She couldn’t relent.

“I should never have pursued you in the first place.” Paula’s statement took Sophie aback. Was she saying their entire relationship was a mistake?

Paula continued, “It was a stupid decision on my part and that put you in a terrible position. What did I really expect? I was almost asking for trouble … I mean, you’re half my age, the daughter of a friend and client! How stupid could I be?”

The confession was unsettling for both women, but this needed to be said. All Sophie could do was sit and listen.

“Honestly, I never thought you would respond to me the way you did. It caught me by total surprise and I was so flattered, and so attracted to you, and so lonely that I didn’t think reasonably or responsibly. I just went for it. I felt like a crazy teenager. I never expected to catch you once I began the chase, but you certainly didn’t run very fast.” Paula grinned and Sophie let out a huge internal breath. Everything was going to be ok. Paula was laughing, and all the tension drained from Sophie’s body.

Sophie felt a new sense of hope and moved to sit next to her ex, taking her hand in her own. Electricity shot up her arm at the simple touch. “I didn’t want to run. Are you kidding me? When I first met you, yea, I thought, wow, she’s a looker, but you were my mum’s friend and I just didn’t think about you in those terms. But when you flirted with me I thought I was misreading the signals – it had been awhile since anyone had proper flirted with me. And I thought, why would this stunning woman want me? I had to be wrong. But then, when you showed up for the backpacking
book, I knew you fancied me and I knew I had a decision to make. That’s why I kissed you, ya know? I thought I’d better make myself clear, so I didn’t give you a chance to change your mind. If I gave you time for a rethink, I would likely never see you again, except for maybe in court.”

“You really liked me, huh?” asked Paula playfully.

“Uh, you think? I was so drawn to you, like immediately. I had never been so attracted to anyone quite so fast before. But I was willing to take a chance even if you were so much older.”

“Ouch!” Paula said, her eyes gazing sweetly Sophie’s way.

Sophie felt encouraged and brave. It was time to push her luck and give Paula the shove she needed. She scooted closer to her ex and cupped her face with her right hand. She wasn’t going to let her get away. She moved her face up close to Paula’s and professed her love, again, “Paula, I’m in love with you. I need you in my life. I want to try again. Please tell me you feel the same.”

All the solicitor’s resolve was gone. She could no longer resist what her heart was telling her to do. She leaned her head against Sophie’s and closed her eyes and finally gave in to her feelings, “Of course I still love you, Sophie. I never stopped. I ended it because I couldn’t handle feeling like you’d put me last in your life. Your judgement sucks sometimes, you know that?” They both giggled knowing it was true.

Paula opened her eyes and drank in the pools of ice-blue in front of her. “You really are so spectacular Sophie Webster.”

Sophie pulled her head back, so she could look at the woman she loved, moving the pad of her thumb over Paula’s lips. She stared down and that beautiful mouth for a moment, then leaned in to capture it in the softest, sweetest kiss she could manage. The lovers were tentative at first, hesitant at their decision to move forward, together. Their lips moved gently against one another, but they had been apart for far too long and their want began to override their control. Paula moved her hands to Sophie’s sides and pulled her closer, their lips hungry for more, exploring and rediscovering this wonderful sensation. Things grew more heated and the women moved their bodies closer together, tongues began to search for connection. Their breathing became heavy and they both knew where this was heading, and Sophie thought her heart was going to explode with joy. Every cell in her body felt alight with arousal. She had won her love back and she felt like her life was back on track. With Paula in her life she knew could handle anything that came her way.

Then suddenly, without warning, Paula pushed at Sophie’s shoulders, forcing their bodies apart. “Wait! We can’t do this!” said Paula through ragged breath.
Sophie thought she must have misunderstood Paula. She followed her with her body, reached out, as Paula tried to move away from her.

“Sophie, stop! We have to stop.” Paula’s tone was serious. She stood up from the couch and took a few steps out of Sophie’s reach, her hand on her chest.

The message finally got through to Sophie who sat there, confused. “Wha … I don’t understand,” said the young woman as she stood up and took a few absent-minded steps toward Paula, a very hurt look on her face. Her body was shaking, partly from the arousal and partly from the absolute terror that had taken hold of her heart.

At this action, Paula put a hand up to stop Sophie coming any closer.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” said the solicitor, her tone full of trepidation.

“Oh, god, there’s someone else already? Of course there is. What did I expect?” Sophie retreated to the other side of the room, her arms crossing her chest, holding tightly to herself so she wouldn’t fall apart. “Why did you let me … why didn’t you just tell me before I …” Tears began to fall as she paced in a small corner of the room.

Realizing where Sophie’s head had gone, Paula walked over to her and gently put a hand on her arm to calm her. “Sophie, no. There’s no one else. I promise. It’s not that.”

“Well, then what?” asked the young woman through tear-soaked eyes, a sigh of relief flowing from her lungs.

“I think you need to sit back down.” This scared Sophie. She knew something big was coming, something she wasn’t going to like.

Paula sat next to her lover and took her had in her own. She rubbed her fingers gently over Sophie’s knuckles. “I’ve always loved your hands,” she said sweetly. This only made Sophie’s gut tighten more. Just tell me the bad news already. Paula visibly swallowed and looked at Sophie, seeing the fear in her eyes, and knew this was going to be hard, but maybe it would all be ok in the long run.

“I can’t, in good conscience, get back into a relationship with you …”

“Is it my mum? Because I don’t really care –“

“This has nothing to do with your mum or her case, Sophie,” said Paula. “This has to do with me and my future.”

Sophie was completely confused. “Your future? What do you mean?” Sophie’s blood ran cold. “Oh, no, Paula, are you sick?”
“Oh, Sophie, no, I’m fine.”

The young woman let out a huge sigh of relief. “Ok, so I guess I should just let you get a word in …”

“I had a meeting today with a client I have represented on and off for years. I’ve talked about him before, Alexander Cooper. He is the principal at Cooper Securities, one of the largest trading firms in London.” Sophie nodded her head, indicating she was following. “Well, his firm is being investigated for international securities fraud, reaching from New York to Tokyo on all the major exchanges. If the charges stick it could bring his entire firm down, sending ripples through several major economies.”

“Oh, so what was your meeting about, then?” asked Sophie, wondering what this had to do with her relationship with Paula.

“Alexander came to employ my services, Sophie. I am going to be working on the case,” Paula said.

“Well, that’s great, I guess, seeing as it’s such a big deal, but why you? Is there something that’s happened in Manchester and that’s why he called on you?” Sophie inquired.

“He knows my work and he is assembling quite a large team of solicitors, in a multitude of cities, but London will be home base. He wants me to work directly under his lead council, Ian Walker, effectively putting me second in charge.”

Sophie wasn’t surprised that Paula had been tapped for something this important. “That’s amazing! But, what does this have to do with us? I don’t understand why you said we can’t do this,” queried Sophie, her eyebrows knitting together.

“I understand you won’t be able to see me every day or give me all of your attention, Paula. I promise I won’t get bent out of shape over it,” said the young brunette, the tightness easing a bit in her chest. “I am proud that you are so good at your job. It won’t be that different from before, well maybe a little, but we’ll have evenings and weekends …” Sophie was going a mile a minute. Something in Paula’s expression told her none of what she was saying was going to be the case.

Paula took a deep breath then sighed. “I know this must come as a shock to you, Sophie. It has all happened so fast.” Paula stood and began pacing the room as she tried to find the words to make Sophie understand. “Ian called me a few days after your mum’s sentencing, asking me if I would be interested in joining the team, that Alexander had asked for me personally. Well, of course I was intrigued. I’ve never worked on a case this big with so many intricacies and implications. But I told him I had to think about it. That I had some complications here that needed my attention.”

“You mean the mess I made of everything, including us?” It was more a statement than a question.

“Well … yes,” said Paula cautiously. “I needed to make sure my reputation was intact after …” she
paused.

Sophie just nodded her head. She understood.

“Ian kept calling me. His offers got more appealing – rented apartment, personal driver, more money than I have ever seen, the challenge of a lifetime really – and all you seemed to want to talk about was an appeal on your mum’s case. I wanted you to …” she hesitated, not wanting to hurt Sophie’s feelings. “I supposed I wanted you to feel the way you came across in your letter. But the less I got from you, the more I got in offers to work on Alexander’s case.”

“So, you decided to take the offer!” Sophie was a little louder than she intended, and she saw Paula flinch just a little. “I’m sorry. I am not being fair to you. I was very focused on my mum’s troubles and …”

“Sophie, this is a big deal for me. To work on something like this could set me up for the rest of my life, even if we don’t win! My reputation will take a giant leap and I will be working with legal professionals all over the world, not to mention how much I will learn about international economies and law. I can’t turn it down. Not even for you.”

The last statement nearly crushed Sophie’s spirit. Paula was putting her career ahead of Sophie, and it hurt. But what did she expect, really? That Paula should give up an opportunity like this for a relationship with someone who hadn’t put her first? Sophie knew it was a lost battle. Paula was leaving her. Again.

“I guess that’s that then? You have to go, I know. I can’t … won’t make this difficult for you. You are going to be brilliant.” She walked over and took Paula’s hand, tears in her eyes. “When will you go?”

Paula’s heart was near breaking at the sorrowful look in Sophie’s eyes. “Well, the meeting today was about all the details. I am renting my house out while I am gone so I still have to –“

“Wait, what?! You mean, you’re not going to London for good?” Sophie nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Well, no, but I will likely be gone for maybe a year or so, depending on how many charges there are and where the trial is held and if there will be more than one trial.” Paula was confused at Sophie’s manic behavior.

“We don’t have to split up! If you’re coming home again then we can just do the long-distance thing. I can come to London to see you, it’s only a train ride away. And you’ll need to come back here to make sure your law firm is still standing, won’t you? Oh, Paula, what a relief! We can do this, can’t we? Please tell me you want to at least try.” Sophie’s mood had changed 180 degrees.

Paula just looked at Sophie, the wheels turning in her head. Could they carry on their relationship? Was it wise to try to start up again while living so far apart? “Sophie, I don’t know. I don’t think it would be fair on you. I don’t want to tie you down to a relationship that doesn’t really offer you that much, at least for the next year or so.”

“Do you love me?” Sophie’s tone was certain and emphatic. She had made her feelings toward Paula very clear.

“You know I do,” Paula confirmed with soft eyes.

“Then that’s all that really matters, Paula! We can survive a year. At least let’s give it a try. What have we got to lose, eh?” Sophie intertwined their fingers and continued, “this thing between us you
don’t find every day, Paula. I, for one, am not willing to give it up. I know it will be hard and we will have to sacrifice, but you’re worth it.” Sophie leaned in and captured Paula’s lips with her own.

Paula had missed Sophie’s mouth against hers. She wrapped her arms around her young lover, pulling her body closer, kissing her back completely. Was this a promise they were making to each other, to remain together, to working their way through all the misunderstandings they had suffered the last few weeks?

Paula pulled away from Sophie slightly, but still held her close. “Do you really think we can do this?” she whispered.

“I really do, babe.”

There it was, that pet name Paula loved and had missed hearing. It was soothing. She was going to take a leap of faith and see if they could stay the course. Paula had once, not that long ago, gambled that a young and beautiful woman might dare take a chance on her despite the odds stacked against them. She was willing to do it again, with this same young woman.

“Well, then, I suppose we have a few things to celebrate?” Paula retreated into the kitchen momentarily, then returned with a bottle of champagne and two flutes. She popped the bottle and poured them each a glass.

“To new beginnings?” Paula asked, holding her glass up.

“To new beginnings!” Sophie clinked her glass to Paula’s, took a considerable drink, then set her glass down and put her arms back around the woman in front of her. “Now, I don’t know about you,” she said, taking Paula’s glass out of her hand and placing it on the table next hers, “but I think this celebration needs to move upstairs.” Sophie kissed Paula again, her hands wandering up under her shirt to the soft skin of her lower back. “God I’ve missed you,” she breathed into Paula’s ear then moved her lips down to her neck. “I have missed every <kiss> single <kiss> thing <kiss> about you.”

“Are you absolutely sure you want to do this with me leaving?” Paula asked, just to make sure Sophie knew what she was getting into. “You don’t have make this commitment, Sophie. You could be a free agent, dating whomever you like,” though the thought of Sophie with another woman made Paula’s stomach turn.

“You’re whomever I like …” she muttered as she continued to use her mouth against Paula’s skin. “Forget about upstairs, I want you right here, right now,” she declared as she pulled Paula’s shirt up over her head, dropping it to the floor.

“What has gotten into you, Sophie Webster?” giggled Paula, taking in the complete lust in her lover’s eyes.

“I am tired of waiting. I am ready to start our new life together, even if it means we are apart. You are the most important thing to me and I am going to show you just how much I love you. Now, shut up and let me make love to you.”

Paula loved when Sophie took charge, so she could do nothing but oblige her young lover. She didn’t know if they were being naïve about pursuing a long-distance relationship, but at least all the cards were on the table and they would move forward, together.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Transition chapter and a bit explicit, but important part of them moving through the move to London and their separation. Let me know your thoughts. Comments appreciated. Will post another chapter soon.

Paula laid awake in the early morning hours watching light begin to bathe the tops of the trees in her back garden. Her arms held a sleeping Sophie close to her, stroking her lover’s hair gently, running the silky strands through her fingers over and over. Sophie shifted slightly, snuggling deeper into Paula’s warmth. This made the older woman smile as she loved the feel of her young lover’s naked body against hers – her curves, her softness, her muscles. Paula’s thoughts reflected on their reconciliation the prior evening and the decision they had made to stay together despite Paula’s impending departure and move to London. She hoped they were doing the right thing for them both.

Paula couldn’t help but think that Sophie might be better off just letting Paula go so she could get on with her life in Weatherfield without being tied down to a woman who wouldn’t be very available. But, they had discussed it all and Sophie was adamant about her desire that they try to make things work. Paula knew she would be completely buried with work with very little time to give Sophie, and it worried her. This wasn’t fair to the young brunette, but Paula was selfishly delighted Sophie wanted to stay together. Despite the problems the couple had already encountered in their fledgling relationship, they shared a bond that was unlike any other Paula had experienced before. She was just drawn to Sophie and she couldn’t explain it, couldn’t rationalize it, couldn’t make sense of it. She thought, with the right effort, they could really make a go of things, have a wonderful life together, perhaps even children one day.

Sophie shifted again, this time flipping over and wrapping her arms firmly around Paula, placing her head in the crook of her lover’s neck, breathing in heavily as if to take in Paula’s scent. The young woman in her arms looked so beautiful in her peaceful slumber, and it gave Paula hope. What could be more important than this? Being in love was the single most amazing feeling in the world, but also the most terrifying. The depth of love Paula felt for Sophie made her feel alive, as though she could do anything she wanted, but it also gave Sophie the power to completely destroy her. That was a chance Paula was just going to have to take.

Something about the way Sophie looked, so content and happy, overwhelmed the solicitor and she found herself wiping a few tears away from her eyes. God, don’t let us screw this up. She ran her hand gently up and down Sophie’s back in an act of possession, of wonder … of love. Paula just wanted to freeze the moment and how things felt deep in her chest at this resilient woman laying in her arms. Just 24 hours ago Paula was resigned to remain single and let Sophie down gently despite the sensitivity of the words she had so eloquently put down in that letter, to cut her loose and move on with her life in London, alone. But in the end, Paula had been won over by the sheer rawness of Sophie’s love for her. Life was strange. And delicious.

“Babe, why are you awake? It’s really early,” came a croak from a very sleepy Sophie, eyes still closed.

“Oh, just thinking about things, that’s all.”
“Are you ok? You’ve not changed your mind, have you?” Sophie asked, a bit panicked, but still through half-opened eyes.

“No! Why, have you?”

“Never.” A smile crept across the young brunette’s features.

Paula shifted her body down to her lover’s until they were face to face, Sophie’s eyes still closed. The emotions were still sitting deep in Paula’s chest. She leaned in to kiss Sophie sweetly and pulled her body closer to feel all the warmth she could. She wanted to hold on to this feeling for as long as it would last, for she feared when life kicked into full gear and they were both swept away by things, they would lose this. It would somehow vanish with time and separation. Paula pushed the thought away. Sophie’s lips were responding, igniting Paula’s libido, so she rolled on top of her lover and began to devour her slowly and sensually. Paula wanted to touch every bit of Sophie’s skin and commit it all to memory – every peak, every valley, every place that made her moan. Sophie’s body responded so well to Paula’s hands and mouth. She was now smiling and caressing her lover’s back, digging her nails in as Paula tasted the skin of her neck, collar bone, chest, sucking at sensitive spots, licking at others. She spread Sophie’s legs apart and settled her body between her thighs, feeling Sophie’s wetness on her lower abdomen. She began to gyrate her pelvis, grinding into Sophie, putting a rhythmic pulsing pressure against both their clits, fucking her. They were both moaning their pleasure freely, Sophie grabbing at Paula’s ass for deeper contact, her legs spread wide open, giving Paula full access to her. Paula then took one of Sophie’s nipples in her mouth and began licking and sucking. Paula cupped and massaged Sophie’s breast as she managed the nipple into a high, hard peak, biting gently to elicit a frantic low moan from her lover. Paula grabbed at Paula’s head, threading her finger through her hair, pulling her in and directing her to where she needed her. She continued to move her hips in a rhythm against Paula, her center dripping with desire. Paula was so worked up it didn’t take her long to move down to Sophie’s ready pussy. She plunged her tongue in and began licking and lapping up the exquisite liquid, moving between her entrance and her clit, sucking hard at the swollen nub. Sophie screamed out her name, pushing her on for more. It all felt very primal, like Paula wasn’t even in control of herself. It was as if she was being driven by a force outside her own body, commanding that she completely possess the body she was pleasuring. Sophie’s hips were gyrating on Paula’s mouth, everything grinding together in a symphony of bliss, Paula’s hands holding Sophie’s hips and buttocks, pulling her lover to her, Sophie’s hands on Paula’s head, directing her movements. Sophie was getting closer and closer with every motion, so finally, Paula moved herself up to take in Sophie’s nipple again, while simultaneously shifting her hand placing it between her hip and Sophie’s center and entered her fingers with a thrust, moving Sophie’s entire body with the force. She let out a cry of pleasure as Paula possessed her and fucked her, thrusting again and again, until finally Sophie screamed out as her body gave itself over to the orgasm that ripped through her, leaving her a puddle of flesh in Paula’s capable hands.

Both lover’s rode the feeling, both emotional and physical, as their bodies jerked and floated back down to reality. Paula lay with her head on Sophie’s stomach, unable to move herself away, her eyes closed, reveling in the feeling that inhabited her. She knew at that moment, she belonged to her young lover, that no one had ever incited such blind passion in her before. She had lost control of herself and didn’t know if she could ever quite regain that composure again.

Sophie just continued to breathe her way back down to earth, enjoying the feeling of being completely devoured, completely loved, though what had just happened was raw in its origin and less about emotion than about being physically consumed. She looked down at Paula who had a completely new and unknown look on her face, eyes closed, breathing steady.

“Babe, are you ok?” she asked, stroking her hair.
“Mmm hmmm,” was all she could muster. A few minutes later she lifted her head, swallowed heavily and laid next to her lover. Sophie intertwined their legs and put her arm over Paula’s stomach, her mouth next to her ear, and whispered, “Can you wake me up like that every morning?” Paula laughed, but her heart ached, because she knew their time together was limited, and it made her question her decision to leave.

“Well, perhaps I can accommodate you a few more times.”

“Are you sure you’re ok? You’re very quiet.”

“I’m just … happy.”

“Can I get some of that happy, too?” asked Sophie, her eyebrow cocked up, desire showing on her face, as she took Paula’s earlobe into her mouth.

“Can I just hold you? Please.”

“Of course, you can, babe. Are you sure you don’t need some attention?”

“No, I just want to feel you next to me, wholly, so I don’t forget.”

“Oh, baby, I will come see you as much as I can, even if it’s only because you need a booty call.”

This elicited a laugh from the solicitor, but she knew there was some truth in it. She would be living a very stressful life and would need the physical release promised. “Well, I am going to hold you to that young lady, because I really don’t know how long I can last without what we just shared.”

“YOU, can’t live without it? How do you think I feel after that Olympic performance? My body is still in a bit of shock over that, you wild woman!”

Paula’s mood suddenly changed, and she became quite serious. She turned to look at Sophie, stroking her face with her thumb, “Promise me we are going to make this work. This has to work, Sophie. I can’t …” she couldn’t finish the sentence; there weren’t words.

Sophie was concerned as she had never seen Paula like this before, on the edge of something very emotionally wrought. She closed her eyes and pulled her lover into a kiss full of promise, a tear falling from her eye at the love Paula was displaying. She knew if they worked toward it, they would stay together, no matter the obstacles that would get in their way. Sophie loved this woman, more than she had ever loved anyone before. She felt like she actually belonged to Paula. It was a weird feeling, one of complete surrender.

The couple lay there together for over an hour, holding on to one another, each thinking about what lay in store for them, until Paula’s alarm beeped. It was time to face reality. Paula had a lot to do to get herself ready to leave in two weeks. Though Sophie hated to see it all happen, she knew she had to let her lover go in order to keep her, so she would help Paula however she could.

“I need a shower,” declared Paula. “I’d ask you to join me, but I have a feeling it would be a long and unproductive use of time when I have so much on today.”

“Party pooper.”

Paula got out of bed, but leaned back down to kiss Sophie again. The view of her lover laying naked in her bed, so sexy, so beautiful, took the solicitor’s breath away. She lightly ran her hand down the length of Sophie’s side, watching her shiver with delight, loving the effect her touch had on her.

“More, later. I promise.” And she turned to retreat to the en-suite for her shower.
Sophie took it all in and sighed heavily. Her body was craving more from Paula. The sex earlier had sent Sophie into a new realm and she knew her body was going to need more, and soon. But she would have to be patient. She had to thank her lucky stars that Paula was willing to try again and had shown her lover how much she truly loved her, both last night and this morning. Their physical connection had always been strong, but something else had happened to Sophie earlier, a new more enduring attachment had developed for her, something beyond the physical or emotional. It was like imprinting or something, like animals that mate with one partner for life. And if she couldn’t make their relationship work, she would be doomed to never feel this connection for the rest of her years. *That’s what Paula meant.* Sophie felt her heart leap at this revelation. *She felt it, too! She’s mine … oh, my, god … she belongs to me now, and she knows it.*

Sophie took her new-found understanding right into the en-suite where she opened the shower door, and joined her lover. She wasn’t about to let the opportunity escape to enjoy the taste and feel of the woman to whom she would always belong. She stepped in and began to enjoy her woman, with absolutely no objections from the object of her desire.
Chapter 7

Sophie sent Paula to the office with a little bounce in her step after their morning shower together. The solicitor literally had to rush out the door to make her scheduled meeting, a quick bite of toast and a little bit of touching had slowed her down, but she had managed to get there on time in the end. Everyone in the office noticed the good mood their boss was displaying and chalked it up to the new case she had taken on that would require her to relocate to London for the foreseeable. This case would launch Paula Martin into the stratosphere. Little did they know that she was already there thanks to a certain brunette she left waving at her from her doorstep an hour earlier.

Paula had a lot to do to get ready for her move. She had to get all her cases reviewed and assigned to other lawyers, including the follow up on all finished cases, including Sally’s. The thought of Sally Webster still sitting in prison sickened her, and she knew how badly Sophie wanted to find new evidence to prove her mother innocent, but nothing was shifting. Duncan was a brilliant con-man and had premeditated the details so thoroughly they all fit together perfectly. His sob story about his dead wife had won over the jury and had sealed Sally’s fate when she and Sophie had pulled their stunt to delay the trial. Paula shook the memory of it all from her mind. It was a new day and she was very in love and she wasn’t going to let anything ruin it. Her heart warmed when she thought of Sophie and she shivered, remembering their morning activity.

“What’s that look on your face?” asked her assistant who was standing in Paula’s doorway looking at her boss.

“Nothing that concerns you!” replied Paula playfully, a smirk pulling across her face.

“Mmm, hmmm. Ok. Well, I have spoken to the estate agent who is going to list your house as a rental. She is coming in later to meet with you at half six, then wants to go through the house afterwards. Can you manage that?” Alex asked her secretive boss.

“Uhm, yea, let her know that will be fine. Did you ask her about the details of the furnishings? I don’t want to move anything with me to London, so it needs to rent fully furnished and I don’t want anyone in there who is going to mess up my things!”

“That’s why I found an estate agent who specializes in high-end rentals. The clientele is always fully vetted, but I would suggest you pack up any valuables you cannot live without … just in case.”

“You’re a star, Alex! Thank you. I have so much to get handled in such a short time, plus Ian Walker is supposed to courier some files for me to get started on already. I am going to need you as my liaison here, so I know what’s going on. You’re up for that, right?”

“Stop worrying about things here, Paula. I will provide you with what you need. You know you can trust me not to let this place get out of hand. Plus, you’ve got the associates in place who will handle the cases. It will all be fine. You just need to go and show them what Paula Martin is made of, so I can retire early once you become the highest paid solicitor in Britain with the most stellar assistant!”

“No pressure, then! Can you be sure to bring in all the case files I need to go through? I better get a start before they get away from me.”

“They are on your credenza right behind you,” Alex pointed, a confused look on her face. Paula had made the same request last night before she left. “Are you ok? You seem, I don’t know, a bit distracted.”
“Uhm, I’m fine. It’s nothing,” she lied. “I just have a lot to get done, that’s all.”

“Paula Martin, I have known you too long to fall for that crap.” Alex knew her well. “Spill!”

Needing to tell someone her news, she motioned to Alex to close the door. “Sophie and I are back together.”

“WHAT!? How did that happen?” asked Alex.

“Oh, I don’t know, I was doing fine and making serious progress, you know that. Then, she wrote me this letter and came round last night, and …” a flustered Paula looked at her assistant.

“And?” Alex asked, already knowing the answer.

“When it comes to Sophie I just cannot control myself, Alex. All the feelings came flooding back and I found myself defenseless against her. God help me, I am so in love with her I cannot see straight … no pun intended,” professed the solicitor.

“I KNEW it! I knew you were going get back together,” Alex confessed. “Listen Paula, I’ve seen you with her and without her in your life, and you are definitely better WITH her. You’re so much happier when you’re together. I know you had some difficulties early on, but, hey, love is love, and you can’t control that.”

“Well, that’s basically what I decided. That I just need her. I don’t want to need her, I just do.”

“How did she take the London thing? I see you’re still going.”

“I told her I had to go and that I couldn’t expect her to be tied down to me when I’m not even here,” Paula explained, then a smile appeared on her face. “But she told me she didn’t care and that we could make it work if we both wanted it. She really is so …”

“Oh gag! I hate you. I bet you had sex all night, too, didn’t you?”

Paula didn’t even need to answer.

“I really do hate you! But, you deserve to be happy, Paula, so take this chance and run with it … and DON’T screw it up this time!” she commanded.

“I am going to do my best. But it is going to be so hard being away from her! She’s going to come to London when she can and when I have time to see her.” Paula sighed at the thought of them being apart.

“Oh, you really are disgustingly in love, aren’t you?” smiled Alex at her boss.

“I know. I’m doomed, right? Well, I will just have to get on with things. I am a strong, independent woman and I can certainly carry on with my life and not fall apart just because my girlfriend is so far away. I have a job to do, a big job, and I am going to focus and be productive, seeing Sophie when we can manage it. We are both adults and will handle it.”

“Exactly!” supported Alex. Neither woman was quite sure things would go that smoothly.

“Now, get out of my office so I can get some work done. Time is ticking. Oh, and can you bring me a coffee?” smiled Paula.

Alex retreated to get her boss a coffee, and Paula grabbed the first of four stacks of files to begin the arduous task of making sure everything was up to speed before she could head south.
Sophie arrived home and headed upstairs to change for her long shift at Speed Daal. Since Alya had covered for her last night, and thank god, she did, Sophie was now on the hook to repay the favor and would be working lunch and dinner shift. It didn’t bother her in the least. She was blissfully happy and thankful her life felt like it was back on track and moving forward.

After changing her clothes and putting on some make up, she headed over to get herself to work. When she walked into Speed Daal she spotted Alya straight away and her brow furrowed.

“Alya, what are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be working,” stated a confused Sophie.

“Well, honestly, I didn’t know for sure if you would be in,” confessed Alya. “I assume as you’re upright, walking and talking, that everything went ok with Paula last night?”

A huge smile pulled across Sophie’s face, telling Alya all she needed to know. “Oh Alya, I couldn’t be happier right now … well, maybe if my mum were out of prison, but right now I am just going to be grateful that Paula and I are officially back together.”

“Oh, Soph, that’s wonderful to hear. I am so glad for you,” Alya replied.

“But, there is one not so good thing to report,” Sophie said, the realization of Paula’s departure reentering her mind.

“Oh?”

“Paula has been hired to work on some big huge international case,” Sophie paused. “And she is moving to London for a year, maybe longer.”

“What? You’re kidding!”

“I wish I was, Alya. But, I can’t ask her to give up this opportunity. She said it will change her professional life, like loads. She will basically be able to write her own ticket once they get through it all. She’s going to be like second in command of a team of solicitors from all over the world. It’s a big, big deal.”

“So, are you moving with her then?”

“No! We only just got back together, and I don’t think she wants to move me in on top of all the stress she will have. Besides, I have a life here. I still have to get my mum out of prison, I have my job!”

“So, you’re going to do the long-distance thing, then?”

“Don’t have much of a choice if I want to be with her, which I do. I just can’t not be with her, Alya. I need her.”

“Well, Soph, I am sure you two will be able to make things work. If you want something badly enough, there is always a way, right?”

“Yea, there is,” Sophie replied absentmindedly, secretly worried that something would happen to tear them apart again. She would just have to make sure that didn’t happen. “Well, lots to get done, so better get working. Thank you, again, for helping me out last night.”
“Happy to do it. Now, since you’re here and in great spirits, I am going to go have a girlie day with Kate and Rana!” exclaimed Alya.

“Give them both my regards, will ya? I was so glad to see they are ok, after, ya know?” Everyone on the street always knew everything going on in the personal lives of its residents. Sophie knew all too well that the news of her reconciliation with Paula would soon be fodder for gossip in the pub. She had better tell Tim and her dad before someone else did!

She shifted her focus to getting Speed Daal ready to open for lunch, but before she put her things in her locker, she texted Paula.

*Hello, my sexy lover. Been missing u all morning and can’t wait until I am in ur arms again, tho it will likely be late bc I am working a double today, but defo want to come to urs tonight, if ur free that is. XXX S*

She got a quick response and she grinned ear to ear.

*Right back at u, darling! And of course, I am free, but only for u and ur amazing mouth. Will be up waiting … and ready. XXX P*

Paula, you naughty girl, you. Sophie could feel herself getting aroused at the text, so shot a quick response back and then put her phone away so she wouldn’t be distracted all day.

*U better take a nap b4 I get there bc I am going to keep you all night. Can’t wait to c u … or taste u later. XXX S*

Paula grinned at the text as she read it, her cheeks warming at the innuendo. She sat back in her chair, closed her eyes and let the feeling of being happy and in love flow through her, savoring it the best she could. Her life with Sophie was going to get challenging, and she knew their text banter would soon be the only contact they would have, other than some facetime and visits when they could manage the time. She hoped Sophie didn’t tire of waiting around for her, but she knew it was a real possibility.

*I will look forward to that, my love, and other things. XXX P*

*Back to work, Martin. Too much to do to sit daydreaming about her all day, though you’d like to.*

It was nearly 10:30 and Sophie was tired after her long work day, but not too tired to Uber her way to Paula’s house. She had texted that she was on her way, anticipation building in her stomach at seeing her love, though she had only left her a matter of hours before.

Sophie rang the bell and could barely contain herself as the door opened to the gorgeous woman standing there. She took no time to wrap her arms around her lover, pressing her lips immediately against Paula’s mouth, moving them both into the foyer away from the cold night air. Sophie fully enveloped the solicitor with her body and moved her lips to Paula’s neck and ears.

“I missed you so much today, babe. Oh my, you feel so good,” said Sophie, making as much contact with Paula as she could.

“Someone is in a good mood,” commented Paula, her arms wrapped around Sophie’s neck, savoring the feel of her lover’s lips on her skin. “Ohhh, that feels amazing, young Webster. I knew it would be worth turning my other lovers away this evening and waiting for you to get here,” Paula laughed as Sophie stopped what she was doing and pulled her head back to look at Paula.
“You, are not funny, Ms. Martin. There is only ONE lover you belong to, and you know it, so be quiet and let me use my talents to show you a good time.”

“Do you want to a glass of wine, or water, or to sit and talk about our days –“

“That can all wait,” said Sophie as she put a finger up to Paula’s lips, cutting her off. “Unless you want me to make love to you right here on the cold tile floor, you better get your sweet ass up them stairs and into bed pronto,” commanded the young brunette, beginning to tickle at Paula’s sides.

“Oh, okay, stop … you know I hate being tickled!”

Sophie didn’t stop.

“I’m going, I’m going,” laughed the solicitor, dropping her dressing gown on her way up the stairs, to reveal sexy lingerie.

Sophie’s mouth went dry and she began taking the stairs two at a time, so she could catch up to her lover quickly. She caught Paula just as they both reached the edge of the bed and Sophie began to remove her shirt. Paula put her hand on Sophie’s to stop her, “Wait! I want to do that.” Paula ran her hands up under the shirt and up Sophie’s sides, the touch eliciting erratic breathing from her lover, raising the black cotton shirt up and over Sophie’s head, revealing her bra and cleavage. Paula brought her mouth to the V between Sophie’s breasts, kissing lightly, licking along the edge of her bra. Both lovers shifted from being in control of their consciousness to being lost in a completely lust-filled fog. More and more clothing got peeled off, exposing more and more naked flesh, as the lovers fell onto the bed and used hands and fingers and mouths and tongues to explore and taste and feel each other completely. They made love for hours, pleasuring one another separately and together, late into the night. They were both thankful it was the weekend and they didn’t have to get up too early, but there were still things to do that needed to get done so they couldn’t sleep the day away.

The lovers lay with each other, holding and caressing, enjoying just being together. Neither wanted to talk about their impending separation. They just wanted to be.

Sophie was playing with the fingers on Paula’s left hand, stroking them one by one with her right hand. “I love just laying here with you, feeling you against me. I almost wish we could do this and nothing else, though I would miss the sex,” Sophie smiled.

“Well, we have all of it, including the sex, thank goodness, because I really, really, really like that part, too,” said Paula, emphasizing each “really” through a giggle. “The way you make my body feel is out of this world and I am just not willing to give that up!”

Paula’s mood silently shifted, and she became pensive.

“What are you thinking about,” said Sophie, responding to the look that now inhabited Paula’s face.

“Oh, just how lucky I feel right now, really, and I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve to feel this way. Who knew this old bird would have such a fantastic sex life with someone as, well, sexy and amazing and young as you? I feel like I’ve hit the sex lottery or something. And I’m not quite sure I deserve it.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I suppose I still feel a bit guilty about cheating on Tim. I go over it in my mind sometimes, what lead me to that point. I wish I could take it back, do things differently.”
“Why, so your marriage wouldn’t have broken up?”

“Not that per se. Tim and I probably shouldn’t have gotten married to begin with, if truth be told. We were young and in love, but I knew I wasn’t completely fulfilled by him because I loved women, too, and as I’ve gotten older I know that I prefer women more. I prefer you, more like.” She kissed Sophie on the nose. “But the kids came along and life kind of took over. I started building the firm and running around after the kids and him and … I don’t know, somehow, I just lost Paula in the shuffle. Eventually I just didn’t know who I was anymore, and I was unhappy, and he was unhappy, but our lives were so intertwined that I didn’t know how to fix any of it. We began fighting about seemingly everything and we just didn’t see the world the same way anymore, and it got hard on the kids with us bickering all the time. Then I found myself wanting something very different. I suppose I went through a mid-life crisis of sorts, and I wound up cheating on Tim, probably because I wanted something drastic to change.”

“How many times did you sleep with her?”

“Four. The sex wasn’t even that good if I’m honest. I took a lot of risks at being found out, and truthfully, I think on some level I wanted Tim to find out, so we could finally shift out of the quagmire we were in. But, in the end, it turned out to be the beginning of the end of the marriage.”

“What happened to her?” Sophie felt a pang of jealousy thinking about Paula with another woman.

“She was pretty much finished with it all before it even physically ended. I think I was just a bit of fun for her.”

“And for you? Did you love her?” Sophie braced herself for the answer.

“No. Not in the slightest. Funny, when I think my marriage imploded all for something that really meant nothing. I hurt my kids terribly, for what? A couple of rolls in the hay? It makes me so ashamed.”

“Babe, we all make mistakes. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You never stopped loving your kids, and it sounds like your marriage was already doomed before you had the affair. Not that the affair was a good idea, but it’s not like you wanted to hurt anybody.”

“Oh, Sophie, you are such a sweet soul. You really just want to see all the good in the world, don’t you?”

“I know that I see good in you. I don’t think any less of you for what you did. I am not here to judge anyone.”

“Can I ask you something?” Paula looked Sophie in the eye. She nodded, a little afraid of how the conversation was turning, thinking she was going to ask about Sian. “Are you afraid I will cheat on you while I’m away?”

This took Sophie by surprise. She thought for a moment and answered as honestly as she could, “Paula, I know without a doubt that you love me, and I am sending you off to London with complete trust in that love and I have to believe we can both be strong enough to resist and temptation that comes to either of us. I promise I won’t betray you.”

“Well, that’s quite a mature answer Sophie Webster.”

“Yea, look at that … I’m growing …” smiled Sophie, trying to be mature.

“You’re stunning, is what you are.” Paula gazed at Sophie lovingly. “And if I were 10 years younger
I would ravage you again, but alas, I am pooped. Sleep in on my agenda. Lots to get done.” Paula yawned. She leaned down and kissed Sophie, wanting to prolong the feeling, but giving in to her exhaustion. “Good night, baby. I love you.”

“And I love you. So very much. Sleep well.”

The lover’s pulled each other close and settled in for some much-needed rest. Paula drifted quickly into slumber, but Sophie lay there holding her love, a lump sitting in her gut. She was fighting with herself about her fear that Paula might meet someone else while in London, someone better for her than Sophie. She knew she was being paranoid and she would have to do everything in her power not to let it show and explode on her. If she couldn’t control it, she might lose Paula and her future with the solicitor.
Paula stood at the baggage claim area waiting nervously for a glimpse of her youngest child who was returning from her trip abroad. It had been four long months since her departure and Paula’s life had seemingly changed completely in that time. She had not talked to Isla about Sophie, at all, and it now made her nervous. She had no idea how she was going to react to the fact that her mum was dating someone her own age, someone she had literally tried to set her up with once.

*How was she going to tell her?* ’Isla, you remember Sophie? Yes, well, we have been shagging since you left and are in love.’ *Oh, this is not going to go well, is it? Why didn't I tell her before now? Oh, shit, there she is.*

“MUM!”

Isla spotted her mum and came at her for a very big bear hug. Paula thought her daughter looked so grown up and like a changed woman.

“Oh, my baby girl! I am so glad you’re home.” Paula pulled her out of the hug. “Let me look at you. You look amazing! Maybe I should go traveling again if you come back looking like this!” She wrapped her daughter up in her arms again.

“Well, your new adventures are only about to begin, mum,” Isla commented, referring to her upcoming departure for London. “I’d say that’s something incredible to look forward to. Are you still leaving next weekend?”

“Yea, that’s the plan. Are you sure you’re going to be okay at your dad’s? You can always stay in the house, you know.”

“We’ve discussed this, mum. I don’t want to be in that big old house all by myself. Dad’s is fine. Plus, I will be busy digging back in at work and getting around to see my friends and such. Plus, I am planning to come to London to see you!” Isla noticed a look on Paula’s face. “What? What’s that look for?”

“What look?” Paula knew she was going to have fess up soon.

“What’s going on, mum? I know when you have something on your mind, so you might as well spit it out.”

“Let’s get your luggage first, then we can go for some lunch and I will tell you all about it. And before you say anything else, there’s nothing to worry about. Just a lot has changed while you were away.”

“Oh boy. I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Hellllooo, earth to Sophie.” Kevin was waving his hand in front of his daughter’s face for some reaction. She had been a different person since she had gotten back together with her ex, but today she was acting strange, like she was apprehensive about something.

“Huh?” said Sophie, absentmindedly.
“Are you ok, Soph? You’re acting right weird. Are you and Paula fighting or summit?”

“What? No, dad, we are not fighting. She’s actually at the airport picking Isla up, if you must know,” Sophie said trying to hide her annoyance.

“Oh, now I get it. The daughter is back and you’re gonna have to face her, aren’t ya?” Kevin grinned.

“Dad, it’s not funny! This is serious. Paula hasn’t exactly told Isla about us yet.”

“Oh, so she doesn’t know you’re back together, then? Well, it’ll be ok, Soph. She will just have to readjust like we all did. No biggie.”

The look on Sophie’s face told Kevin differently.

“What’s wrong with you? You’re acting like she’s never heard your name before,” said Kevin, shaking his head at his daughter.

“Well, that might not be too far from the truth, dad.”

“You’re kidding me!! She hasn’t told Isla about you? Nothing?” A laugh belted out of his throat.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes!”

“Dad, you’re making it worse! I am a nervous wreck about this. What if she has a fit and forbids us to see each other?”

“What, you mean like your mum did?”

“Point taken.”

“Besides, Paula won’t let her do that. You’re both grown women for heaven’s sake and, like everyone else, Isla will get used to it … eventually. Stop fretting. Everything will be fine.”

Paula had taken Isla for a nice lunch at her favorite place downtown. They had done nothing but chat about Isla’s adventures, which was just fine with the solicitor as she was dreading the talk she knew she had to have with her daughter about Sophie. She just didn’t know how it would go over, but she knew it was inevitable and she was just going to have to get on with it.

“You’ve gone quiet again, mum. Please tell me what the heck is going on. I’m starting to worry something is really wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Isla. It’s just a bit … delicate, is all, and –“

“Mum, you just need to tell me. I don’t care how ‘delicate’ you think it is. You’re driving me mad.”

Paula took a deep breath and revealed the first bit, “I’ve been seeing someone … and it’s serious.”

“Wow, serious, huh? That’s great! So, tell me about him. Or is it a her?” she asked, wondering why her mum was being so cryptic. “And why haven’t I heard about someone you’re serious about until now?”

“Uhm, it’s a her.” She had to let this all out a little at a time.
“Aaaand? Honestly mum, this is like pulling teeth! What’s the big deal?”

Paula swallowed hard. “Isla, it’s Sophie.” Paula looked at her daughter to see if there was recognition that registered with the name.

“Sophie? Not ringing any bells here, mum. Am I supposed to know who you’re talking about?”

“Sophie … Webster.” There, she said it.

The name was familiar. Isla said it in her mind and then the light went on! “Wait, you mean … shut up, mum! You are not dating someone half your age, are you?” she burst out laughing.

“What is so funny?” This was certainly not the reaction Paula was expecting.

“Well, it’s just, I don’t know, a bit odd, I suppose. Don’t get me wrong, you’re entitled to date whoever you like, but, Sophie Webster? I just can’t see it. And you two are serious? How serious? Don’t tell me you’re getting married?”

“No, we are not getting married! We’ve only been together for a few months, but it’s more than a fling, Isla.” Paula paused for a moment, then continued, “I’m in love with her.”

Isla could see her mum was serious. “And she feels the same way?”

“Yes, she does.”

“And you’re sure she’s not just wanting a sugar-mommy?”

“You’re not going to make this easy, are you?”

“Oh, not if I can help it,” the young woman grinned playfully. She waved the waiter over, “Can we have another bottle please. This is going to be good.” Isla kicked back in her seat, settling in for the ride. “C’mon, spill. I want to know everything.”

Paula started from the beginning and took Isla through the events of the last few months. Her daughter seemingly went through all the emotions as her mum relived the details of her relationship with Sophie – dinner at Sally’s, them sneaking around, Sally catching them out, the trial, the blunders, the break up, and then the letter and subsequent reconciliation between the two.

Isla sat, dumbfounded. “Why on earth did you not tell me any of this until now, mum? I could have helped you through it.”

“I didn’t want it to distract you from your travels. You were having such a good time, I didn’t want you worried about me. In the beginning, I was just a kid in a candy store, happy and giddy, and everybody hates that person, so I spared you that, especially since you and what’s-her-name had just broken up. Then things went tits up and I was so busy trying to keep Sally out of trouble and hold Sophie together, I just didn’t really want to have to explain it all. Then, we broke up and I thought what’s the point in even telling you about it at all. But, now we are back together and you’re home, so …”

“Well, you should have told me!”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Paula was trying to get a read on her daughter and how she felt about the whole thing. “So, aren’t you going to say anything?”

“What’s to say? You’re a grown-ass woman and you can get serious with whomever you like. I
can’t tell you how I feel until I see you two together, you know. I liked Sophie when I met her, so I
don’t assume I will dislike her now, but, like I said, I won’t know until I see for myself. Have you
told dad?”

“It’s none of his business, Isla.”

“Well, he’s going to find out eventually, mum. You might as well tell him and get it out of the way.
He should be home when you drop me and my stuff off. Perfect time!”

“Oh, don’t make me do that! Why do I have to tell him? It doesn’t affect him.”

“It’s up to you, but you really should be a grown up about it. You wanted to know about his
girlfriends when he had them.”

“That’s because you were still young, and I didn’t want him dragging people around who would be
a bad influence on you!”

“Mmm hmmm. Ok, mum. Whatever you say.”

“So, are we good, here? You’re not going to be weird with me about this?”

“Why, is Sophie coming round tonight or something?”

“Only if you want to meet her … properly … again. Ugh, you know what I mean. I thought since
it’s your first night home I would give you the choice. She can join us for dinner if you would like.
Or you can spend time with your dad. It’s up to you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss this for the world! I am going to see lots of dad. You, on the other hand, are
jetting off to London, so I better get some mummy-time while I have the chance,” laughed Isla. “By
all means, bring Sophie around for dinner. I’m dying to see this with my own eyes!”

“You’ll play nice, won’t you?” asked Paula, knowing Sophie was very nervous about Isla knowing.

“Course I will. You know me, mum!”

“Yea, that’s what I’m afraid of!”

“The sex must be really good,” Isla commented, winding her mum up.

“Isla Marie Martin!” Paula playfully slapped at her daughter. “Don’t be gross, little madam. I can still
take you over my knee.”

“Ok, now I am getting kinky images in my mind about spanking …” Isla roared with laughter at her
mum’s face.

“What kind of weirdo are you? Most kids stick their fingers in their ears at the mention of their
parents having sex, but not you!”

“You raised me. Must be your fault. Since when are you shy about talking about sex anyway? I
remember, oh so painfully, having to listen to you go on about condoms and STIs and orgasms at the
dinner table when I was 13!”

“Well, that was different. It was my job to educate you about things and -.”

“Why is it different?”
“Well, because, I don’t want to discuss my sex life with my daughter, for heaven’s sake.”

“Why not!? We are both adults now, mum. I know you have sex and you know I have –”

Paula stuck her fingers in her ears and started singing, “la, la, la, la, la, la ...”

All Isla could do was laugh.

“Oh, you’re just going to have fun with this, aren’t you?” Paula inquired.

“I’m sorry, mum. It’s just too easy.” She loved that they could talk about this stuff openly. “I promise not to embarrass you in front of Sophie.”

“You’d better not, or I am leaving all my sugar-mommy money to your brother!” Paula mock threatened.

“You have my word!”

“Oh, well, I am going to take you to your dad’s now. I will text you and let you know about dinner. I thought I would cook something decidedly English as you’ve been away for so long,” said Paula.

“Oooh, I’d love a good Shepard’s Pie!” Isla exclaimed.

“Shepard’s Pie it shall be!” agreed Paula.

Sophie was on pins and needles waiting to hear from Paula. They had tentative dinner plans, but it all depended on how things went with Isla, so she was kind of in limbo. The pair had spent a lot of time together over the past week, Sophie helping Paula prepare for her move. They had gone suit shopping, Paula wanting to sharpen up her wardrobe considerably, and Sophie had come away with a few new bits and bobs of her own, all gifts from her love. They had sorted through the rest of Paula’s clothes and personal items and organized it all into two categories – things she would ship and things she would take with her on the train. The estate agent had come by to finalize paperwork as she had already been successful at renting the house.

Sophie was nursing her Pinot Gris as she scrolled through her phone checking social media when her phone chimed with a text alert.

*How does homemade Shephard’s Pie sound for tea? Isla is at Tim’s now but will be joining us at 7. You can come round and help me make dinner if ur up for it. Xxx P*

That’s all I get???

Then her phone chimed again.

*BTW, she took it all very well. Didn’t seem phased at all. 😊*

*Oh, thank god!*

*Phew, good news! Will head home for a shower then come to urs. U can teach me how to make SP. Can’t wait to c u. Been a very long 9 hours since I held u. xxx S*

*Why bother going home. Come shower here. With me.*

*On my way, u naughty girl u.*

Paula laughed at her partner’s text and grabbed the food from the bags and began her prep for dinner.
She grabbed a bottle of wine and decided to start without Sophie, so poured a nice glass and turned on some music. She was chopping and peeling away when Sophie appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, a very lustful grin on her face.

“You are the sexiest woman I have ever seen in my life,” professed Sophie as she moved toward her lover.

“There you are, baby!” exclaimed Paula, rinsing the onion from her hands so she could embrace her lover. “C’mere you.” Paula wrapped herself around Sophie and planted a wet kiss on her mouth.

Sophie could taste the wine on her partner’s lips and it shot a jolt of desire through her. Paula moved her body to the music against Sophie while still kissing her, causing things to heat up between them very quickly. The young brunette’s hands grabbed at Paula’s backside, squeezing it and moaning at the feeling. She loved Paula dressed so casually in old baggy jeans and a white cotton button up shirt, such a contrast to her usual power suit. It always made Sophie want to strip her down to nothing. “Please tell me Isla’s not here yet,” whispered Sophie against Paula’s lips.

Paula pulled back and grinned, “Isla’s not here yet. What did you have in mind?”

“Someone promised me a shower if I recall correctly,” mused Sophie as she gently ran her hand up the front of Paula’s shirt to her bra-clad breast, squeezing at the hardened flesh there, attaching her lips to her lover’s neck.

“You keep that up and we might not even make it upstairs,” breathed Paula heavily into Sophie’s ear.

Unable to wait, Sophie turned Paula around, keeping one hand on her breast while she ran the other down the front of her pants and into her underwear where she found Paula’s wetness. She began to rub her clit between her fingers as Paula moaned with pleasure. Sophie continued her ministrations against Paula, taking an earlobe into her mouth for a light bite. Paula was already on the verge of orgasm when they both heard the front door open and Isla chime out, “Hiya mum, it’s me!”

As the door closed, the pair sprung apart lightning fast and tried their best to compose themselves. Paula quickly straightened her shirt, making sure her jeans were fastened. Thankfully, Sophie had not shed any clothing. They were both flustered and trying to steady their breathing when Isla walked into the kitchen and looked back and forth between the two who were standing very far apart. A knowing look crept onto Isla’s face and she grinned, but had promised not to embarrass anyone, so feigned ignorance. “Sorry, I’m a little early.”

“Hello sweetheart,” croaked out a hoarse Paula, her voice a few octaves higher than normal, not quite able to look her daughter in the eye. “Uhm, you remember Sophie?” she motioned her hand in Sophie’s direction as she turned the music down, thankful it hadn’t been too loud.

Isla looked at Sophie, who was leaning up against the counter, her arms crossed over her chest. “Hi Sophie. It’s really nice to see you.”

“You, too, Isla.” Sophie knew her face must be bright red and she just wanted the ground to swallow her up. She didn’t know what to do with herself. Should she sit, should she stand next to Paula? She decided to stay right where she was. It was safer for her not to be too close to her lover, so she didn’t inadvertently touch her.

“Would you like a glass of wine? Sophie and I were just enjoying one,” asked Paula, realizing suddenly that Sophie didn’t even have a glass yet because the two had gotten distracted.
“Yea, sure, I’d love one. Thanks.” Isla plopped down on the stool at the island where Paula was chopping veg for their dinner.

Trying not to be obvious, Paula pulled two glasses from the cupboard and poured both glasses half full and handed one to Isla hoping Sophie would just grab her own. “Did you get settled at your dad’s?”

“Oh, yea, I unpacked some, but I have lots of laundry to get to still. Didn’t want to miss out on dinner, so I just left things a bit of a mess. I hope dad doesn’t go into my room,” Isla giggled.

Paula rolled her eyes, remembering what a slob her daughter could be. She hoped that she might outgrow the bad habit of leaving her things all over the place. “Well, I had better get this meal going or we will all starve.”

“Can I help?” asked Sophie, needing something to do other than stand in the corner.

“Yes, you can, love. Why don’t you chop the carrots while I make the potatoes,” Paula said, handing Sophie the bag and motioning for her to grab a knife from the block.

Sophie made sure to wash her hands well.

“Isla, will you go out to the garden and grab me a good handful of thyme, please?” Paula asked, needing to get just a moment alone with Sophie to reassure her.

“Sure, mum.”

As Isla retreated, Paula pulled Sophie over for a quick kiss, “You ok, darling?”

“She nearly walked in on us! Of course, I’m not ok, babe. She knows what we were doing.”

“Yes, well, that may be, but she’s an adult. She can handle it. Just take a deep breath and try to calm down, ok? It will be fine,” said Paula, trying to reassure her partner by squeezing her hand. “Just try not to cut yourself, ok? I don’t need a trip to A&E.”

“What about A&E?” inquired Isla as she walked back into the kitchen, a bunch of thyme in her hand, which she handed to her mum.

“Oh nothing, just warning Sophie that my knives are really sharp, to be careful.” Paula looked at her daughter and smiled at her. “I’m so glad you’re home, love. I have missed your face so much,” she said as she rounded the island to give her daughter a hug.

“Mum, what’s gotten into you?”

“What, a mother can’t show her daughter some affection? I won’t be here to do this much longer, so I have to make the most of my time with you.”

Sophie thought the two of them looked so sweet together and her thoughts shifted to Sally. One day soon, she and her own mum would share a moment like this. She just had to figure out how to make that happen.

Paula finished putting the Shepard’s Pie together in the dish and popped it into the oven. “Shall we take our wine into the living room, then?” Paula grabbed another bottle, opened it, and grabbed her glass to follow her lover and her daughter into the adjacent room. She let Sophie sit first, so she could then sit up close to her. She knew the young brunette would likely sit in China if it were up to her. Paula curled her legs up onto the couch and placed one hand on Sophie’s leg, wine glass in the other.
Sophie was as stiff as a board. Isla couldn’t take much more of the tension she felt radiating off her mum’s girlfriend, so decided to release the pressure valve.

“Sophie, are you alright? It’s just, you seem really tense,” asked Isla, taking a drink from her glass. “You’ve hardly said two words in the last hour.”

“Errr, I’m fine, really,” squeaked Sophie.

Isla just looked at her and smiled. “Sophie, please relax. I do not have a problem with your relationship with my mum. At all. Who am I to judge anyone? If you make her happy, that’s all that matters. So, please, feel free to hold her hand if you want to. I’m not going to freak out on you.”

Sophie felt stupid for being so paranoid. “Really? You’re really ok with us? The age thing doesn’t bother you?”

“I am really ok. Age is just a number. I don’t know why people are so into putting everything into boxes with labels on them. I don’t live my mum’s life for her and if she wants to be with you, then that’s her decision. Not anyone else’s. Just like me going off on my own for four months was my decision. She supported me, finally, after some wise words from you, so now I choose to support her.”

Sophie could see Paula’s influence all over her daughter. She was logical and non-emotional, very pragmatic. Sophie looked at her lover and let out a long breath, then placed her hand in Paula’s and intertwined their fingers. “Isla, I love her. I don’t really know how I am going to cope having her so far away, but, like you, I am going to support her, 100%. Because she is going to go out there and do something really big. And I am going to be her loudest cheerleader.”

Paula smiled at her girlfriend and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. “Thank you for that. It means a lot to know you’re going to be in my corner, no matter what.”

“Awww, you two are really cute together,” commented Isla. Then, doing the obligatory protective daughter routine, she said, “But I will say this. Sophie, if you hurt my mum, I’ll have to kill ya!”

The rest of the evening was relaxed and casual, with Isla telling lots of stories of her adventures in Cambodia, the trio enjoying their dinner and their wine. Sophie thought Isla would make a great friend and wanted to make sure the two of them stayed in contact while Paula was away. Then Sophie’s mood shifted a little bit when the thought of Paula’s departure entered her brain. One more week, then she’s gone. Sophie would not let her emotions crowd in and spoil the time they had left.

As the group enjoyed the last of their coffee, Isla announced it was time for her to leave.

“Why don’t you just stay here tonight, Isla? It’s late,” said Paula, taking her daughter’s hand in her own.

“No, I want to get home, so I can sort the rest of my stuff in the morning. Dad won’t tolerate my mess for too long. Best that I get a handle on it,” said the younger Martin. “Besides, you two need to have time together without the ‘kid’ hanging around.”

Sophie felt her face heat up at Isla’s innuendo. “Now, don’t be silly,” said Paula. “You know you can stay! We promise to be quiet,” laughed Paula, grabbing Sophie’s hand, trying her best to make Sophie relax again.

“Paula!” scolded Sophie through gritted teeth.

Isla laughed along with her mum. “Good night, both of you. I’ll see you soon, yeah?”
“Good night, baby girl. Drive safely, and text when you get home, so I know all is well. I will talk to you tomorrow,” Paula directed.

Isla gave her mum a big hug and opened her arms to Sophie for the same. “You two behave!”

The door closed, and Paula yawned. “I am just about too tired to walk up those stairs,” stated the solicitor.

“Why don’t I clean up the rest of the dishes while you get ready for bed,” said Sophie, placing a sweet kiss on Paula’s lips. “I will be up in a few minutes.”

“You sure?” Paula asked.

“Go! It won’t take me long. I’m a professional, remember?” Sophie pointed her finger up the stairs.

“Thank you. That’s so sweet of you. You’re taking good care of your old bird.” Paula began trudging her way toward her bedroom. Sophie swatted her gently on the bum and grinned.

“YOU are not old.” Sophie paused, then said softly, “You are beautiful, though. And when I come upstairs I am going to show you just how much you are loved.”

Sophie took a few minutes to herself as she cleaned the coffee cups and dessert dishes by hand, then set them on the counter to dry. She felt very lucky that everything had worked out with Isla ok. She was expecting a repeat of her mum’s reaction and another obstacle to her happiness, but Isla was wonderful and hadn’t put up any objections at all. She hoped it would all continue this way.

When Sophie got upstairs, she found her partner naked in bed, but fast asleep. She marveled at how much emotion just looking at her lover could stir in her. Paula was the most exquisite woman Sophie had ever seen and she was desperately in love with her. She stood for a moment, looking intently at her, so peaceful. Sophie took in her features – she had never taken the time to observe her lover’s characteristics closely, carefully, before. She had removed all her makeup and jewelry and had pulled her hair back away from her face with a hair band. Sophie studied her face - her cheek bones were high and pronounced with a perpendicular contour framing her jaw; her eyes were large and almond-shaped with perfectly arched eyebrows; her lips were full and sensual. *How can a person be so beautiful?* Sophie sat gently on the bed, so she could reach out to touch her lover. She traced the outline of her face with her fingers, slowly trailing down her jawline to her slender neck and on to her chest. Her body was just as amazing despite her age. Paula had taken care of herself and had kept herself in good shape. Her hips and middle were fuller than Sophie’s, light stretch marks visible on her abdomen, the mark of motherhood. Her breasts were amazing despite the pull gravity had taken over the years. Sophie wanted so badly to kiss her, but she knew her love needed to rest. She had great stamina for someone twice Sophie’s age, which was impressive to say the least, and could match Sophie sleepless night after sleepless night, until she would eventually just have to crash, like tonight.

Sophie undressed, turned out the lights and slid into bed next to her lover, reveling in the feeling of skin against skin, the warmth enveloping her. She pulled the duvet up over them both and draped her left arm around Paula’s waist, sliding her right arm under her neck so she could pull her lover tight to her. She breathed in her scent and listened to the even steady rhythm of her slumber. She gently kissed the back of her lover’s shoulder and snuggled her nose into the back of Paula’s hair, content beyond reason. She wanted to freeze this moment in time, commit every sensation, every scent, every feeling to memory so she could recall it when she needed to, when she was alone and missing her lover.
Saturday had come. And it made Sophie sick. Today she would have to let Paula go.

She lay in bed in the cold early morning holding her lover for the last time. Paula was sleeping, seemingly without a care in the world. The week had been a scurry of finalizing details and tying up loose ends. Paula had been terribly busy and relied on Sophie to help her situate several things, including the shipping of her things to London, as she was already getting bombarded with information from her new boss, Ian Walker. Sophie wasn’t sure she was going to like this fellow, as he had no qualms about calling Paula at all hours, including during last night’s dinner. Thankfully, Paula had not answered the blasted call, but did ring him back once they were finished, taking up what Sophie considered her personal time. Paula had spent the better part of a bloody hour talking to him, taking direction, having to get some files and make notes for a meeting happening on Sunday. On Sunday! Sophie didn’t get a good feeling about what her partner was going to be up against. She was going to literally be working non-stop.

Was it really worth giving up most of your life for a job?

Sophie mulled that question over in her mind, but came to the conclusion that it wasn’t up to her, but Paula, to answer. Sophie was going to stand by Paula and support her decision to take on this challenge, no matter how strongly she disagreed.

Paula stirred in her arms, and began talking in her sleep. At first it was gibberish and Sophie couldn’t understand or make sense of anything she was saying. Paula began thrashing a bit. “Wait. I can’t … the jury … wait, your honor, I need more time …”

Sophie shook Paula to wake her as she was panicking in her sleep. “Babe, wake up. It’s me. It’s Sophie Wake up. You’re okay. I’m here.” Sophie wrapped her arms around her.

Paula awakened slightly, still thrashing, still calling out. Once she realized Sophie was there, holding her, she grabbed her and held onto her tightly. “Sophie! Oh Sophie. Wha … I was dreaming, and it was all wrong …”

“Babe, you’re alright. I’m right here,” she said, rubbing her back.

As Paula’s body and mind woke, she sat up, her breathing a bit shallow and rapid. “God, that was so real. I just … they were … never mind, it’s not important.”
“It’s okay, babe. Come here and lay with me,” Sophie opened her arms and pulled her lover to her. Paula’s heart beating fast against her side. She rubbed her back again, trying to soothe her. “It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere. Try to go back to sleep.”

Paula’s body calmed as Sophie’s hand ran gently up and down her arm. “What time is it?” Paula asked.

“Just after 5. Why? You need to go back to sleep, babe. You have a big day today,” directed her lover.

“I don’t think I can go back to sleep just yet. Just hold me, please,” requested Paula, pulling at Sophie’s body.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. I just want to feel you next to me. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“I was already awake,” admitted Sophie.

“What? Why are you up so early?”

“Just thinking about everything. No need to worry. I’m okay. I’m just going to miss you,” said Sophie, her throat thick with emotion.

“Oh, baby, I know. I am going to miss you so much. I wish we weren’t going to be apart.” Paula lightly kissed Sophie’s neck. “You’re amazing, you know that? I don’t know how I would have gotten through the last two weeks without you. You have really been so helpful with so many things. I don’t know if I’ve properly thanked you,” said Paula, a lustful grin on her face, her hand tracing up Sophie’s side.

“You have thanked me many times if I recall correctly. I believe several times right here, a few times on the couch, twice in your office, oh, and once on the kitchen table,” mused Sophie. “But you won’t hear me complaining.”

Paula continued kissing her lover, this time along her collar bone, her tongue tasting the young brunette. “Mmmm, well, I think a little more gratitude is in order …”

“Babe, do you think this is a good idea?” Sophie asked as Paula continued to use her mouth on Sophie’s skin. “You need to sleep as long as you can, because once you get to London, you know you will be going non-stop.”

“Oh, I think this is a very <kiss>, very <kiss>, mmmm very <lick> good idea,” Paula smirked, then fully returned her attention to Sophie’s body, rolling on top of the young woman and spreading her legs with her knees, sliding her mouth down to her breasts. “In fact, the idea is to taste you <kiss> and feel you <kiss> and pleasure you, until I get a better one.”

Sophie wasn’t going to argue with Paula’s wishes, so she laid back and enjoyed the feel of her lover devouring her. She closed her eyes when she felt her right nipple slide into Paula’s mouth, the wet heat blanketing the flesh and sending shivers across Sophie’s skin. “Ooooh yes, babe, that feels so … oh … good,” she eeked out as Paula bit her gently. She wanted more. She ran her hands up and down Paula’s back, wriggling beneath her, moving her center against Paula, craving deeper contact.

“Mmmm, you like that, baby? Do you want more?” asked Paula, teasing her lover, trying to coax her closer to the edge, her hands moving across her lover’s skin.
“Yes, you know I want more …”

Paula moved her mouth from Sophie’s breasts to her taut abdomen, licking her way down across her hip to the inside of her thigh, hooking her leg up onto her shoulder, driving Sophie wild. She could smell that wonderful aroma of Sophie’s sex and it took considerable control not to just dive in with her mouth. Paula wanted to prolong her lover’s anticipation, teasing her until her body ached for her lover to enter her. She continued to kiss and lick at her thigh, getting excruciatingly close to her center, Sophie gyrating her hips, her back arching, seeking contact. Sophie was so wet and ready.

“Oh, please, I need you to fuck me,” Sophie cried out.

Paula knew when Sophie started to talk dirty that she was getting close to being primed for penetration. Her hips were bucking, and her hands were grabbing at Paula’s head, trying to force some pressure and contact with her center. Paula moved her mouth from her lover’s thighs, entering her tongue into the slick folds, licking deeply and fully from Sophie’s entrance to her ready clit. Sophie moaned loudly, pulling again at her lover’s head, her legs fully open and welcoming that amazing mouth.

Paula’s phone began to shrill, startling them both.

“What the hell …” shrieked Sophie, beginning to sit up.

“No, no, baby, don’t lose it, concentrate. Ignore the phone.” Paula reached up to silence the offending sound and returned to Sophie. She continued the assault on her lover with her mouth, moving one hand up to pinch and pull at Sophie’s nipple, trying to restore her arousal. She then began to suck on her clit with force, using her tongue to circle and draw rapid breathing from her lover. She was getting it back. She wanted to make her come hard, so she continued to lap at the wetness, circling her clit, sucking the nub, entering her with her tongue. Sophie was climbing again, her body craving more, so Paula inserted two, then three fingers into the young brunette. She cried out in extreme pleasure and she grabbed at Paula’s hand still on her breast and forced her to squeeze the nipple there harder than before.

“Oh, fuck yes, baby, fuck me …” Sophie pleaded.

This symphony of physical ministration continued as Sophie ascended to the edge of the abyss, then plunged over into surrender, arching her head back in sweet and complete bliss. She rode out her orgasm holding fast to Paula’s shoulder with one hand, her other hand grabbing at her lover’s hair, her body jerking involuntarily, her breathing erratic.

Paula rolled over to the empty side of the bed and grabbed her phone to confirm her suspicion at the identity of the caller.

Once Sophie’s body settled a bit, she turned her attention to Paula who was listening to the message that asshole Ian Walker had left. This was going to get old. Sophie just shook her head and waited patiently, running her had sensually up Paula’s thigh. Paula swatted her hand away.

“Stop. I need to listen to this.”

“Are you kidding me?” spat Sophie. “HE interrupted something very important and now HE gets all your attention.”

Paula rolled her eyes at her lover but continued to listen, then hung up, annoyed. “Sophie, I have made it very clear what this job entails, so I don’t want to hear how put out you are about it. I didn’t answer the phone, if you recall. I made sure you were taken care of, putting YOU first.”
“Whatever! It’s like we have no sacred time. He is going to have all of you in a matter of hours. I don’t know why he can’t leave you alone until then.”

“We are not going to have this argument. I am here, with you, right now, and you want to fight. I can’t help that he doesn’t sleep and chooses to call me when he does. All I can do is choose when to and not to pick up the fucking phone. I gave you your orgasm. What more do you want from me?” Paula spat, threw on a t-shirt, then stormed into the bathroom.

Sophie sat there, feeling angry. Were they going to spend their last few hours together in a spat? She allowed her fury to flow over her. Paula had been moody with her for the last day or so, snapping at her easily, all the change rearing its ugly head. Sophie thought about the dream that woke Paula earlier and realized the solicitor was beginning to feel the pressure of the responsibility of this job. And Sophie wasn’t helping by being combative with her. Paula was right. It wasn’t her fault that prat was calling her at all hours. Sophie walked to the en-suite and leaned in the doorway. “I’m sorry. You’re right, it’s not your fault. I’m being selfish.”

Paula looked up at her girlfriend standing naked in front of her. “I don’t like it either, Sophie, but it’s what the job requires. It’s not going to get any better, so you either have to get used to it, or …” She didn’t continue as they both knew what the or was.

Sophie walked up behind her lover and wrapped her arms around her. “I know.” She put her head on her back and hugged her.

Paula spun around in Sophie’s arms and embraced her lover. “This isn’t easy on either one of us. And it’s just going to get harder, love. Now, you know I love you and that is going to have to be enough to get us through this.” She placed a kiss on Sophie’s lips then pulled her into a full hug. She sighed heavily in her arms.

“Can we go back to bed, or do you need to call Ian back?” asked a wounded Sophie.

“I’ll call him later. Come on, you’re shivering,” directed Paula, pulling Sophie back to bed. They curled up under the duvet, not saying anything, just holding one another until they both drifted off to sleep.

A few hours later they were up, showered and dressed. Paula finished packing her toiletries into her bag and double checked that she hadn’t left anything she needed in her room. “Okay, I think I’m set. I just need to grab my work stuff for the train and we can be off,” she said.

Sophie’s mood was melancholy, but she was trying not to let it show too much. She didn’t want to send Paula off with her last memory of Sophie in a strop. She grabbed one of Paula’s bags and headed down to the car.

Paula wheeled the other bag down to her office for a final once over. She sat in her chair and ran her hand along the smoothness of the desk. Are you ready for this, Paula? The enormity of what she was undertaking was creating doubt in the solicitor’s mind. She didn’t know if she was up to it. Rarely did Paula Martin doubt her abilities, but this challenge was riddled with unknowns and that made her nervous. What if she failed? What if she hated her life? Could she live without Sophie?

“Penny for your thoughts,” came the request from the doorway where Sophie stood. She knew Paula was struggling a bit. She walked over and sat in her lover’s lap and put her arms around her. “Are you okay? You look, I don’t know, a bit scared.”
Paula’s usual in-control demeanor slipped. She closed her eyes and whispered, “Oh Sophie, I’m terrified.”

If Sophie ever had a chance to get Paula to stay and give up this job, this was it. She was primed for manipulation. Sophie looked at her and realized in that very moment, Paula and what she wanted meant more to Sophie than her own needs.

“Babe, I want you to listen and listen carefully,” the younger woman commanded, looking her lover in the eye. “You are going to be amazing because you ARE amazing. If anyone should be terrified, it should be that Ian Walker, because he has no idea what a force of nature you are and once Alexander sees you at work, he is going to want you to take over. Babe, they hired you because they know you are the best. They are giving you so much because they know you know your stuff. You are smart, you are honest, you are wise, you are great at your job and you are going to go in there and show them that they made the best decision by hiring you, and don’t you ever forget it. Otherwise, I will have to come to London straight away to kick your ass! Now, I want you to get up and go show them what Paula Martin is made of, and make me proud!”

All Paula could do was smile. Sophie had just delivered the kick in the pants she needed. “Do you have any idea how much I am going to miss you?” said Paula, hugging her partner to her.

“Well, hopefully so much that you never forget this,” said Sophie, placing a searing kiss on Paula’s lips.

They continued kissing for a few minutes, savoring one another, tongues caressing, a bit of sorrow passing between them at the thought that this sensation had an expiration. Paula pulled out of the kiss, putting their foreheads together. “If we keep this up I will miss my train.”

Sophie sighed and got up out of Paula’s lap, only to earn a playful swat on her ass from her lover. “Hey! Watch that!”

“Gladly …”

“Cheeky! I’ll put the last bag in the car. You grab your work stuff and I’ll meet you outside,” directed Sophie.

“Wait, before we go, there is something I want to discuss with you,” said Paula.

“Oh kay.” Sophie was a little worried.

“Well, I want you to look after something for me while I’m gone, I mean, other than yourself.”

“Uhm, okay, babe. What?”

“My car.”

“You what?” Sophie thought she misheard.

“I don’t want it sitting in storage all year. It needs to be driven. I know you’ll take care of it for me … your dad’s a mechanic so if anything goes wrong he can handle that part of it. Sweetheart, I know you’re not going to go wild in it. I trust you.”

“Well, shouldn’t Isla take it or something?”

“She has her own car. What, you won’t do it? You’d rather I put it in some garage and let the tires rot?”
“Of course not! It just makes me nervous, I suppose. What if something happens?”

“Baby, if I can trust you with my heart, I can certainly trust you with my car.” She placed a kiss on Sophie’s nose.

“Well, I guess you have a point. Okay then. I guess I can force myself to drive that clunker for you,” Sophie grinned, knowing everyone on the street was going to be jealous, even Carla Conner!

“Good. Now, that makes me happy! My clunker and I thank you. Now, let’s go get Isla and have some lunch.”

“Before we go get Isla, I have something for you. I was going to give it to you at the station, but I’d rather do it now while we are alone.” Sophie reached into her pocket and pulled out a flat, square velvet box, handing it to Paula.

“What have you done?” Paula took the box and opened it, revealing a delicate silver charm bracelet. “Oh, Sophie. It’s beautiful.”

“The charm on it is a book. You used that as your excuse to come see me again the day we met, remember?”

“Of course, I do.” Paula smiled at the memory. “I was a bit brazen, wasn’t I?” Paula cupped Sophie’s face with her hand. “I was just so drawn to you. I knew I had to see you again,” said Paula, pulling Sophie to her, kissing her. “I’ll wear it always. Thank you.”

“I had it engraved on the inside. It’s a bible quote - 1 Corinthians 13:13 ‘And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.’ Paula, I have faith that we will weather this separation. I have hope for our future together. And I have these because of our love for each other.” Sophie fastened the bracelet onto Paula’s wrist and fingered the charm. “I am going add charms to it as we go through our life together. This is the first of many, you can count on it,” promised Sophie.

“You never cease to amaze me, Sophie Webster. You’re a marvel, you know that? I don’t know how I am going to manage not seeing your face or holding you every day,” stated Paula, closing her eyes while pulling Sophie to her tightly. She placed her lips on her lover’s mouth with fire, as if to leave her mark on her, to spoil her for anyone else who might think of touching her. “You are my future, Sophie. My one and only way forward. Thank you for being with me as I do what I need to do to get that future set.” The solicitor opened her eyes and looked at Sophie squarely. “I belong only to you, baby. Only you.” The lingering kiss was a promise, one that Paula was fully planning to keep.

And just like that, Sophie was alone. She had seen Paula off at the train station where they shared a sorrowful good-bye and a promise that, once Paula was settled, Sophie would make the trip to London. She didn’t know when that would be, and for now, the knowledge that it would eventually happen would have to suffice. Sophie was going to have to find a way to get on with her life in Weatherfield, turning her focus and efforts to freeing her mum from prison. Tim had some new ideas and Sophie was going to have to get on board or come up with something herself. Gina was still enemy number one, so she would be of no help.
Sophie parked the little red Mercedes at her dad’s garage and hopped out, needing to talk to him about where she was going to park what was now affectionately known as ‘the clunker.’ He had just come out of number 13, heading for a drink at the Rovers.

“Hiya Soph! What you doing with Paula’s car? Wasn’t she supposed to leave earlier today? Did her train get delayed?” Kevin was peppering his daughter with questions.

“No, she left already,” Sophie confirmed. “And before you ask, she put me in charge of her car whilst she’s gone, so I need to know if I can park it over in the other garage? If I let anything happen to it, she’ll break my legs or something equally awful.”

“Oh, yea, you can park it over there, I guess. Shouldn’t be a problem. You gonna be driving it, then?” inquired the mechanic.

“Yep! She doesn’t want it sitting idle for too long, so I am going to be traveling in style for the foreseeable.”

“Well, lucky you! Must be nice to have such a high flyer as a girlfriend. You want to join me for a drink?”

“Thanks, but no. I just want to park the car and get home for a hot bath. I wouldn’t be good company tonight.”

“Uh, the keys to that space are on the side table. Help yourself. Guess I’ll see ya later. If you change your mind, come on over.”

“Thanks, dad.”

Sophie tucked the car in for the night and headed home to sulk. She was running her bath when her phone chimed. Sophie grabbed it up and her heart soared when she saw it was from Paula. Sophie had promised herself she was not going to be the needy girlfriend, so decided she was going to make sure it was Paula who reached out first.

*Hi sweetheart! I am a bit over half way there. Ian has called twice. I miss u. Xoxxx*

Sophie replied quickly.

*Oh, baby, I miss u 2. Tell Ian to piss off. I am running a hot bath … wish my hot gf was here to get in w me! Xxx*

*What’s this hot gfs name????*

*Look on ur train ticket*

*Ur gfs name is Virgin?*

*No, but she was a virgin … a loooooooong time ago."

*She can’t remember back that far! What happened this morn is a stretch.*

*Oh, I remember this morn vividly – ugh, now am thinking of my hot gf naked! Thanks.*

*Lol, maybe that bath will help? What I’d give for a hot bath rt now! Give even more to be able to kiss u. XXXXX*

*Me 2, babe. Soon, tho, yea? I’m sure ur new digs will have a nice big tub, which I will certainly be
Paula’s train arrived on time and, as Ian promised, there was a man there to meet her. He carried her bags and tucked her into a luxury car for the ride over to her executive apartment over in the financial district, not far from Cooper Securities. London was a beautiful place and Paula thought she would enjoy living in this amazing city … if she ever got time to see it. Ian Walker was going to demand all her time, but, he was paying her handsomely for the privilege, so she was going to have to adapt.

The car pulled up to a high rise and stopped. The doorman opened the car door and welcomed Paula by name, showing her into the building.

“Ms. Martin, I will see you up. Your belongings will be brought up to you momentarily.”

“Thank you, Thomas,” said Paula, noting his name from the engraved name plate on his jacket.

As they rode the lift, Thomas familiarized Paula with some of the building amenities and how to contact him directly for any assistance. There was a concierge available 24/7 to assist with any request. There was a spa, a pool and a very extensive exercise room. Paula couldn’t imagine having any time to enjoy any of it.

“Thomas, have my other belongings arrived?”

“Yes, ma’am. They have been placed in your apartment per your request. If you need assistance moving anything, please don’t hesitate to call upon me.”

The lift stopped on the 24th floor and Paula grinned to herself as they exited, thinking of Sophie, her beautiful 24 yr old girlfriend. Paula followed Thomas to a door marked 2401. He unlocked the door and pushed it open to allow her to enter first. He then placed the key in her hand. “Again, Ms. Martin, if you require assistance, please just ring.” She reached into her purse for some cash. Thomas held up his hand to stop her, “Mr. Walker has taken care of everything. Have a lovely evening.”

Well, it seemed Ian had indeed taken care of everything. Paula walked into her new home and was quite pleased. It was decorated very nicely, exuding a homey feeling and not at all the corporate sterility she had seen before. There was fire burning in the fireplace in the living room and, also one in the master bedroom, a touch Paula liked a lot. The en-suite had a huge bathtub and she smiled thinking again of her lover. There was another bedroom, a nice kitchen, a dining room and an office, all to Paula’s satisfaction. She would be quite happy here for the next year, she thought. It was only missing one thing.

It was still early after Sophie’s bath, so she decided to go see Tim to discuss their next move to get Sally out of prison. Paula had confirmed many times that the only way Sally was getting out was if Duncan confessed. How the hell they were going to get him to do that was beyond Sophie.
Tim wasn’t home. He was likely having a pint, so she headed across the road to find him. Sure enough, he was belly up at the bar with a nearly empty pint in his hand.

“There you are, Tim. I’ve been looking for you,” said Sophie, standing next to him.

“Hiya Soph. Thought you’d be under the duvet now Paula’s gone,” said her step-dad.

“No, I’ve decided I have a life to live and I am not going fold up and die while she’s gone. We are back together and that is going to have to sustain me. I’m going to see her once she gets her feet,” responded Sophie. “Besides, we have things to do! Any new ideas?”

“Other than going over to Duncan’s a beating a confession out of him, no. We have to figure out a way to use May, Soph. She’s the key. But, how? His flaming daughter doesn’t even know she’s alive. How sick is that? Keeping something like that from your own daughter.”

“I know. But at least we know not to try to get to him through her. She’s a waste of time.”

“Yea, but we need some leverage. I can’t just sit here and do nothing, Sophie. I’ve gotta try to get through to him.”

“Tim, you need to leave him alone. I don’t need you locked up, too. And if you go around there you know that’s what will happen, so leave it. It’s been a long day, so I am going to go home and wait for Paula to call me. She should be to her apartment by now,” said Sophie, checking her phone for the time. “Don’t do anything stupid!”

As Sophie headed out, Tim dialed his phone. “Brenda, it’s Tim. I need a cab.”

Sophie walked into number 13 and looked at the time, nearly 9. She wondered why Paula hadn’t called. Surely, she was there and finally in her apartment. Sophie was hungry, so made herself a sandwich and sat with her dad and Jack who were watching telly.

“You heard from Paula, Soph?” asked Kevin.

“Not yet. She’s probably getting her head around it all. She’s had a long day,” replied the young Webster. Just then her phone rang. It was her love and her heart jumped. She answered it immediately.

“Hi babe! I’ve been waiting for ya to call. How are you? You made it okay?”

“Hello sweetheart. Oh, it’s good to hear your voice. Yes, I made it just fine and I am in my new place. You should see it, honey, it’s quite something. First class all the way. And the bathtub is huge!” Paula laughed. “I can’t wait for you to see it!”

“Well, nothing here has changed in the last few hours. I just miss you like crazy and I am not at all happy that I don’t get to kiss you goodnight. You must be absolutely exhausted.”

“I am very tired, so I am going to have my own hot bath now and then get in bed. I have a breakfast meeting with your favorite guy tomorrow.”

“Were you able to unpack all your stuff? Oh, did the trunks arrive?”

“Yes, everything was here when I got here, and they had someone come in and unpack it all. They even steamed all my suits! They look better now than when I bought them.”
“Wow, totally first-class, huh? I can’t wait to see this place.”

“Oh, and I am on the 24th floor so the view is incredible. When you get here I plan to make love to you in front of the fire!”

“Oh, now that sounds, mmmm, well perfect! I want to be there with you now,” whined Sophie, thinking she would make a deal with the devil himself if she could be snuggled up next to her love.

“I know. Me, too. Not long and you’ll be here. Until then, just know how much I love you and miss you. I will touch base with you tomorrow after I meet with Ian, okay?”

“Okay, babe. Get a good night’s sleep and go make me some money!” Sophie giggled. “I love you. Goodnight.”

“I love you, too, you sexy thing, you. Mwwwah. Goodnight.”

Paula hung up the phone then went into the bathroom to run her bath. Her thoughts lingered on Sophie and her heart ached for her lover. She didn’t know how well she would sleep without Sophie curled up next to her like she had been every night for the last two weeks, but she would soon find out.
Chapter 10

Sophie was still getting used to seeing her mum roaming around the street, an almost free citizen. By some stroke of dumb luck, all the pieces had fallen into place when May Radfield had returned to Weatherfield to see her husband, and convinced him to confess, taking the burden off her mum. Now it was only a matter of formality, or so Sophie hoped, in getting the conviction overturned and making Sally a completely free woman. Paula had her firm jumping through hoops once the confession came down, putting Sally back on the street.

The past two weeks had seemingly dragged by, each day feeling like forever, as Sophie adjusted to life without her partner. She went through the motions, getting up each day, going to work, helping her mum, etc., but the truth was, she was miserable. Nothing seemed to make her happy except the rare contact from her love. Sophie was grateful for any text or call from Paula, which were few and far between. She knew the contact initially would be miniscule, but she wasn’t prepared for how difficult it would be to manage her misery. But she was determined not to burden her partner with her sorrow. She would continue, like a trooper, and count the time down until they could be together again, though she had no idea when that would be. She was looking forward to their first facetime session tonight, Paula promising to call her at 9 so they could at least see each other, even if they couldn’t touch.

Paula looked up from the reports from Tokyo to see her assistant in her doorway. She pulled her readers off her face and looked up, “What do you need, Kylie?”

“I have the initial data collection on all the trades made from each office for the last seven years from IT. It’s quite a lot of information. What do you want done with it?” inquired the young blonde.

“That needs to be sent to New York. Steve Spencer is handling the breakdown and pattern detection, so make sure to send those asap. I need the trending reports yesterday! Let Steve know you’re sending that information encrypted via dropbox,” directed Paula, “and Kylie, make sure to –“

“Yes, copy you on the email. I know,” said Kylie over her shoulder as she retreated from Paula’s office. The two of them did not get on well, like she did with Alex, and it made her life more difficult, but she had no time to correct this small problem compared to the mountain of problems currently sitting squarely in her lap. When she agreed to take this on she knew it would push her limits, but she had no time to correct this small problem compared to the mountain of problems currently sitting squarely in her lap. When she agreed to take this on she knew it would push her limits, but she had been a bit naïve about the depth and complexities she would have to wade through. It was her own fault. She was a hands-on solicitor and, to do her job right, she needed to know the details of each facet of the information now raining down on her head. She wasn’t comfortable leaving those details to others to decipher and make decisions about. The entire structure of the arguments against the investigator’s lay in those details, and it was Paula who had to steward it all. She had teams in New York, Amsterdam, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Tokyo, all pulling together loads of information to disprove allegations of wrongdoing on the part of Cooper Securities. It was a complex and tangled mess.

“Ms. Martin, Ian Walker on the line for you,” squawked her intercom. Christ! Again? He wouldn’t leave her alone to get through one thing before piling something else on her to do list.

She picked up the phone, “Yes, Ian, what can I do for you? <> Mmmmm hmmm <> mmmmm hmmm <> yes, well we can’t go over any of that until we get all the discovery in house and reviewed <> yes, the team here is working through what’s been sent <> yes, I am waiting for that information <> once I have it, we can have a strategy meeting <> mmmmm hmmm <> well, it’s not going to be
Paula had been in London for just over two weeks and it felt like 10 minutes and 10 months all at the same time. She was easily working 100 plus hours a week and hadn’t had much time at all for anything but acclimating to her new surroundings and the details of the charges against Cooper Securities. Her life had become nothing but this case and digging into the details of how this company does business. She knew coming in she would find internal dirt, processes that bent the laws, accounting practices that were questionable if not downright criminal, but she had faith that Alexander Cooper ran his company on the up and up, for the most part. She wanted to believe the charges against the company were unfounded, so she plowed through, day to day, mining into the details to prove just that.

“Ms. Martin, Ian Walker on the line for you, again.”

_Hmmm, four minutes, this time._

“Yes, Ian? <> what, tonight? <> oh, in an hour? <> ok, I need to run home to change then <> yep, I’ll be ready at 8.”

_Great. Dinner with Ian and Alexander at 8. There goes my call to Sophie. Better let her know. Damnit!_

*Hello love. Sorry to have to cancel our call tonight. Was just summoned for dinner with Alexander and Ian at 8. Will likely be out until late. I’m so sorry. Was looking forward to seeing ur beautiful face. Maybe tmr? I love u. Xoxox X* 

Paula hated disappointing her partner. But, it couldn’t be avoided. She gathered her things and headed for the lift. She now had 45 minutes to get dressed for dinner. It was a good thing her flat was only a five-minute drive away. Having a driver and car at her beckon call helped in these situations.

Sophie’s phone alerted her to a new text, and her heart jumped, hoping it was Paula. She read the message and her heart broke a little. She was terribly disappointed, but knew Paula would not cancel unless she had to. She likely didn’t want to spend the evening with two old men talking about a lot of boring stuff! Sophie responded, trying to sound upbeat.

*Disappointed, but I understand, babe. I will miss seeing that gorgeous smile of urs. Call me when u get in? I love u and miss u more than words can say. XXXX S*

It looked like another boring night of telly at her mum’s, probably watching footie with Tim, a can in one hand, the remote in the other. Sophie never understood why men were compelled to hold the tv remote captive, despite never changing the channel or needing the remote at all, except to turn the box off once the show ended. But her dad was that way as well. Hmmm, men!

Ian Walker had the evening doorman, Edward, ring Paula’s flat once he arrived to pick her up. She was, of course, ready on time, dressed in a knee-length black cocktail dress with a sapphire colored shawl and four-inch black heels. If she had learned one thing about being in a male-dominated profession it was to be as tall as comfortably possible. Men were suckers for feeling dominant, but could be managed by a woman’s brain because they were afraid of femininity. She wore a simple silver diamond necklace, diamond earrings and, of course, the silver charm bracelet Sophie had given
“Good evening, Ms. Martin,” greeted Edward as she exited the lift. “May I say you are looking quite stunning this evening.”

“Thank you, Edward. Hello, Ian,” she said.

“Ah, punctual as usual, Paula. Alexander will be meeting us at the restaurant. You’re in for a treat this evening. We are going to his private club, members only, with one of the best chefs in the country.”

“Mmmm, wonderful.” Paula wasn’t impressed with white male privilege. She’d much rather be at home tucked up in her bed talking to her lesbian lover. This is going to be a long night.

The club was very much what Paula expected, overstuffed leather, dark wood, beautiful cocktail waitresses, the stench of cigars in the air – very masculine. They were shown to Alexander’s table, where he sat, Bowmore single malt scotch in hand. He stood as they approached.

“Oh, Paula, don’t you look lovely,” Alexander greeted, kissing her one cheek at a time. “What will you have to drink?” he asked, pulling out her chair. “Ian,” he acknowledged his head council.

“Oh, uhm bourbon old fashioned with a twist of burnt orange.” She thought of Sophie who could make her favorite drink to perfection.

“Scotch for me, please,” interjected Ian.

“So, Paula, how are you finding our fair city?” inquired the CEO.

“Well, I’ve not had a chance to see much of it, honestly. Too busy getting familiar with the details of the charges, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, well, I’m certain you will find some time to get out from under the thumb of this one … eventually. How are things coming along, anyway? Those bastards are pulling out all the stops trying to nail us to the wall. Despicable.” Alexander motioned for another scotch.

“Paula has a nice handle on organizing the teams and assigning the data details. We should have some information on the trading patterns, in a week would you say, Paula?” Ian was trying to impress his boss.

“Well, that depends on how quickly New York moves on it. The number of transactions alone is staggering. We need to make sure we do this right and don’t rush the analysis, so we don’t miss anything. This might take longer than you think.”

“Well, I’m sure you can manage getting us what we need as soon as,” pushed Ian.

The trio continued to discuss organization and strategy, including some internal investigations of certain individuals within the company whose earnings raised red flags and could certainly lead to discovering illegal activity. If they found it first, they could figure out how to deflect and defend. About an hour and a few drinks later, their dinner arrived.

“Oh, enough shop talk. Ian, how are Nicole and the children? I haven’t heard a word from you about them for ages,” stated Alexander, his head turning as a blonde cocktail waitress walked by their table.

“Nothing really changes there, Alexander. Nicole has her life, the children theirs. School is costing
me a bloody fortune and Nicole spends enough to run third world country,” he chuckled. Paula would bet her next years’ earnings that Ian Walker was as faithful a husband as Duncan Radfield was a saint.

“Good thing I pay you well, then. And Paula, how is your partner, Sophie isn’t it?”

“She’s wonderful, thank you for asking. I’m hoping she will come for a visit soon, if I can manage a day away from the office,” Paula said, sipping her drink to hide the smile the mention of Sophie brought to her face.

“Ian, make sure that happens, won’t you? I don’t want her overworked! She’s too important to this case,” he directed, pointing at Paula.

“Done,” said Ian, nodding his head while forking a cut of steak into his mouth.

“So, what does Sophie do in Manchester? I know virtually nothing about your mysterious partner,” inquired the CEO.

“She manages a restaurant, actually. But I think she is trying to find her calling still. She’s young and hasn’t quite got her feet yet,” answered Paula.

“Young?” inquired Ian, and in a not so innocent manner.

Paula felt both men’s eyes on her. Had she just opened the conversation up to a place she didn’t want it to go? Was she going to get an approving pat on the back for achieving what most men her age considered a triumph of sexual conquest? She knew they would both eventually meet her, so diverting the conversation would only delay the inevitable.

“She’s 24.”

The eyebrows shot up onto their foreheads and sly grins arrived right on schedule.

“And quite beautiful, I’d imagine?” asked Alexander, a hint of salaciousness in his tone.

“Easy to be in love when they’re beautiful, isn’t it?” stated Ian. It made Paula’s hackles stand on end at the implication that she was just another one of the boys, playing the big boy’s game, chasing eye candy.

“Sophie is much more than just a beautiful face. She’s bright and kind and honest –“

Gentle laughter came from both men, implying that Paula was making excuses for dating someone half her age, trying to mitigate the ‘real’ reason someone her age would be with a young, beautiful woman. Anger flared in the solicitor and she had to balance her emotions out, not let them run away with her. How dare they make assumptions about her or her relationship.

Paula stopped mid-sentence and eyed them both and said, “It’s sad to me that neither of you can remember what it’s like to have the room light up when your wife walks into it, somehow making the world seem a better place. And that you haven’t experienced for a long time that euphoric feeling you get in your stomach at the sound of her voice or that your heart beats a little bit faster when you hold her hand because you love the feel of her skin. But I especially pity you because you have your wives here with you and you don’t even appreciate it. I miss Sophie every moment I am away from her, and for that, I am grateful, because I know when we are together, we will both feel whole. So, yes, am happy to be in love with Sophie, but not because of her youth or how she looks in a bikini, but because of who she is and because she makes me a better person when I’m with her.”
Both men sat and squirmed uncomfortably. They knew they had insulted the woman sitting at the table. “Paula, I certainly didn’t mean to belittle your relationship,” started Ian. “Please, accept my apology. And when Sophie does come to visit, make sure you take the appropriate time away from the office.”

“Well, Ian, I am hoping she will be here this weekend, in fact. And I will indeed take you up on that offer to step away from the job for a bit. Thank you.” Paula grinned to herself. Now she just hoped Sophie was available to make the trip.

“And please, put any expenditures on the company card, Paula. As a token of my apology,” stated Alexander. “Treat Sophie to a spectacular visit and show her you made a wise choice in joining our team.”

Paula had played her cards perfectly, and both men knew it. They had certainly hired the right person, one who had just put two very powerful men right in their place without so much as a stumble.

They finished their meals, and Paula enjoyed listening to some of Alexander’s stories about starting his company over 40 years ago. She hadn’t decided yet if he was innocent of all the accusations being brought forth against him and his company, but she’d known him for many years and always had respect for him. His executive assistant was a dear friend of Paula’s, so she had an inside track on how he treated those who worked for him, and all reports were good. He seemingly loved his wife of 43 years, along with his four children and several grandchildren. They had all lived a very comfortable life and sometimes money and power can pervert the realities most people have to live under. But for all intents and purposes, all Alexander’s wealth and privilege had not warped him into being a greedy man. He ran a tight ship, but somewhere along the line a cancer grew within the inner sanctum of the company, bringing the law to his doorstep.

After a night cap, Paula said her good byes, leaving the two men to their cigars. Ian called for the car to take her home. Though he could be demanding, Paula thought him very intelligent. He was very successful, being a few years younger than Paula, and the head of the legal department at Cooper Securities. She reminded him in some ways of George Clooney, very polished and very attractive, but not at all Paula’s type. Even when she dated men, he would not have been her type. She imagined he had no trouble finding companionship when he wanted it, and likely not from his wife. He was handsome, intelligent and powerful, quite an attractive combination for unsuspecting young women.

Paula’s thoughts shifted to her lover and how much she missed her. She looked at the time – just after eleven. She dialed the phone, wanting to hear Sophie’s voice.

She picked up straight away and Paula smiled. “Hi babe! How was your dinner thingy?” Paula loved Sophie’s vernacular.

“Typical, I suppose. It was at Alexander’s private club, so it was a little weird to be surrounded by cigar smoke, scotch and a lot of white men! It just made me miss you something awful. I would have given anything to have you there with me.”

“You always know just the right things to say to me. How do you do that?”

“I guess we are just in sync is all. I do have a question for you though.”

“What’s that?”

“What is your schedule like this weekend?”
Sophie’s heart started beating rapidly. “Why?”

“Well, I thought it was about time you came to London.”

“Are you serious!?!?! Oh my god, babe, I am so excited!! Yes, I can come. I will get someone to cover for me at Speed Daal. When did you want me to come?”

“How about Friday? You can spend the weekend. We can enjoy the city, eat some nice food, shop –”

“I don’t care about any of that. All I want is to wrap my arms around you and never let go.”

“Well, that sounds even better. So, I will book your ticket and send you the details.”

“What do I need to pack?”

“Well, as I plan to keep you naked all weekend, there’s no need to worry with clothes.”

“You are going to get so lucky, Paula Martin. I can’t wait to plant my lips on you.”

“Well, you probably should bring something to wear for dinner. Alexander has given me the go ahead to spoil you a little, so a bit of shopping will be in order.”

“Alejandro?”

“It’s a long story, but one you’ll enjoy. I’ll tell you all about it when I see you. Oooh, I can’t believe I am going to see you in three days. I can’t wait to feel you against me.”

“Keep talking like that and I may have to hop in the clunker and come down now!”

Paula chuckled at her lover’s enthusiasm. “Ok, so, Friday then! I can’t wait, baby. I love you so much.”

“So, you’ll email me the train info, then?”

“Yes, as soon as it’s booked. I will have Kylie do it first thing.”

“Oh, the assistant. How are things between you these days?”

“Still a little icy if I’m honest. I just don’t have time to stroke her. I need her to step up and be a big girl.”

“Well, I certainly don’t want you stroking her!!”

Paula laughed. “Oh, there is only one woman I want to put my hands on …”

“I love you so much, babe. And I can’t wait to feel those hands on me!”

“I’m at my building, so I am going to go. It’s been a 17-hour day; I am a bit tired. I will text you in the morning, okay?”

“Alright, babe. Get a good night’s sleep and save up that energy. Your hot girlfriend is coming to town!”

“I certainly will. Can’t wait. Love you, baby!”

“I love you, too! Mwaah.”
Sophie could hardly contain her excitement! She was finally going to see her love. It had been the longest three weeks of her life and now she just had to endure three more days.

“Listen up, nothing, and I mean nothing, is going to stop me getting on that train this afternoon, do you hear me? I promised Yasmeen I would have this sorted by the time I left, so get your ass into that truck and make your way over here, now! I don’t care if you have to break traffic laws, you will be here, or I will find another supplier!” Sophie was yelling at her food delivery guy. They had a good relationship, so she felt okay giving him a kick in the pants at his lame excuses for trying to delay the morning delivery. Sophie was working until 1, then heading to get her train which left at 3. She was all packed and ready to go. It was just a matter of finishing up at work then off for the weekend of her life!

Paula was buried. The trade transaction data files had been crunched for the Hong Kong office and now needed review. Several not so appealing trends had been identified, which meant there might be some trouble on the horizon. Ian had been on the phone to her four times about this data since their dinner Tuesday evening. She knew, though he had given her the ability to take some time off, he would be pushing her for the analysis and subsequent strategy to combat anything negative. The lawyer sighed heavily. Sophie was going to kill her. She might have to work the weekend after all.

Sophie settled in to her first-class train berth, excitement practically oozing from her pores. It was only a matter of a couple of hours until she could embrace the love of her life and they could start their weekend together. She sent a quick text to let Paula know she was on the train.

“Hi sexy! I am sitting in luxury, awaiting departure. Can’t wait to see u! XXXX S*

Paula’s phone chimed. She knew it was likely Sophie and she wanted to scream. Why did life throw these fucking curve balls at the worst times? She was knee deep into the analysis report for Hong Kong and it would likely take her a few more hours to finish. And Ian just kept calling for updates, which slowed her down even more. She read the text and checked the time. 3:02pm. The train was due into the station at 5:14pm. Maybe she could send a car for Sophie. No, that wouldn’t work. Sophie would kill her. She was just going to have to focus and forge through. It would take her the good part of an hour to get to the station, so she would have to leave by 4. Damnit!

Sophie was kicking back, having a cuppa and a scone, enjoying the first-class treatment, scrolling through her social media, posting selfies. She couldn’t remember a time where she was so excited to see anyone in her life. The anticipation she felt at touching her lover overwhelmed her and set butterflies off in her middle. She checked her phone for the time – 3:48pm. Just over an hour and they would be together.

Just then, the train began to slow, then slowed some more, then came to a stop. After a minute or two, the conductor squawked over the loud speaker, “Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the
delay. There has been an unforeseen emergency that will put us on hold. I will do my best to keep you informed as updates come through.”

GREAT!!! Sophie’s disappointment was palpable. Why does this shit happen to me? She had no idea how long their delay would be, so she decided to give Paula a heads up.

*Train has been delayed. Not sure how long we will sit on the tracks. Will keep you posted. XXX S*

The text from Sophie came through as Paula was trying to figure out her plans. She was nearly finished with Hong Kong, but needed about another half hour. *Maybe I can get it done.* She kept working, keeping an eye on her phone and on the time.

Sophie’s train continued to sit. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes and no movement. There was apparently some mechanical issue with the track closer to London and they were all assured it was being attended to and they would soon be on their way.

*Still sitting here with no movement! This is making me crazy, babe. I want to see u now! But I will just have to be patient. XXX S*

*Thank god for train delays! Almost finished.* Paula called for Kylie, whom she had told to not bother her unless for an absolute emergency.

“Yes, Paula.”

“Can you get Ian for me?”

A few moments passed, then her intercom came to life. “I have Mr. Walker for you.”

“Ian, I have Hong Kong finished for you. I am going to email it to you now, then I have to leave to go to the train station to get Sophie. <> Yes, she’s coming in tonight. <> I told you about this several times this week and I am not canceling my plans. <> Dinner, tomorrow? <> Well, we <> no, I would love for you to meet her <> well, our plans are <> ok, then, dinner at 7 <> yes, we will be ready <> ok Ian, have a nice evening <> yes, we will see you at 7.”

*FUCK!!!*

Paula and Sophie had gotten roped into dinner with Ian. Sophie would just have to understand, and maybe she would begin to understand what Paula was up against once she met him. Now she had to get her ass in gear.

The train was finally in motion and moving quickly toward London.

*We are on the move with arrival time scheduled for 5:52. Only a bit late. Hope you’ve not been sitting waiting at the station. Can’t wait to kiss you! XXXXX S*
Paula thought she would have just enough time to make it to Euston if traffic cooperated. She let her lover know she would be there.

*Just now leaving the office. Should be there in time to meet ur train. Never looked forward to anything more. XXX P*

Paula’s car pulled up at 5:44. She instructed her driver to wait. She managed her way past the menagerie of people and found the right arrival platform for the train from Manchester. It was just pulling in when she got there. *Phew, right on time!* She waited with complete anticipation.

Sophie made her way down the aisle and to the exit as fast as she could, pulling her bag behind her. Once on the platform she looked for Paula but didn’t see her. She moved toward the exit, then stopped cold when she spotted her lover. They clapped eyes on one another and she saw Paula begin to walk very quickly toward her, a huge smile on her face. Sophie quickened her pace, moving as deftly as she could around the obstacles in her way, until, finally Paula was within reach.

The lover’s embraced in a fierce full-body hug and began to kiss one another, letting the world pass around them as if they were the only two people on earth. Neither would let go. They were both near tears with excitement to finally, after three weeks apart, touch one another.

“Oh my god, babe!” cried Sophie. “I can’t believe I’m here! I’ve missed you more than I can say,” as she continued to assault her lover with her mouth.

Paula pulled their bodies completely together, tucking her head around Sophie’s shoulder. “You feel so damn good! Don’t ever let me go.”

They stood on the platform, clinging to each other, for what felt like ages, just reveling in the feel of their bodies together. Sophie pulled back to look at her lover, both hands on Paula’s face. “I have never been happier to see anyone in my whole life!”

“Well, we should probably move from the platform and go do something other than stand here, don’t you think?” Paula asked, still smiling.

“I don’t care what we do, where we go, if we eat or don’t eat, sleep or don’t sleep, as long as I’m with you, babe!”

“Come on, love. The car’s waiting.” Paula held Sophie’s hand and they walked to the exit, not letting go.

Paula motioned her driver over and tucked Sophie and her bag into the back, then climbed in next to her. “Home, James, please.” Sophie grinned. Paula’s life was so … posh.

They chatted on the ride about the train delay and Paula’s panic at getting her report finished. Then Paula broke the news of their dinner date the following evening with Ian. Sophie took it all in stride, just happy to be with her partner, not worrying about anything. They pulled up at the high rise and Edward was there to greet them.

Sophie stepped into Paula’s flat and her jaw dropped open. “My god, you weren’t kidding, were you? This place is amazing! Holy shit, Paula, it’s nearly as big as your house. It’s really beautiful,” Sophie said, then pulled Paula into her arms. “But not nearly as beautiful as you.”
Now that they were alone, in their own private bubble, Sophie kissed her lover deeply, pulling their bodies together, hands roaming and feeling.

“Aren’t you hungry, baby?” asked Paula against Sophie’s lips. “I thought maybe some dinner.”

“I am. Starving. For you.” Sophie pushed Paula’s suit jacket off her shoulders. “You want to show me where the bedroom is, or do you want to do it right here?”

“You’re a bad girl, Sophie Webster,” moaned the solicitor. She pulled out of her lover’s embrace and tugged her to the bedroom by the hand, smiling a lustful smile. They reached the bedroom and Sophie took in the surroundings – large king bed, fire burning in the fireplace, an overstuffed chair in the corner, a large wardrobe and a long dresser – all very tasteful. But nothing was more attractive than the woman in front of her. Sophie stood for a moment, taking in the beauty of her lover, running her fingers down Paula’s arm to grasp her hand. “I can’t believe I’m here,” she whispered. “I am going to make you cum harder than you’ve ever cum before,” she said as she started to unbutton Paula’s blouse.

“Oh, god, I don’t know how I have lived without this …” declared the solicitor, eyes closed, enjoying Sophie’s touch. Her blouse fell to the floor, exposing her bra-clad breasts, her nipples already hard at the anticipation. Sophie pulled her body to her, latching her lips onto the skin of her chest, sucking gently, running her tongue along her bra line. Paula was in a haze as the young brunette pushed her gently back onto the bed and removed her pants, then climbed on top of her lover to continue kissing her skin. She roved up her neck to her earlobe, sucking the flesh into her mouth and tugging gently with her teeth. “You taste so damn good, babe.”

Paula’s body was already on fire, her hands and legs wrapped around Sophie, roaming over her back and pulling her close. “You have too many clothes on young lady,” noticed the lawyer.

“Well, you should do something about that then, dontcha think?” teased Sophie.

“Oh, I think I shall,” stated Paula, her hands tugging at Sophie’s shirt, untucking it from her jeans, then running her hands up Sophie’s bare back to lift the clothing over the young brunette’s head. She threw it blindly away to land indiscriminately on the floor, moving next to the buttons on Sophie’s jeans. She couldn’t reach the front, so she rolled Sophie over to straddle her, popping the button and unzipping her pants. She pushed them down her hips as far as she could, then got off the bed, grabbed the bottom of the legs and pulled the jeans off in one fell swoop. “Now, that’s much better,” Paula said, licking her lips and returning to straddle her lover’s hips.

Paula stopped for a minute to take in the sight before her. Sophie was laying there half naked, fire light shimmering against her, hair spilling around the duvet beneath her, love in her eyes. Paula thought she would cry at the rawness of her beauty. It overwhelmed her, and a lone tear escaped along with a ragged breath. She couldn’t move.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” asked Sophie, gently stroking her lover’s thigh.

Paula couldn’t breathe properly. She moved to sit on the side of the bed to try to get a grip on her emotions. She put her hand on her chest to try to settle herself.

A very worried Sophie sat up on her knees and began rubbing the solicitor’s back. “Oh my god, Paula, are you okay? Did I do something?”

Paula’s head whipped around. The thought that Sophie was somehow blaming herself for her state of emotion brought the lawyer back to her senses. She turned to face Sophie. “No, baby, you’ve not done anything, except be perfect. I’m just …” She didn’t have the words. “I just don’t know how to
say how I feel.”

“I know. I feel it, too. It’s wonderful though, isn’t it?”

“Oh, god, yes, it is.”

Sophie understood. The couple had moved past their bodily connection and into a place of deep passion, an emotional bond that transcended the physical. Paula hadn’t realized the depth of her love for Sophie until she saw her coming toward her on the platform at the train station. She had pushed her need for her lover out of her consciousness, so she could successfully be away from her without falling apart. And now that she was here, in front of her for her to touch and feel and connect with, it completely flooded her senses and swept her away with the force of a tsunami.

Paula pulled Sophie to her and held her close, breathing in her scent, feeling her warmth. “The only words I know to say are I love you, but they just don’t express it very well,” mused the lawyer. “I just need you, that’s the bottom line, I suppose.”

Sophie couldn’t get her body close enough to Paula’s. She clung to her lover tightly. “I know what you mean, babe. I want to crawl inside your skin and rest myself up against your heart and stay there forever.”

“You’re already there, sweetheart,” said Paula, kissing her lover’s nose. She noticed Sophie shiver. “Come get in bed with me. You’re cold.” The lover’s stripped off the rest of their garments and got into bed, pulling the down feather duvet up over them, snuggling down into the heat their bodies were generating.

Sophie held onto her lover, no words needed between them to say what they were both feeling.

“Can I make love to you?” asked Sophie sweetly. “I want to be inside you, babe, to feel every inch of you.”

“Of course, you can, love. I’d like nothing more,” whispered Paula, turning on her side and placing a loving and lustful kiss on her lover’s mouth. “My body is craving you. Here, feel me,” she said, moving Sophie’s hand between her legs to reveal a very wet center.

“Oh, I am so going to take you to heaven, babe,” declared the young brunette as she rolled on top of her lover and began working her way across her body with her mouth. “So, hang on.”

The pair took their time reconnecting, enjoying each other, making love over and over, until slumber captured them. They both slept deeply, finally back where they were supposed to be, wrapped up in one another, no words needed.
“Wake up sleeping beauty …” Paula whispered in Sophie’s ear and kissed it gently. “I have made you some breakfast!”

Paula’s body was trained to wake early, so she had already been up and showered and had time to whip up some eggs, yogurt, toast and coffee. The lovers had an eventful night between the sheets and Paula, for one, felt completely stress-free and refreshed. She wanted to make the most of their time together, so she slapped Sophie playfully on the ass, startling her out of her slumber.

“Oi … that hurt, babe! What do you think you’re doing?”

“I am waking my lover, so she doesn’t sleep the day away, thereby wasting time that could be spent out there, taking in the beautiful city of London! It’s a gorgeous day. The sun is actually out and there’s no telling how long it will last, so get your sexy ass up!”

“I thought I wore you out last night. Why are you already up … and so chipper?” the young woman groaned, wanting just a bit more time to sleep.

“Oh, you did wear me out, but I am a resilient old bird and my girlfriend is here to visit and I don’t want to spend another moment not being with her. Now, unless you want me to find another girlfriend, one who is upright and attentive, then I suggest you get a shake on.” Paula laid a kiss on Sophie’s naked shoulder then pulled back the duvet, so she could admire her girlfriend’s naked backside.

Sophie groaned again, but her brain was beginning to clear from its fog. She sat up and took a nice big gulp of her coffee, hoping the caffeine would soak in quickly. “I honestly don’t know where you get your all your energy from. I need an IV of this stuff. Maybe a shower will help.”

“Yes, you get a shower. I am going to check email, quickly I promise, then we can go out! What do you want to do today?”

Sophie eyed the clock. “Paula, for god’s sake, it’s only 7:30! Are you trying to kill me by depriving me of all my sleep?”

“Oh, come on! I’ve been up since 6. I’m usually up by 5, but someone kept me up late,” replied the solicitor, pulling Sophie into an embrace and kissing her collar bone. “Oh, this could be dangerous. If you don’t hit the shower I might not let you get dressed at all.”

“Sounds alright to me,” yawned Sophie, placing her arms over Paula’s shoulders, pressing her naked form to her, pulling her lips toward her for a sensual kiss. “How can you deny your naked <kiss> horny <kiss> girlfriend?”

Paula’s libido struck fire instantly and she kissed Sophie fiercely, palming a breast for a hard squeeze, pushing Sophie back onto the bed. She stripped off her own shirt rather quickly, Sophie working her jeans and underwear down her legs. “Oh, you are not playing fair, Sophie Webster.
Mmmm, god, you are so hot.”

“I’m all yours, babe,” moaned Sophie, grinning at her triumph. They could go out later.

It took only moments for Paula to attack her girlfriend’s body with her mouth, Sophie giggling and squirming at the sensitive spots around her ribs. Paula was a possessed woman. Very unlike their tender love making last night, Paula was devouring Sophie this morning, the need to own her lover obvious in her fervor. She had the young brunette on the edge of orgasm in record time, not wasting any efforts to push her over into ecstasy, loving the sound of her screaming out Paula’s name. She allowed her lover to recover from her bliss for a few minutes, then started on her again. It was like she couldn’t quite satiate her physical need for the young woman in her bed.

“Babe, you’re a wild woman this morning!” exclaimed Sophie. She realized Paula still had her bra on, so reached up to unclasp it, setting her breasts free. Sophie pulled a nipple into her mouth and squeezed the other, eliciting a whimper of pleasure from the lawyer.

The lovers rolled around in a heaving pile of lust, fucking one another with raw intensity, taking one another into the realm of delight over and over, until, finally, they felt satisfied. They laid together, amused at their loss of control.

“Wow, that was … something else!” Sophie declared. “Call me crazy, but I think we both needed that.”

They both laughed, knowing it was true.

“You think?” Paula acknowledged, rubbing her hand absentmindedly on Sophie’s stomach. “I’d say that was three weeks-worth of pent up sexual frustration. And boy was that fantastic! YOU are fantastic, baby,” said the solicitor, rolling over to place her body next to Sophie’s, intertwining their legs. “You know, I think, mmm, so far, this has been a very successful visit.”

“Yea, but don’t you want to take me out and show me London?” Sophie was winding her lover up.

“Why you cheeky little madam! We’d have already seen half the town by now if you hadn’t seduced me!”

“Ha! I seduced you? If I recall, YOU threw ME onto the bed and attacked me!” she grinned ear to ear. “I’m a vulnerable, innocent and you took advantage of me.”

“Yea, and If you’re not careful I will do it again! Now get your backside into the shower, and NO, I will not join you, you seductress. If I do, we will never get out of this flat! Now, I am going to finally check email, then shower, AGAIN, once you’re finished.”

“Why do you need to shower again, babe? I’m sure you smell fine,” playful sarcasm spilling from Sophie’s lips.

“I smell like a pile of sex, all sweat and pheromones. I’d probably have dogs and bees following me around London if I don’t bathe again. Now, you, shower,” she pointed.

“Bossy …”

Forty-five minutes later the lovers were stepping out into the bright London sunshine. It was just after 10am, still plenty early for a good day out on the town. They were both quite hungry after their morning activities, so stopped for brunch, including a couple of flutes of champagne. Alexander was
taking care of the bill, so why not enjoy themselves. They headed to Piccadilly Circus to be touristy and to find some souvenirs for themselves, cheesy reminders of a day of frivolity.

As they were walking around, Paula spotted a store she definitely wanted to go in. She pulled Sophie by the hand, into the shop, a huge grin on her face.

“Paula! Why are we in a sex shop???”

“Why shouldn’t we be? We have sex, don’t we?”

“Yes, we do … all the more reason we don’t need to be here. Our sex life is just fine, great, in fact.”

“Oh, there’s no harm in exploring in here a little bit, is there?” Paula headed down an aisle.

“Do I not satisfy you?” asked Sophie with a bit of a worried tone.

“Oh Sophie, don’t be silly. Of course, you do. I wouldn’t scream out your name so often if you didn’t, but what’s wrong with spicing things up every now and again?” Paula was handling a rather large vibrating dildo.

“Jeez, what do you want that for?”

“Do I not satisfy you?” asked Sophie with a bit of a worried tone.

“I’m not a prude. I just don’t see the need for anything like that! Are you missing having a penis in your life, or summit?”

“Sophie, Sophie, Sophie … I am quite satisfied with you and all your parts baby. And this,” she flapped it in Sophie’s face, “has nothing to do with a penis and everything to do with penetration. It feels really, really good!”

The blank look on her girlfriend’s face made Paula realize that Sophie had had a very different sexual experience than hers. Paula had been with men and women, and had birthed two children. Sophie, to Paula’s knowledge, had only ever slept with women.

“So, you’d rather have that thing in you than me?”

“Sweetheart, my vagina has seen two kids pass through it, so it’s a bit looser than yours. It’s not that I don’t like having you inside me, because I really do, you’re amazing in bed. But I also like deep penetration. Maybe not this deep,” she said, placing the large toy back on the shelf. “That’s a bit large for me. But, maybe something like this!” She palmed another one, a bit smaller in girth. “Now, this … this one could be a lot of fun.”

“Yea, for who?”

“Baby, you need to loosen up a bit. We can both use it you know.”

“You’re not getting that thing anywhere near my vajayjay!”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it!” Paula laughed. She looked a little further down the shelf and found something more Sophie’s speed. “Well, how about this for you then? It’s for beginners,” she burst out laughing and Sophie turned bright red and got upset.

Paula reached out for her lover, dragging her over to put her arms around her, Sophie resisting. “Listen to me. You are fabulous in bed, love. Our bodies connect so well together that I don’t need
anything more than you. But, there is also nothing wrong with bringing toys in to play around with
either. And I love that your vajayjay is untouched by penises. You’re pure and perfect and I love
everything about you and your body. I wouldn’t change a thing, even if I could. Okay? Come on,
we’ll just go.”

Sophie didn’t know why she was being so uptight. It’s not like she didn’t masturbate or use a
vibrator. She decided she was being silly. Paula was more experienced than she was, so she decided
to trust her. “No, if you want to try some new things, I’m okay with that. I know I’m being childish.”

“You’re not being childish, love. You’re just not as experienced as this old gal.”

“Just how experienced are you? We’ve not had this discussion yet … how many people have you
slept with?”

“47.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. She tried to get her reaction under control. Then she saw Paula begin to
laugh.

“Oh, you’re joking! Phew. You had me a little worried there for a minute. Not that I thought you
were a slapper or anything, but that’s a big number for someone like me. What’s your real number,
then?”

“Well, you are lucky number 13!”

“Eww, I don’t like that. Thirteen is bad luck!”

“No, it’s not! It’s actually an awesome number. It symbolizes a lot of really wonderful things.”

“Like what?!?”

“Well, how many disciples were there?”

“12!” Sophie thought she’s made her point.

“So which made Jesus?”

“Thirteen.” Oh.

“And it symbolizes cleansing and purification, which I think is amazing because that means you
cleansed my life and let me start anew! Aaaaand, guess how many lunar cycles there are, and how
many gates there are in the female body? It goes on and on. But, I think, for us, the most important is
right here,” she said holding up her left arm.

“What, your arm?” Sophie was confused.

“No, silly. My bracelet. What biblical quote is engraved here and on my heart?”

“1 Corinthians 13:13. Oh, my, god! How do you know all this stuff?”

“Uh, youngster, it’s just crap you pick up along the way. You’ll see one day when you’re well-
seasoned, like mo! So, what’s your magic number then?” inquired Paula, knowing it would be
smaller than her own.

“Uh, well, only four. You’re number four. There was Sian, Jenna, Maddie, then you.”
“What about Kate?”

“We never …” Sophie said, shaking her head.

“Oh. Well, that makes me happier than it should.” Paula was thrilled with this news. Kate made her jealous.

“You thought I’d slept with Kate?”

“Well, yeah, I did. I mean look at you both, why wouldn’t my mind go there?”

“Well, there is only one woman I want to sleep with ever again and it’s not Kate. It’s you, you and only you … and well, maybe this,” Sophie said, grinning and wagging the bright pink dildo back and forth.

Paula laughed at her girlfriend and planted a wet, soppy kiss on her mouth. “I love you Sophie Webster, and I am happy to be the stable, strong and perfect number four! Now, let’s buy these and go find you a fabulous dress, yeah?”

Paula called for James to pick them up and instructed him to take them to Harrod’s. It was a bit cliché, but Paula had never been and really wanted to see the huge department store. It was a 15-minute drive over, allowing them to take a load of for a bit of a rest.

“Oh, come on, old woman,” Paula said to her young lover who was complaining about her feet hurting. “We need to find you a dress worthy of that hot body!”

“I should never have worn these boots without breaking them in first! I just wanted to look good for you,” Sophie confessed.

Paula chuckled at her, “You poor thing. You know, baby, you always look good to me, even when you’re wearing your old ratty t-shirt and holey sweats. But, you do look really hot in those boots!” She laughed again, grabbing Sophie’s hand and pulling her into the massive store.

They made their way to the cocktail dresses and Sophie’s eyeballs just about popped out of her head at the price tags. She pulled at Paula, eyes bulging. “Babe, I cannot afford any of these!”

“Hmmm,” said Paula, half listening as she concentrated on the selection in front of her. “Ooh, how about this one?” She pulled out a knee length navy blue strapless dress with sequins across the waistline.

“How much is it?” asked Sophie.

Paula was holding it up to Sophie, then realized she was stressed about something. “What, you don’t like it?”

“Babe, it’s too expensive!”

“What?” The light went on. “Sophie, don’t worry about that! I told you Alexander is sucking up, so we will be getting you a whole new outfit, including jewelry and shoes! Now, I won’t go so far as buying you real diamonds on his card, but sometimes the right paste will do the trick all the same.”

“Paula! That dress is four hundred pounds!”

“And?”

“And don’t you think that’s too much? Babe, really, I don’t think this is a good idea.”
“Listen to me, my love. Alexander Cooper is a billionaire. He pays two-hundred pounds for a single scotch, Sophie! Let that sink in for a minute.”

Sophie was stunned. She knew Paula was mixing with very wealthy people, but it took her a moment to get her head around the scotch thing. “Are you fucking kidding me? They actually charge that much money for a flaming drink?”

“Oh, yes they do! For about 3 ounces. And for him, it’s like paying for a Coke.”

“Oh, well if you think it’s okay … then, yes, I love that dress!”

“Let’s try it on, shall we?” Paula waggled her eyebrows up and down.

“Babe! We cannot fool around in the dressing room! What if we get caught?”

“Since when are you such a stick in the mud?” prodded the solicitor.

“Since when are you such a horny teenager??”

“Since you stepped off the train. What’s your point?” Paula retorted, straight faced. “Oh, come on, no one’s going to see!” Paula was laughing and grabbing at Sophie’s backside.

“Paula, stop! You are out of control!” she swatted her hand away. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you today!”

“It’s your fault.”

“MY fault? How is this on me?”

“If you weren’t so god damn sexy in those boots …” A smirk pulled across Paula’s face.

“You are awful, Paula Martin!”

“That’s not what you were saying this morning!” Paula laughed heartily and grabbed Sophie’s hand, leading her to the dressing room. She hadn’t felt this lighthearted in a long time. She loved that Sophie brought out the playful side of her. Just another reason she loved this woman so much.

“C’mon love. I promise I’ll behave.”

“You, stay out here! I will put the dress on and come show you.”

“Oh, you’re no fun! They’ll all just think I’m your mum, helping her daughter try on a dress! No one will see a thing …”

“No! You stay put. I do not want to have to phone my dad from jail.”

“Oh, fine. I’ll stay here … and behave. But when I get you home, the rules change! I will go get you some shoes to go with the dress. Be back in a minute.”

When Paula returned with a couple of shoe choices for Sophie, she stopped dead in her tracks as she took in the vision of her girlfriend standing before her wearing the dress.

“Close your mouth, horny teenager,” Sophie directed at her lover.

“Sweetheart, you look … so … incredible. My god, how can you be this beautiful?” She wrapped her arms around Sophie’s waist and pulled her into a kiss, the nearby shoppers beginning to whisper, probably no longer thinking this was a mother daughter team, unless they were from the back woods
of Appalachia. “You are a vision.”

“Shoes?”

“Hmmm?”

“Shoes. Did you get me some shoes?”

“OH, yes! I did. Here!” Paula pulled the lids off three boxes, all containing four-inch heels of different styles.

Sophie felt like a million bucks. She slipped on her favorite of the shoes and took a walk to the mirror. Bingo! “Yep, these are good!”

“Uh huh.” Paula was still mesmerized.

Sophie giggled to herself at Paula’s demeanor. God, she loved this woman! She changed back into her regular clothes and handed Paula the dress, still a bit uneasy about spending money that wasn’t hers. But she was going to trust Paula knew what she was doing.

“Now, jewelry. This way. Come on,” directed the solicitor.

“Don’t you think the dress and shoes are enough? I don’t need anything else,” whined Sophie.

“Will you stop being such a wet blanket. Shopping is supposed to be fun! Especially when someone else is paying.”

The jewelry section was massive, and the pair meandered around looking at all the sparkling treats on display. Paula had a surprise in mind for her love, so made an excuse to move away from Sophie, who had her own agenda. The pair separated for a bit, each looking in different areas. When they met up again, Paula had a package in her hand.

“What’s that?” inquired Sophie, who also had made a purchase but stuck hers in her handbag.

“This is your bling for later!”

“What, I don’t get to see it first? What if I don’t like it?” Sophie grinned.

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I suppose. You do have okay taste.”

“Especially in girlfriends …” deadpanned Paula, raising one eyebrow.

“You are on my list, Martin. Better watch yourself.”

“I’d rather be watching you …” Paula really didn’t know what was going on with her today. Her libido was in high gear. Must be ovulating, she thought, making her horny beyond belief. All she wanted to do was tear Sophie’s clothes off and roll around with her, naked, in bed.

The couple roamed around the store for awhile longer then decided to have James drive them around the city for a little tour of major sights – Buckingham Palace, Parliament, Big Ben, London Bridge, The Tower, St. Paul’s. They had a fun time just being together and enjoying each other as they traversed the roads of London. They arrived back at the flat around 4 so they had time to rest up before getting ready for their dinner date.
“How are your feet, love? Do you want me to rub them for you?” Paula was being sincere.

“Oh, they’re alright. Sitting on my ass for the last hour has relieved the pressure on my little puppies. But, I tell you what I would like,” she said, wrapping her arms around Paula’s neck.

“What’s that, then?” said the lawyer, pulling Sophie close and kissing her neck lightly.

“A nice hot bubble bath … with my very hot and sexy girlfriend. It’s time we christen that tub, don’t you think?” Sophie said, opening her neck up for further attention from Paula’s lips.

“Why do we have to go out tonight?” whined Paula. “I’d much rather stay in <kiss>, have a bath <lick> mmmm <nuzzle>, make love …”

“Me, too, babe. But I don’t think your boss is going to like that plan too much. Of course, you could always quit and come back home!” Sophie knew it would wind her partner up by using the “Q” word. Paula Martin never quit anything.

“And give up that huge pile of money and our future? Never.” Paula stated, walking into the en-suite to run their bath.

“Just how much money are we talking here, babe? You never told me how big a pile of money they promised you.” Sophie followed her lover in while stripping off her clothes.

“BIG!”

“Big, as in, you can buy me my own clunker one day or big as in your grankids will get ponies for their birthday?”

Paula mouthed out the words and Sophie stopped cold.

“Did you just say five million pounds?”

Paula nodded.

“Holy mother of all that is natural and pure. Are you fucking joking? Five million?”

Paula nodded, again.

“Pounds? Not some foreign type money that takes a million to make like a tenner?”

Paula nodded, again.

Sophie sat with this knowledge for a minute. She was stunned. “I knew they were paying you well, but I had no idea!”

“I told you it would set my future. Our future. Now do you understand why I work so much?” Paula had stripped down and was climbing into the tub. “You coming in?”

“Yea,” said Sophie, her mind still swirling from the details of Paula’s paycheck. She removed the rest of her clothes and sunk down into the hot liquid on the opposite side of the tub from her lover. She moaned at how good the water felt. “Ooooh, yes, that’s the good stuff right there.” She paused for a minute. “But why you?”

“Why me what?” asked Paula, not following Sophie’s train of thought.

“Why would they hire a solicitor from Manchester and not from London or New York to basically
run the teams? It just seems weird to me.”

“Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. I told you before, I’ve worked for Alexander for years, and he trusts me. Fraud cases are funny because people get paranoid very quickly. Think about your mum’s case when suddenly no one wanted to be associated with her. Alexander knows I am good and trusts me not to get paranoid.”

“Something just seems off about it to me. Not about you. I know you’re a kick-ass lawyer and they are lucky to have you on their team, but you said yourself you had a lot to learn about how they do business and how the economies work together. Why not hire someone who already knows that stuff?”

Paula thought Sophie had a point. “I don’t know, really. Other than the trust thing.”

“All I’m saying babe is just be careful. That’s a lot of money and this case involves obscene amounts of money, which people do bad things over. If there are people at that company committing fraud, chances are it’s over a big payout.”

The truth was, Sophie’s thought processes were sound. Paula’s antennae were now up. She’d be paying more attention to certain things from here forward. “You’re not going to be weird with me about the money, right?”

“Babe, no, of course not. It’s your money, your job. I’d love you even if you were a poor old country solicitor who worked for pay in chickens. It’s you I love, not your bank account.”

“That’s what I told Isla.”

“What?” Alarm bells went off in Sophie’s mind.

“She was joking about me being your sugar-mama. Sophie, don’t get upset about this, it meant nothing,” Paula responding to the look on Sophie’s face. “She was totally joking with me. I know you love me, not my money.”

Sophie couldn’t stand the thought of them talking about her like she was a gold digger. “You know, people are going to say that, though. That I’m only with you for the money. And you’re only with me because of my age. I hate the world sometimes. You don’t believe that, do you? You know that I love you for you, right?” Sophie was overcompensating.

“Come here.” Paula instructed her lover, who moved to Paula in the suds and put her head on her chest, her body laid out along the length of her lover under the water. “Listen to me Sophie Webster. I don’t doubt for a moment what your motivation is in all this. We love each other for the right reasons, not the wrong. And frankly, I don’t give a shit what other people think or say, because you and I know the truth. We are in love, fully, completely in love, money or no money. And I will love you always, no matter what. Just don’t get fat, okay?” Paula let out a huge laugh and Sophie slapped her shoulder, then started to tickle her ribs, water sloshing all over the floor.

“Now look what you’ve done!” Paula continued to laugh. She pulled Sophie up to her and kissed her through her laughter. “You are one amazing woman, you know that?” She moved her hands to her lover’s backside and caressed her, pulling her body down to her own, and kissed her again. Things heated up, then Sophie stopped everything.

“Wait, let’s move out of this water. I hate having sex in water, it chafes me.” She got up, bubbles all over her body and Paula watched her step out and towel off intently. The lawyer was practically salivating. Sophie offered her hand to her lover who got out, dried off a bit, then followed her naked
partner over to the bed so they could really get some contact. It was about 5 so they had some time to enjoy one another before they had to get ready for their evening out with Ian Walker. And they made perfect use of it.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Changing things up a bit, adding some layers for the story. Let me know what you think! Comments are appreciated.

After some naked canoodling, the pair tore themselves apart to get ready for their evening with the infamous Ian Walker. Sophie had already decided she didn’t like him, even though she had never met him, and she was not at all looking forward to wasting her precious girlfriend-time with him at some pretentious restaurant. But, she had promised to be mature and supportive of her love, so she padded herself into the en-suite to get dressed and put on some make up.

Paula had laid out Sophie’s clothes on the bed and was pulling something for herself out of the wardrobe. She opted for a sleek, black backless pantsuit that Sophie had chosen while the pair shopped back in Manchester weeks ago, saying she liked that it showed off Paula’s muscular back. She had already applied new make-up and fluffed her hair, so she dressed, then pondered her jewelry selection. She decided on her diamond studs and one diamond drop earring that dangled to her jawbone.

Sophie came out of the bathroom in her thong, having realized that they did not buy her a strapless bra at Harrod’s. “I can’t wear one of my regular bras with that strapless dress, babe, and yours are too big for me. What am I going to do?”

“Don’t wear one. Your bosom is large enough to fill that dress, trust me!” a twinkle in the solicitor’s eye.

“My bosom?” laughed Sophie, obviously making fun of Paula’s word choice.

“Would you rather I said, tits?”

“Well, I guess not … but bosom? Is this 1942?”

“Put the dress on, Webster!”

“Fine. I’ll see how it feels, but I’m not promising I am going to like it.”

“I’m going to like it,” the solicitor said under her breath.

“I heard that!”

Sophie pulled the dress on and had Paula zip her into it. She adjusted her boobs into place and jumped around the room to see if anything popped out. Then she bent over and touched her toes to test again.

“See, I told you! If there is one thing I am an expert at, it’s your tits!” stated Paula, a complete look of I-told-you-so on her face.

“Well, a girl can’t argue with pure fact,” Sophie said, kissing Paula. “I will probably need an expert evaluation later.”
“I think I can accommodate that request.” Paula kissed her lover again and gave one breast a squeeze.

“You better stop doing that or you’ll have to cancel dinner.” Sophie swatted Paula’s hand away. “I think I’m going to put my hair up. What do you think?” asked Sophie.

“Uhhh, yes, I think that will be a good choice considering the jewelry I have for you,” stated Paula, a sly grin pulling across her lips.

As Sophie stood in front of the mirror sweeping her hair up and placing a million bobby pins in to hold it all up, Paula came up behind her and placed a silver sapphire drop necklace around her neck and fastened it. Sophie looked at it in the mirror, fingering the stone that sat at the center of her collarbone. It was accented with small diamonds and it sparkled under the light.

“Oh, babe, it’s beautiful. Is this one of yours? I’ve never seen it before,” asked the young brunette.

“No, darling, it’s one of yours.”

“What?” She spun around to face her lover. “You mean …”

“Just a little gift from your loving partner. Oh, and these.” Paula pulled out a box with a matching set of one carat studs.

“Paula, I can’t take these. It’s too much. I …”

“Yes, you can, love. I bought these for you because I wanted to treat you to something nice. Why make a lot of money if you can’t give things to the people you love? Oh, and these are from Alexander.” She had two more smaller diamond studs for the other two holes in Sophie’s left ear.

Sophie shook her head and put all the earrings in, then turned to look at her reflection. “You’re too good to me, babe. I don’t know what to say.”

“Just tell me you love me.”

“I love you. More every moment we are together. Thank you.” She turned around again and placed her lips on Paula’s, wrapping her arms around her neck. “Mmmm, I will never bore of that feeling. Never.” She gave her another sensual kiss, then pulled back to look at her lover. “You look really, really hot, by the way!”

“Thought you’d never notice!” Paula grinned as she walked into the bedroom to put on her shoes. She looked at the time. “Darling, I am going to check email quickly then we need to get downstairs. Ian will be here right at seven and he’s always very punctual.”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Yea, whatever,” she said under her breath.

“I heard that!” Paula laughed on her way to her laptop. She typed in her password and opened her email, then groaned at the number of messages there were waiting for her. She had not checked in since this morning. She scanned them by sender and subject, checking to see if there was anything she needed to look at immediately. Nothing that couldn’t wait. Then she spotted one from Ian entitled ‘Hong Kong’ and she sighed. Should she read it or not. She had a few minutes and knew he might bring it up at dinner, so she opened it and began to read.

Sophie put her shoes on, grabbed her phone and the clutch Paula lent her and moved into the office where Paula had her nose stuck in the laptop. She heard her sigh and turned to look at her partner. “What’s wrong?”
“Oh nothing, just Ian being Ian.”

“How so?”

“He sent me a critique of the Hong Kong report I sent him yesterday and he doesn’t like how I’ve presented certain things. It’s not a big deal. He is just very particular about things.”

“Pedantic prick!” Sophie spat, not liking him upsetting her woman.

“Sophie. It’s alright. I love that you’re protective of me and my feelings, but this is just all part of the job. Don’t you worry about it. Did you not listen when I told you the story about my dinner at the ‘club’?”

“Yes, okay, I will let it go. But I just don’t like that guy, Paula. I’m telling you, there is something not quite right.”

“You’ll feel differently when you meet him in all of 3 minutes. He’s quite charming, really.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Paula closed out of the report and shut her laptop. “C’mon. We need to get downstairs. By the way, you look amazing! And I can’t wait to get you back here later to rip that dress off you.” She winked at her lover, then grabbed her hand and their coats, and headed for the lift.

“The Ledbury is one of the finest restaurants in the city,” Ian boasted, flashing a smile Sophie’s way. “I know you’ll both enjoy it very much. It took some effort to finagle a reservation, but I triumphed in the end.”

Sophie wanted to vomit. This pretentious asshole was worse than Leonard Ratigan by miles. But she promised herself she would be on her best behavior this evening, so she smiled sweetly and nodded her head at Ian. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Paula knew her lover was on edge and kept a casual but firm grip on Sophie’s hand. She could read her body language and did her best to fill in the conversation in the car as best she could. “Ian, I thought perhaps your wife would be joining us this evening.”

“Oh, no, she’s at the country house at the moment. I’m afraid I am all on my own as it goes. But, one must do what one must to earn a living, so I find myself at the helm of this awful mess Alexander is dealing with. Perhaps next time you’re in town, Sophie, Nicole will be available.”

“Mmm hmmm.”

“Ah, here we are!” Ian indicated they had arrived at the restaurant. He opened the door, stepped out and offered his hand to Sophie. She looked up as she exited and noticed Ian’s eyes were fixed squarely on her cleavage. How can Paula think this guy is anything but a sleaze ball? This is going to be a long fucking night.

The trio were seated quickly. Sophie knew she was going to need alcohol to get her through this nightmare, so when Ian ordered a couple of bottles of wine, she also requested vodka on the rocks. Paula looked at her lover with a questioning eye, wondering what she was thinking. The waiter poured each patron a glass of their wine of choice and Sophie downed hers rather quickly.

“Sorry, just a bit thirsty,” uttered the young brunette. “The wine is very nice.”
“Yes, that Chardonnay is a 2009 Sonoma. Only the best for my team,” said Ian, smiling at Sophie.

Sophie took a moment to look at this man in a lighted room. Paula was correct in her description of him. He was quite attractive, for a man, with perfect hair, perfect teeth, perfect clothes, and perfect manners. On the outside, he seemed, well perfect. She knew that on the inside he was likely as corrupt as Satan himself. She noticed he kept looking at her, rather lasciviously, and it made her a bit uncomfortable. She wished she had saved this dress for another occasion, one worthy of it, not this mockery. She wondered if Paula noticed where his eyes were traveling quite often.

“So, what did you two ladies get up to today, then?” Ian asked.

Paula’s mind was a bit in the gutter, thinking of all their love making, the dildo buying, the bath, the canoodling, but snapped herself back to the reality of having to answer the question. “Oh, just touristy things mostly. James drove us around the city and we enjoyed the sunshine today. It was quite nice to be out of the office for a bit.”

“Yes, I can only imagine,” said Ian, giving the impression that he was chained to his desk. But Paula knew better. He was always off playing golf or ‘not available’ when she called for him. She imagined he had a private bedroom off his office suite for his dalliances. “So, you were able to see some of our fine city, then?”

“Yes, it was quite nice, wasn’t it darling?” Paula said to Sophie.

“Yea, it was. Very nice.” She was not in the mood to be verbose. Her vodka arrived, and she wanted to slam it down her throat, but didn’t want to embarrass Paula, so sipped it very lady-like.

The waiter addressed the table with their menu’s and any special offerings. Sophie knew dinner was likely quite pricey, but really didn’t mind Ian paying for this as he was usurping her personal time with his drivel. They each made their selections of the first course and Sophie wished the food would come so her mouth would be full, and she wouldn’t have to talk.

Paula and Ian talked a lot about Alexander and the company and a bit about the case, all to Sophie’s relief. It didn’t require her comment or attention. She kept her hand on Paula’s thigh under the table to ground her. Her vodka was beginning to work, and she began to relax a little. She ordered another, neither Paula nor Ian noticing, and continued to sip on her wine.

“Will you ladies excuse me for a moment, please? I see an old friend I’d like say hello to,” Ian said as he rose and moved across the room.

Paula took this opportunity to check in with her girlfriend. “Darling, are you okay? You’re drinking a lot.”

“I need to drink a lot, babe. I can’t stand that pig!”

“Sophie, what’s happened? Did he do something to you?”

“Have you not noticed that he keeps undressing me with his eyes? Or are you just ignoring it?”

“That was uncalled for.”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t like him, Paula. There’s something evil about that guy.”

“You don’t have to like him, baby. Would you like to leave? I can make our excuses.”

Sophie felt guilty. She was not being very supportive of Paula and knew she was being over the top.
“No. I’m sorry, babe. I will be okay. I know this is something you have to do and I’m not being very mature about it.”

Paula gave her lover a concerned look. “You just give me a sign you want to leave, and we will go. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“I love you. I love you so much.”

Ian returned just as the first course was being served. “My apologies ladies. You have my full attention for the rest of the evening. So, Sophie, Paula tells me you manage a restaurant? That must be quite interesting.”

“Uhm, yes. It’s a Pakistani eatery and I quite enjoy it, actually. It certainly keeps me busy.” Sophie was trying to lighten up.

“I quite enjoy Asian food. Have you ever travelled to Pakistan, Sophie?”

“No, not yet, but I’m hoping to someday. Maybe Paula and I will take a trip.” She looked at her lover, her eyebrows raised. “What about you, Ian? Where have you traveled?”

“Oh, I’ve been all over the world, but mostly in and out of offices rather than enjoying local culture. Pity really. My wife is well traveled. She spent quite a bit of time in Africa when she was younger.”

“Oh, really? I’d love to go to Africa someday. Paula has been, haven’t you, babe?”

“Uh, yes. When I was quite young I spent about 8 months backpacking around Africa with my mates. It was a wonderful experience.” Paula shifted the conversation. “My food is amazing. Are you enjoying yours, darling?”

“Yes, it’s wonderful.”

“Yes, the executive chef is world renowned. I quite like coming here whenever I can.”

The group made it through to the dessert course. Ian excused himself from the table again, leaving the lover’s alone.

“You seem to have relaxed some, baby. You feeling some better?” inquired Paula.

“Yea, I stopped drinking. That helped. I still don’t like him though.”

Paula laughed at her lover. “I love how real you are Sophie. No pretense with you. Listen, I need the ladies, will you be okay here on your own? Or you can come with me?”

“I’ll be fine. If he comes back I will start drinking again!”

“Ok. Be right back, honey!” Paula made her way toward the toilets and saw Ian standing in the alcove by the gents. He was on the phone with his back turned to Paula. As she approached she could hear him talking in a very terse tone.

“… she called me a pedantic prick! Little tart, swanning around with her tits hanging out …” Ian turned and spotted Paula approaching and stopped mid-sentence, feigning a smile.

The hair on the back of Paula’s neck stood on end. She smiled weakly at him and motioned that she was heading to the ladies room. Once inside she stopped cold. Was he talking about Sophie? How could he be? She had called him that while in Paula’s office at her flat, but how the hell could he know that? Something was very wrong. Sophie was right. There was a whole lot more going on
with Ian walker than met the eye. Paula hurried back out to the table so Sophie did not have to be alone with him.

When she returned Sophie was still sitting alone. Paula was visibly upset, but trying to maintain her composure.

“Babe, what’s wrong?” asked Sophie.

“Listen, you were right. Something isn’t right here. I need you to fake feeling a bit ill and ask me to go to the ladies room with you, but leave your purse on your seat. Your phone is in it, right?”

“Yes, it is. Paula, what’s going on?” She was frightened. She had never seen her lover like this before.

“Just do what I ask.”

Ian returned to the table, a suave smile on his face. “My apologies again, ladies. That was Byron Whittington in Hong Kong. I had to take that. Dessert should be here momentarily. More wine for anyone?”

“No thank you, Ian. I’ve had too much already,” feigned Paula. “Darling, are you feeling okay? You look a little pale,” Paula asked Sophie.

“No, I’m not feeling very well. Would you mind taking me to the ladies room?”

“Of course not, dear. Please excuse us, Ian.” Sophie put her clutch on her seat.

They got out of Ian’s eye line and Paula watched him. He looked around to see if anyone was paying him any mind, then grabbed Sophie’s purse, pulled out her phone, tried to access it but couldn’t because of the security code, so pulled the back off it and placed something discretely in it, then put the back cover back on. He put the phone back and put the clutch back.

Sophie couldn’t see what was happening. “Babe, please tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t just yet. Just trust me.” She moved them into the toilet and pulled out her phone and popped the back off it. There was nothing there. He hadn’t managed access to Paula’s personal phone yet and, thankfully, she also had a PIN for access. That bastard had bugged her flat and likely her office and would place one in her phone once he got the chance. She usually kept her phone on her, so he had not been able to put a spy app or a bug on her as yet. But why? Why keep tabs on someone working for you on your own team?

“You’re scaring me, babe.”

“Just stay calm. Boy, you have got some kind of personal radar for character, honey. Ian is up to something and I am going to have to figure this out. Just follow my lead the best you can. We need to get out of here.”

“Ok.”

They returned to the table, Ian rising to pull Sophie’s chair out. “Oh, Ian, I am afraid we are going to have to leave. Sophie is ill. I need to get her back to the flat. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Sophie, I do hope you feel better. Paula, I will talk to you tomorrow about the Hong Kong report and we can move on to Amsterdam.”
“Yes, of course. I saw the data collection had been completed for Amsterdam. I can look it over tomorrow and begin on the report. I’m sure Alexander will be expecting some progress soon.”

“No! We can grab a cab. You stay and finish your meal. Thank you for a lovely evening,” said Paula, trying to maintain her energy level.

“Yes, thank you Ian. It was lovely of you to have us out,” said Sophie. “I am very sorry I am not feeling well.”

“No bother, dear. You’ll call upon me if I can be of service? Good evening.”

They moved to gather their coats and Paula watched Ian in the mirror. He got immediately on his phone and eyed the pair standing, waiting for their coats. He was talking to someone on the other end of the phone about them. They would not be able to talk openly with that phone in Sophie’s purse. Paula had to think, and think fast.

Her flat, her office and Sophie’s phone were all bugged. If she ditched Sophie’s phone or didn’t go back to the flat, it would raise suspicion. She couldn’t trust anyone. Thomas and Edward were likely keeping tabs on her comings and goings. Kylie was certainly on Ian’s payroll.

The pair hailed a cab and headed to the flat. They were going to have to pull off some theatrics to keep the ruse up. Paula took Sophie’s phone and sat on it to mute the microphone the best she could.

“Listen, Ian just put a bug in your phone. He has bugged the flat and likely my office. He might have everyone watching me, and now you.”

“What? How do you know this, Paula?”

“When I went to the toilet earlier, I overheard him telling someone ‘she called me a pedantic prick’. Sound familiar? It’s not something you hear every day. He’s been listening to me, Sophie. To us.”

“But why?”

“Remember what you were saying about why they hired me when I don’t have a working knowledge of the company? I think he’s setting me up somehow. Either that, or he needed someone in my seat to legitimize what he’s doing … someone he thought would not figure out he’s up to no good.”

“What is he up to?

“I don’t know. But I’m sure it’s not legal. And I’m sure there is a lot of money involved. I want you to get back to Manchester first thing in the morning.”

“No, I’m not leaving you here.”

“Don’t you see, Sophie, if I leave now he might have manufactured evidence that could implicate me. I have to use the fact that he doesn’t know I’m onto him to get into the systems so I can find out what’s going on!”

“Paula, you need to go to the police, right now! This is too big.”

“You’re just going to have to trust me. I know what I need to do. Once I get some idea of what’s going on, I will go to the police. I promise. Until then, we have to play it cool. Okay? And YOU are
“Well, won’t that make him suspicious? I only just got here and then I turn around and leave? I don’t think that’s going to work either.”

“You might be right. I’ve got to think this through. But, in the meantime, here we are. Try to act normal.” She grabbed Sophie’s phone from under her bum and handed it to her mouthing to be quiet.

The pair exited the cab when Edward opened the door. “Good evening, Ms. Martin, Ms. Webster.” Paula couldn’t remember when Edward would have heard Sophie’s last name. She hadn’t introduced her. He was on Ian’s payroll.

They got onto the lift and Paula let the doors close but didn’t press her floor button. She waited just a moment then pressed the door open button. Her suspicions were confirmed as the doors opened to Edward talking quietly into a cell phone. He immediately put it into his pocket when he noticed the door to the lift open. “Yes, Ms. Martin, was there something you needed?”

“No, just hit the wrong button. I’ve had too much wine. Good night.”

He was likely reporting back to Ian that they had arrived at the flat.

On the way up to the flat, Sophie grabbed Paula’s hand and whispered in her ear. “This is a nightmare. I can’t believe he’s been following your movements and listening to everything –” Sophie stopped mid-sentence. “OH MY GOD, that perv has been listening to everything! Paula, I’m going to be sick. He’s heard us having sex!”

Paula rubbed her temples. Her head was throbbing. She had to think.

“Do you think he heard me talking about why they hired you? When we were in the bath?”

“Probably couldn’t hear us over the water running.” Paula had a great idea. “Sophie, he can only hear things that are close to bugs and if there’s no other noise. We are going to have to create noise, so he can’t hear everything. Music should do the trick.”

When they entered the flat they were both quite tense, but Paula mouthed to her lover “act normal.” “Are you feeling any better, babe? I’m so sorry you’re not feeling well. Why don’t you get out of those clothes and get into bed. I’ll get you some cold water and come take care of you.”

“Yes, okay, that sounds like a good idea.” She was stiff. She put her phone on Paula’s desk in the office, with the other known bug, and retreated to the bathroom to undress. She felt completely violated and wanted to kill that asshole for doing this to them. She got into bed in a pair of Paula’s pajamas as she had not brought any.

Paula came in with some water and handed to Sophie. “Here you go, babe. You settle in while I change, okay?” She mouthed that she was going to turn on the music. She moved the Bose radio over to the bedside table and turned on something soothing, but loud enough to distort any conversation they would have. She changed and slid into bed to hold her lover. “It’s all going to be okay, baby, I promise,” she whispered in Sophie’s ear. “Just hold onto me and get some rest.”

“Are you sure he can’t hear us?” Sophie asked.

“Pretty sure. The music will take care of that.”

“I feel so angry, Paula. He’s violating our privacy and he’s breaking laws. We have to do something.”
“There’s no ‘we’ Sophie. You’re going home, and I am going to handle this.”

“No, I’m not leaving you to handle this alone. You are going to need my help, Paula, and I don’t want to hear another word. Ian has a network of people working for him. You need one, too. Who can you trust?”

“Sophie, I am not going to put you in danger! You’re leaving and that’s final!”

“Well, then I’m going straight to the police! I am not leaving until WE have a plan.”

“YOU are infuriating! I am trying to keep you out of this. It’s my problem, not yours!”

“The minute that bastard put a bug in my phone it became my problem too. So, I’ll ask again, who can WE trust?”

The lovers spent awhile going through what they knew, what they had said about their personal details to anyone at Cooper Securities, what Paula would be looking for in the files, who they could get to help them. Paula had a good investigator in Manchester she used a lot and she would have him come to London. He could sweep the apartment and locate the bugs, so she knew where they were and how to combat them. Tomorrow, they would get new phones to use to communicate with one another. Paula was going to make it easy for Ian to bug her phone like he did Sophie’s, to lull him into a sense of security. She had to keep him feeling like he was in control and she was none the wiser. She wasn’t sure if Alexander was a part of the scheme, so she certainly couldn’t let him know, but she could get information from Evelyn, his personal assistant, who had been Paula’s friend for well over ten years.

The pair fell asleep wrapped up in each other, both frightened of how this all was going to play out. Paula had to keep her wits about her and think ten steps ahead at all times. And she could trust no one. Except Sophie and anyone she brought in. No one from Cooper Securities was above suspicion. And she had to be smart, very smart, about Ian Walker.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Been having some writer’s block this week. Sorry for the delay. And thanks to everyone for the lovely comments. You are all too kind. I am thrilled you are liking the story, so keep reading and keep commenting. Cheers!

The lovers had agreed to be out of the flat early, ‘accidentally’ leaving Sophie’s phone behind, making certain Thomas overheard the pair discussing it so it hopefully wouldn’t raise flags. The sun was out again, making it very plausible for them to set out on foot, without the car and James the driver tracking their every move. Paula had her phone, so called for a cab once they were out of sight of the high rise. Paula went to the bank to withdraw as much cash as the machine would give her on a Sunday, so they could pay cash for certain things. She used her personal bank account for other things, not the Cooper Securities card as she had been instructed – another way for Ian to track her.

They ducked into a restaurant for breakfast and to go over their plan moving forward. Paula had to convince Sophie to leave. Sophie had to convince Paula she was an asset, not a liability. Paula checked the time. They would be able to get the phones as soon as a retailer opened. Until then, they would discuss the details and mull over their next steps.

“I am going to have to figure out how to dig into the network drives for information on Ian without being detected. That’s going to be tricky. But I know that’s where I have to start. Plus, I am going to have to continue to do my job, which means I have a report on Amsterdam to get to.”

“Well, do you think all this data stuff you’re doing, these reports, have anything to do with what Ian is up to? This is all a part of the case, right? Do you think the investigation is connected somehow?”

“Anything is possible at this point.”

“Well, I don’t understand all the stuff you do or what this case involves, so I don’t know how to help. Are you sure you don’t just want to go to the police?”

“Not without knowing what is going on and with some sort of proof. I can’t draw any undue suspicion to Cooper Securities. I really need to talk to Evelyn. She will help me figure things out internally. I am going to need a fake company identity with clearance for the entire network.” Paula sighed. That wasn’t going to be an easy thing to pull off. She would need an insider in the IT department. “If I tell Evelyn everything, maybe she could help me bypass some of the security measures they surely have in place. Oh, she is not going to like this.”

“Are you sure you can trust her, Paula?”

“Yes, I’m certain of it. I am going to call her and see if we can have lunch tomorrow. We have been meaning to do it anyway, so it won’t come as a surprise to anyone if we meet up. I will be able to feel her out, see what she knows, if anything.”

Paula dialed Evelyn’s personal mobile while Sophie watched on. The conversation took a few minutes, but Paula gave the thumbs up, then hung up. “Okay, that’s set. Lunch tomorrow.”
“What can I do?” Sophie was determined to help figure things out.

“What could you do?” Paula, we have gone over this a million times –”

“I need for you to do something. Do you think Yasmeen will give you some more time off?”

“Uh, she will if I tell her it’s important. What am I doing?”

“Remember I told you about my investigator, the one I use a lot back home?” Sophie nodded. “Well, I need for you to get my car, pick him up and drive back here so he can do the sweep of the apartment and a few other things that will help us keep eyes and ears away from us.”

“Wait, why not just have him come on the train?”

“I don’t want Ian to be able trace the train tickets in hindsight. Besides, if Joe just shows up at the flat, Ian will be informed straight away, and it will draw suspicion.”

“Well, then how are you going to get him into the flat?”

“You, my dear, are going to return for a visit to London with your dad.”

The light went on for Sophie. “Oh, that’s good. I like that! No one will be any the wiser.”

“Exactly. I will have you come back, say Thursday. I’ll be sure to drop it in Ian’s ear that you and your dad are coming to stay with me because,” Paula had to think of some plausible reason Sophie would be returning so quickly, “ah, because you are going to look for flats for your sister who is moving to London after she returns from abroad.”

“Do you think he will go for that?”

“I don’t see why not. He wouldn’t have any reason to question it.”

“Now, your phone is going to be a problem. We need to get you free of it and the intrusion of the listening device somehow. For now, make sure you only take it with you while you’re on the street in case he has a GPS tracker. When I talk to Joe I will tell him we need a solution for handling your phone. At least Ian didn’t infiltrate your operating system, so he is not able to get onto any of your apps or get to your social media. You’re just going to have to carry on as best you can like everything is normal. You and I will have to orchestrate false conversations when needed to throw Ian off.”

“This is scary, Paula.”

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry you got dragged into this. If I had just come to London on my own –”

“If you think for one minute that I would change the fact that we got back together, then you’re crazy. I want to be nowhere but right where I am, and I’m glad you’re not alone in this.”

“Truth be told, I would probably not even have caught on if not for you. I have been so focused on the case, I likely would never have noticed anything was wrong. So, thank you … for being so smart, and a little bit paranoid.” Paula grinned and leaned over to kiss her partner, holding her hand. The simple show of affection in Sophie’s face kindled arousal deep in Paula’s belly. “I missed making love to you last night.” She brought Sophie’s hand up to her lips and kissed it softly.

“You and I both. Talk about getting cheated out of the best part of your vacation. I could kill him for
“Well, once Joe gets a handle on the taps, we will know how to combat them better, so it won’t happen again, if he’s even tapped the bedroom. He may only be interested in what I’m doing in the office. Plus, it’s not likely he is actively listening to us. He’s probably getting transcripts of our conversations.”

“Well, I’d still like to put his testicles in a vise!”

Paula laughed again, rubbing Sophie’s knuckled with her thumb. “We will be together again soon, baby, I promise. We just have to be patient.”

“I’m tired of always being patient! You know I have a hard time keeping my hands to myself, especially when we are apart for such long stretches. It’s just not fair.”

Paula looked around the restaurant, then looked at Sophie. “Well, there’s always the toilets. Up for a quickie?”

“Eww, babe, no! Not in the toilet.”

“I wasn’t serious, honey,” Paula chuckled. Though the thought of being intimate with her lover made her tingle. And Sophie did have a point. They would be apart again soon, unable to touch one another.

“Oh. Well, I certainly wouldn’t turn down a good offer. I’m that horny. You have that affect on me, you know?”

“Oh, believe me, I understand. It was torture lying next to you last night, all night, and not making love to you. But …”

“But, nothing, it sucked!”

“Well, maybe we should find a nice cozy getaway for the afternoon, then.” Paula said, trying to figure out a way to satisfy her building need.

“Are you being serious? Because I would be more than fine with that.” Sophie leaned in close to her lover’s ear, whispering, “I need your mouth on me, babe.”

Paula’s eyebrows shot up. “Let’s get the phones, then find a hotel. You just convinced me!”

“Had to twist your arm, did I?” giggled the young brunette.

“C’mon, you. The quicker we get business taken care of, the quicker I can take care of you,” said Paula, pulling Sophie off her seat, heading for the exit.

An hour later they had their new phones and were on their way up the lift at a small boutique hotel, hand in hand, neither of them able to tamp down the fire that had been lit in the café. They took the lift to the third floor and hurried to find their room, only just able to control their arousal and not attack one another in the corridor. As soon as the door to their room closed behind them, secluding them from the world and Ian’s prying ears, they crashed their bodies and mouths together, each pulling frantically at clothing, needing to feel skin on skin. They fell together onto the king bed, hands roaming feverishly, seeking contact, mouths fused together, tongues caressing.

“I am so fucking horny … I want you so much, babe,” breathed Sophie, pulling Paula’s shirt up over her head. “Oh god, you are so hot. Mmmmm …” Sophie was pawing at the zipper on Paula’s jeans,
trying to get the offending clothing off her lover. She finally got them loose and Paula shimmied out of them, pulling her underwear off as well. She grabbed Sophie’s shirt, removing it swiftly, then unclasped her lover’s bra, releasing her full breasts. Paula felt her wetness increase at the sight of her lover’s naked torso. “Get these off!” Paula breathed out heavily, pushing at the rim of Sophie’s jeans. Sophie got off the bed quickly and made short work of her pants and thong, then climbed back on top of Paula, basking in the feeling of her lover against her. They were both wet and wanting contact. They each placed their hands to the other and began rubbing through folds and stimulating one another toward ecstasy.

Paula moaned in Sophie’s ear, running her tongue along its rim, sucking at the sensitive lobe, gyrating her hips against her lover’s hand frantically. “Oh god, baby, more please. I need you inside.” Sophie inserted her fingers and Paula pulled at her back, scraping fingernails across soft skin. “Oh, yes, god.” Sophie cupped Paula’s breast with her free hand, squeezing her nipple between her thumb and finger, tugging on the nub. Paula moaned out in pleasure, holding onto Sophie’s arm, pulsing her hips along with Sophie’s thrusts. She kissed Paula’s neck and sucked hard at the dip in her collarbone, licking over where the bone protruded as she continued to pleasure her love. Paula delighted in every thrust, each thrust a beat closer to the edge. Sophie could see she was getting close. She whispered in Paula’s ear, “Cum for me, babe. I want to watch you.”

Paula’s body was quivering, getting closer to tipping over the edge. She opened her eyes and looked at her lover saying, “I’m so close, oh baby I’m almost there … don’t stop.” She was grabbing hard at Sophie’s back, letting out a guttural moan as her body fell into the abyss, her eyes locked on her lover’s. Sophie thought watching Paula feel the pleasure of her climax overtake her was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. She saw the ecstasy flood through her, their eyes fixed on one another, Paula’s pupil’s overtaking the iris, leaving an open door for Sophie to step through. She had never felt closer to another human in her life.

She didn’t think it was possible to love a person this deeply.

As Paula’s body shook, Sophie kissed her lover’s mouth gently then moved her way down to Paula’s center and began lapping at the wetness, licking gently at the sensitive tissue. Sophie loved the way Paula tasted. She gave her lover’s body a minute to settle back to earth, then gently began to manipulate her clit,licking and sucking very softly. She reached a hand up to rub her nipple with the same motions, pulling on the hardened flesh to incite her arousal further. She continued to run her tongue through the folds, teasing slightly at her entrance.

Paula was writhing, again, barely having regained feeling in her body. She was holding onto Sophie’s head, pulling at the silky strands of hair. “Oh, Sophie, what are doing to me,” she breathed out, her body floating up again toward orgasm. Sophie plunged her tongue into Paula, flicking the tip upward as she pulled out, dragging it along her wall. Paula thought she was going to explode with the pleasure Sophie was delivering with every lick.

She continued taking Paula higher and could feel her walls beginning to clench at her tongue. She knew she was close. She plunged her tongue in as far as she could, then stiffened the tip and pushed it hard into what Sophie had discovered was Paula’s G-spot.

The physical pleasure this brought Paula was unprecedented. She screamed out incoherently as she climaxed, her body jerking in delight, any shred of stress left in her muscles flowed out of her and she lay limp on sweaty bed sheets. Sophie slowly moved up Paula’s body with her lips, kissing skin very gently, allowing her lover to fully feel and enjoy the pleasure flooding her senses. When she reached Paula’s lips, she kissed her lovingly. “I love you,” Sophie whispered.

Paula reached out for Sophie, barely able to move her arms. She pulled her close and opened her
eyes to find her lover looking at her, smiling. “There … are just … not words to tell you … what you mean to me. That was fucking incredible.”

Sophie smiled wider, happy that she had accomplished what she set out to do. “I couldn’t help myself, babe. I felt a little possessed if I’m honest.”

“That felt like you plunged me into a pool of dopamine! Jesus!”

Sophie giggled and kissed Paula’s temple and the side of her face a few times, “and you thought you needed that sex toy …”

“Oh, shut up! I never said I needed anything but you. You are certainly talented with that tongue, young lady. For someone who gets embarrassed talking about fooling around in the dressing room, you sure can let loose when you want to.”

“It’s all about motivation. Not being able to touch you last night, then thinking about being apart from you again so soon, made me want to just, I don’t know, totally consume you.”

“Well, I’d say you were successful! Give me a few minutes and I will show you just how much I appreciate that motivation.”

The pair made love for the better part of the afternoon, making up for the loss from the night before. They knew their time together was coming to an end, and they would have to eventually leave their little bubble and return to the flat where the pretense would resume. Sophie would leave on an early train, heading off with an agenda to return Thursday with Joe Tucker in tow, posing as Kevin. Hopefully, Paula’s lunch with Evelyn would be fruitful, giving Paula incognito access to the network drives, where she would begin mining for information.

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Sophie was heading north, back home, but only for a few days. She would return Thursday with Joe Tucker pretending to be Kevin, so they could figure out just how bugged Paula’s flat was. Sophie was hoping against hope that Ian Walker had not been listening to the goings on in the bedroom. If he had, it would take Sophie’s contempt for this man to a level beyond despicable.

Before she boarded her train, she’d had to say goodbye to Paula. It was a difficult thing to do considering all the information they had discovered. Sophie didn’t want to leave her there without help, without someone to watch out for her. The solicitor was smart, of this Sophie had no doubt, but she felt like this was Ronan Truman times a million. Ian Walker was big league and likely involved in dirty dealings that involved money with a lot of zeros attached. And that meant danger. She was so in love with the lawyer that the thought of her getting hurt in any way terrified Sophie. She was determined to do whatever she could to make sure that didn’t happen.

Paula sat nervously at the lunch table awaiting Evelyn’s arrival. She had gone over in her head a million times how she was going to broach the subject of Ian Walker and that she suspected he was crooked. She felt sure she could trust Evelyn, but there was a shred a doubt eating away at her, and it made her tense.

“Oh, hello, Paula! Goodness, it is wonderful to see you!” a beaming Evelyn approached the table.
Paula stood to greet her old friend with an embrace. “Look at you. You’ve not aged a bit! How on earth do you do it?”

“Oh, look who’s talking. You look fantastic! And what’s this I hear you’re dating some fabulous new woman?”

“Alexander told you?”

“Oh, don’t blame him dear. I dragged it out of him last week after he had dinner with you. When I asked after you he got the look of a scolded school boy … told me how he’d put his foot in it and you politely, but swiftly, set him on a path to redemption. Truth be told, I think you could have doubled your fee and he’d have paid it. He was that embarrassed.”

“What a dear old fella he is. It wasn’t my intention to scold him … well, maybe a little. But you know how men are about these things. They were acting like I was dating the prize filly at the Kentucky Derby, that Sophie was nothing more than a fine specimen to be admired for her form. They had stepped out of their place, so I simply put them back in it!”

“Well done! Men need to realize they don’t really run the world, they just think they do.”

“Yes, the male ego is something, isn’t it? Believe me, it’s something I deal with every day in my profession.”

“So, tell me, then.” The look on Evelyn’s face told Paula she wasn’t talking about the men anymore.

“Oh, about Sophie?”

“No, about Winston flaming Churchill. YES, about Sophie!”

“Oh, Ev, she’s something special,” said Paula, a loving smile pulling across her features. “I would never in a million years have thought that at 51 I would be dating someone 24! But, we somehow just, fit! The age difference has reared its ugly head a few times, but we managed to get over it … eventually.”

“How on earth did you two meet?”

“Well, she’s the daughter of one of my old school mates, who I hadn’t seen since my A levels, but her sister called me one day out of the blue and said Sally needed a fraud attorney. So, I met with her and wound up taking the case on … how could I not?”

“So, this Sally became your client? And somehow you thought it a good idea to date her daughter?” a hint of judgement in her tone.

“I have never done anything like this in my life, Ev. I’m telling you, this took me by complete surprise!” Paula offered. “Event to this day, I can’t quite identify what happened.”

“So, how did it happen then?”

“Well, Sally had this idea to set Isla up with Sophie because they are both lesbians. And I went for it so maybe Isla would be tempted to postpone her travels, you know, maybe she and Sophie would hit it off. Well, to say the least, I wasn’t prepared for my reaction to this young woman.”

“I assume she’s a beauty?”

“Well, yes she is, but it was so much more than that, Ev. She just took the breath out of me! She was,
I don’t know, so mature and calm and wise, like an old soul, you know? So, I sat through lunch trying to get a grip on myself, hoping Isla didn’t fancy her, because I certainly did!”

“And Isla didn’t want to pursue anything?”

“Thankfully not. She was very much focused on her trip.”

“So how did this lunch turn into you being in love then?”

“Well, here is where it gets interesting. We parted ways after lunch, but I couldn’t get her out of my head, so I made up an excuse to go over to Sally’s because I knew Sophie would be there. I just wanted to see her again, see if I still fancied her.”

“And?”

“And Sophie was there … alone! I told her I wanted to borrow a book for Isla’s travels, one she had mentioned at lunch, so we got to talking and I confessed that I had come round to see her. She seemed flattered, and we kept talking and then …” Paula trailed off, the memory washing over her.

“Then??”

“She kissed me.”

“She what?”

“I know, right? She told me later that she wanted to make her intentions clear. So, here I am, making out with this amazing young woman on my school friend’s couch when guess who walks in?”

“Not Sally?”

“Right in one!”

“Oh, my goodness! What did she do?”

“Well, luckily she was clueless. She hadn’t seen anything. I wound up staying for dinner and Sophie and I decided to begin seeing each other on the sly, not wanting to complicate things.”

“Well, I’d say that was a bit naïve on your part, Paula.”

“In hindsight …”

“So, does her mum still not know about you?”

“Oh, she knows …”

Paula went on to explain all the gory details of the next several weeks, including Sally’s trial, the implosion of their relationship and subsequent reconciliation, and Paula’s move to London.

“So, it seems like everything is all good now, though, correct?”

“Better than good, Ev. I have never felt this way about anyone, not even Tim. I want to be with her all the time. And being apart from her is killing me.”

“So, what can you do to remedy that?”

“Well, she lives in Manchester. And I’m here, and up to my eyeballs in work, so moving her here
wouldn’t really solve any problems, would it?”

“I suppose you’ve got a point.”

“We are just going to have to survive on texts and calls and visits here and there.”

“Well, hopefully this nonsense investigation will come to an end sooner rather than later, and then you can get back to your Sophie. Poor Alexander. It’s really taking a toll on him. I pray this is all going to be over as quickly as possible. I’m just happy you’re here working on this for him.”

Evelyn’s tone piqued Paula’s senses.

“Why is that?”

“Well, let’s just say, I am happy someone who cares about Alexander is involved in his defense.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Paula, I don’t want to gossip about internal problems, but, I just don’t trust Ian Walker.”

“How come?”

“Well, I’ve never really been a fan, but about 6 months ago Alexander was ready to fire him. I don’t have all the details, but I think he suspected Ian was involved in some shady dealings. They had quite a few heated exchanges in the office and Alexander told me that his days were numbered. Then about a month later Interpol came knocking with the fraud allegations against the company. Ian was like a bulldog with them and Alexander felt protected I suppose. Ian had grand plans of an international legal team to fight off the ridiculous charges, so he didn’t fire him. And that’s how you came into the fold.”

“Me? How so?”

“Alexander demanded you be hired as Ian’s right hand. He told Ian to do whatever it took to get you on board. Honestly, Paula, it made me feel a whole lot better knowing you would be involved. Now, I don’t know how well you get along with him or what your professional opinion of him is, but he was not in favor of bringing you on board. He and Alexander went around and around about it. He wanted his team, people he could trust, etcetera. He even told Alexander that you had turned him down flat … that you weren’t at all interested. Alexander pushed back and told him to give you whatever you wanted.”

“This is very interesting, Evelyn.” Paula thought for just a moment. She was going to have to trust her old friend if she was going to make headway. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Of course, Paula.”

“Something is very wrong. I don’t trust Ian one bit. I’m not sure what he is up to at this point, but I am going to need your help if I am to figure it all out.”

“So, you think he’s dishonest? Putting the company at risk somehow?”

“That’s exactly what I think. Now I just need to prove it. And you’re going to help me!”

“Well, what kind of help exactly?”

“Ev, Ian has bugged my office, my flat and Sophie’s phone …”

“What?? I don’t understand. Why would he do that? There must be some mistake!”
“I haven’t quite figured that part out yet, but I know he thinks that keeping tabs on me is important. I don’t know if he is trying to set me up to take a fall or if he just wants to make sure I don’t figure out what he’s up to. Having talked to you, I now think it has something to do with the investigation.”

“Well, how is it that I can help?”

“I need access to all the system networks, in every country we operate in, and I need to be able to get in undetected by Ian. If he is guarding illegal activity, then I am sure he is monitoring who is accessing which drives and which files. Can you create an identity and passcode for me to use? One with high clearance that won’t arouse suspicion?”

“That’s all usually done at the IT department in New York. I suppose I could try to get the requisition sent through later, but –” Evelyn stopped mid-sentence, a realization falling over her face.

“What?” Paula knew an obstacle had reared its ugly head.

“Ian has to approve all new user access. Since the investigation began, he has had tight control over all things having to do with the networks and IT.” Evelyn sounded defeated.

“Then I am going to need to use one that already exists and will not draw attention, or we will have to get someone from IT to bend the rules. I might have to book a trip to New York. I need to go meet with the legal team there anyway, so I will just have to pop around IT to have a look.”

“You’ll have to use mine until then.” Evelyn offered.

“Are you sure, Ev? I don’t want to drag you into this and cast any suspicion onto you.”

“I need for you figure out what the hell is going on, Paula. Alexander is a good man. He’s an honest man, well as honest as the others in his business. I need to do what I can to ensure that he and his family are protected from this. Here are my details.” She wrote her information on a napkin and handed to Paula.

“My communication to you is going to come from a different number than you have for me. Here, I want you to put this number in your phone under ‘Pam’. This is the number I will be using to communicate out of Ian’s reach.” Evelyn typed it into her phone.

“Why Pam?” inquired the solicitor’s old friend.

“Paula Ann Martin.”

“You always were so clever Paula,” Evelyn laughed.

“I will call you or text you from that number when I am going to get into the system, so you know. Keep a journal of the times I am in just in case Ian ever asks you about it. I will do my best to use different computers, so the request isn’t always coming from the same IP address. I will text you with instructions to access things from the computer in your office as well. While I am in New York, I am going to have to see if I can set up a remote access to several offices, all in different countries, to throw him off if he digs that deep.”

“This is all very clandestine, Paula. Is Ian paying this close attention to things?”

“Evelyn, whatever he is doing probably is netting him a lot of money, so yes, he is paying very close attention. Why else would he bug my partner’s phone? He is dotting his I’s and crossing his t’s on this. I am going to have to start digging for a paper trail of financial transactions for him, including trying to locate off shore accounts. If he is siphoning money from the company, then he has to be
“Do you think you should tell Alexander about any of this?”

“Not yet, Ev. I want to make sure I have a full understanding of what Ian is up to because it could have repercussions for the investigation, and the less he knows, the better. I will involve him when and if I think it’s necessary.”

“And how are you keeping yourself and Sophie safe?”

“The best way to stay safe is by staying as many steps ahead of him as I can. I have to keep him thinking I’m oblivious to what’s going on.”

“Well, if anyone can figure it out Paula, it’s you. And you know I will do whatever I can to help.”

“I am going need you Evelyn. I am not sure how deep his network of allies goes, but I know he has a lot of people watching me, so everything I do has to make sense. If you see or hear anything suspicious, I want you to let me know as soon as you can, understand?” Evelyn nodded her head and took Paula’s hand in her own.

“Love, I am on your side. Always remember to use me however you can, okay? But you must promise me you are going to be careful and take care of yourself.”

“I am, and Sophie has my back as well. Don’t worry.”

“So, do you think she might be long term?”

“I think we have a mutual and complete admiration for one another. I don’t want to be with anyone but her.”

“Are you thinking marriage?”

Paula paused for a moment and took stock of the question. “Yes, I am. I really am. Oooh, that scares me a little bit.”

“Why does it scare you, dear?” asked Evelyn with soft eyes.

“Because I failed at it once. What’s to say I won’t fail again?”

“What’s to say you will? Paula, none of us know what’s going to happen, but it shouldn’t stop us from trying, right? Do you love her?”

“More than I can say.”

“Make sure you keep that feeling every day, no matter how angry you get at her, no matter how juvenile you think she’s being, no matter how insecure you’re feeling, keep her the most important thing in your life and you’ll be fine. That’s where most people fail, Paula. Having a long life with someone is all about making them important, no matter what.”

“I have to make sure it’s right for her, too, though. I want her life to be as fulfilled as possible. She deserves to have all the things she wants, including children, Ev. I’m 51. Am I too old to do all that again? Would it be fair to Sophie to have a partner so much older, not to mention the child? I would be more like a grandmother.”

“Have you talked about all that? Do you know if she even wants children?”
“No. But I think about it. I don’t want to rob her of anything.”

“Just talk to her and be open to figuring things out. And who cares how old you are! If you want something, you should just go for it, don’t you think? You went for Sophie without thinking everything through, so why not keep her with the same consideration?”

“You make a very compelling argument. I think you and Sophie will get along just fine. I’m hoping you will get the chance to meet her someday soon.”

“I will look forward to that. In the meantime, don't over think things. Just enjoy being in love, Paula.”

Paula smiled softly at her old friend and her thoughts drifted to her lover, causing a smile to appear across her face.

"You're thinking about her now, aren't you?" smirked the older woman. "You must have a picture of her, so let me take a look and see if I approve."

Paula pulled out her phone and showed her a few photos of them together.

"Well, now I understand! She's lovely, Paula. But what convinces me you're supposed to be together is not that she's beautiful, but that gleam of utter happiness in your eyes in every one of these pictures. You can't buy that with all the money in the world, my friend."

The old friends finished up their meal and parted ways with the understanding that they were now intertwined in a mystery that would challenge the best of their intelligence. Paula now had full access to the information she needed to figure out what was motivating Ian Walker to listen to and watch her every move. She would have to be extremely careful and not let on that she suspected him of any wrong doing. If he caught on, they could all be in danger. She would just have to make sure he didn’t.
Chapter 14

Paula left the restaurant in a cab feeling hopeful now that Evelyn Palmer was on board. She knew her friend would help her get to the bottom of this mystery that had unfolded so quickly and seemingly put her and Sophie in danger. Any man willing to eavesdrop on a woman’s life spelled threat to the solicitor and she was now involved to the point of no return. If she went to the police, she would have only speculation to hand them and Ian would surely bury any evidence further underground. Paula knew she had to keep her cool, think everything through, and try to dig deep to find out what crimes Ian Walker was committing at Cooper Securities, and why. She was going to have Joe Tucker look into Ian’s personal life – his finances, his family life, his indiscretions, his personal holdings – there would be something there to help her flesh out why he felt it necessary to listen in on her life.

Before she got back to the office, Paula needed to touch base with Sophie. She phoned her to let her know how her lunch with Evelyn went and to make sure had arrived safely back home.

“Hi babe!” Sophie answered with her usual cheer.

“Hello my love. Just wanted to make sure you made it back to Manchester.”

“Yep, back home to my boring old life … at least for a few days. How did your lunch with Evelyn go?”

“Couldn’t have gone better, actually,” Paula reported.

“So, she’s going to help you, then? And you’re sure you can trust her, right?” questioned a worried Sophie.

“Yes, she’s fully on board. She’s going to let me know if she overhears anything when Ian meets with Alexander, which happens a lot with this case on, so I have some ears on the inside. And she gave me her network access, so I can begin digging as soon as possible.”

“Be sure you have your eyes and that assistant of yours! You know she is going to be watching you like a hawk,” Sophie reminded her girlfriend.

“Yes, she is going to be a pain in my backside. I may just have to find a reason to get rid of her if she gets in my way.”

“That sounds ominous, babe. You’re not going, like hurt her, are you?”

Paula laughed at where Sophie’s mind was. “You’ve been watching too many crime shows, baby. I meant that I would have her transferred to another solicitor. I could feasibly request that Alex, my Alex, come up from Manchester because we work well together, and she knows how I think. You know, that’s something I will have to consider! It might work on many levels. She could stay in the flat with me …”

“Is she pretty?”

“What? What does that matter?” asked Paula, not realizing Sophie was jealous.

“Well, I don’t want my girlfriend living with her hot assistant!”

Paula laughed again, “Sophie, you have absolutely nothing to worry about! There is only one person
I want, sweetheart. I promise.”

“I know, I know. This whole thing just makes me nervous. Just be careful, babe, please.” Sophie pleaded, then changed the focus to Joe Tucker. “Have you had a chance to talk with Joe?”

“Yes, I spoke with him for quite a while this morning. He’ll handle everything, don’t worry. He will give you an audio jammer to use when you want to block the signal from your phone when you need to. And he will give me one to put in whatever room I need it in while I am at home.”

“So, like when we’re in bed?”

Paula chuckled. “Yes, baby, like when we’re in bed. No more having to sneak off to hotels.”

“Well, I quite liked that actually.”

“Mmmm, so did I, love. I won’t be forgetting that afternoon anytime soon.”

“Let’s not talk about it otherwise I am going to get myself all worked up with no way to do anything about it.”

“You have other things to worry with right now anyway. Have you found a place to put your phone until you can block the signal?”

“Yea, I’ve got it in my room. Don’t worry, we’ve been over this.”

“Good. Joe is going to call you and set up a time to come yours so he can be ‘Kevin’ and you can discuss coming to London. And you’ll then call me to see if it’s okay. I will push you to come this week, because I am going to New York.”

“But, Ian’s going to know you’re not going to New York, so why use that to leverage in the visit?”

“Well, truth is, I am going to New York. Next week. I have to get over there as soon as because I need to find someone in IT I can work with.”

“That’s a bit dangerous, Paula. You don’t know any of them people. How do you know who you can trust?”

“I’ll find someone. I’ll have to, Sophie. Listen, I’ve got to run, baby. I am back to my office now and I have to go back into solicitor mode … and Kylie will certainly be all ears! Text me when Joe leaves and let me know everything is ok. Oh, and I am going to call you for the fake conversation in a few minutes, so Kylie can hear. Bye, baby. I love you.”

Before Sophie could even respond, Paula had hung up. She didn’t like that Paula was going to New York and would be so far out of reach, in another country, and possibly in danger if she dug too deep. But, the good news was that she would see her lover again Thursday evening, when she and her ‘dad’ would make a visit. Now, she just had to figure out what to tell her real dad and Yasmeen. She decided to wait for the fake call, then head over to Speed Daal to talk her way into more time off.

Paula settled in behind her desk after a brief spar with Kylie and her call to Sophie. Kylie was, of course, standing within earshot when Paula spoke with her girlfriend, taking in every word. Paula made sure to mention things that would corroborate their weekend together.
She knew she had to work on the Amsterdam report, so she quickly began to review the data breakdowns Steve Spencer had sent her. He was her direct contact in New York and was hoping he would be her way into IT when she visited. She would have to vet him out since he was also in contact with Kylie and Ian, so he might not be who she could rely on. But first, she needed to let Ian know she was planning to visit New York next week.

“Kylie, get me Ian on the phone, please.”

A few moments later, Kylie let Paula know Ian was unavailable.

“Well, is he in his office and just busy or is he out?” She wanted to throttle this woman.

“He’s out.”

Paula looked at the time. 3:28pm. Where was he?

“Did Gemma indicate when he might be back?” wanting to see if Kylie made any effort.

“No, she didn’t.”

She quickly texted Evelyn to see if Ian was in Alexander’s office.

*Ev, is IW by chance meeting with AC at the moment?*

A few minutes later she got a reply. *He cancelled a 3 o’clock meeting he had scheduled with AC on very short notice. Said it was important to the case. AC not at all happy*

So, Ian was not where he was supposed to be. Shocking. And it supposedly had some importance to the case. She would have to find out where he was. But until she got some work done on Amsterdam, she was stuck behind her desk. She dug in to the data and began to write. She scrutinized the trade transactions by year for anomalies, starting with the most recent, but nothing seemed out of order. Just like Hong Kong. The only thing out of the ordinary was a slight imbalance of high trades, where too much was paid for stocks or bonds as compared to their value, but again, nothing that threw up any red flags. She then looked at the data broken down by time period, trades by month, gender of trader, age of trader, time trader had been with Cooper Securities, trader net commission, client net commission by transaction, client net commission by trader, which clients had more than one trader, and the list went on and on. She knew something was there, she just couldn’t suss anything out. She poured over the data, again and again, coming up with nothing remarkable.

“Paula, it’s seven. I am heading home,” said Kylie, standing in her doorway with her keys already in hand. Paula noticed a small, exotic jade green dragon hanging from her keys and it made her stop for a moment. There was something exquisite about it and she thought she might look for one for Sophie.

“Well, have a nice night. I’m afraid I have a few more hours to go on the Amsterdam report. Ian never materialized?” Paula inquired.

“No, he didn’t ring this afternoon.” And with that, she turned on her heel and left the office.

_Such a charmer, that one._ Paula took another hour to finish her first swipe at Amsterdam, then, with a quiet office about, decided to dig into the networks to surf around and see how everything was laid out. She sent Evelyn a quick text, making sure she was still ok with Paula using her login credentials. She had already accessed the drives that Ian had given her privileges to, all things having to do with the legal side of the business. She knew he would not keep incriminating evidence within her reach, so she perused her laptop drive access under her login and made notes on which drives she was
‘allowed’ onto. Evelyn’s approval came through, and she was about to log in when Ian came bursting into her office, a head full of steam.

It startled her, and she jumped as he barged in. She shut her laptop immediately.

“Paula! Have you completed Amsterdam?” he questioned. “I have been waiting all day for it. Time is of the essence, and you are being paid a lot of money to handle this. If you have better things to do, just let me know and I will get someone else on board!”

“First of all, I don’t appreciate you barging into my office, Ian. You could have announced yourself so as not to scare the wits out of me. I have indeed finished the report and was about to email it to you. This was a lie. And as for what I am doing with my time, I believe we have already had this discussion. I will not be rushed through any of the analyses I am charged with so as not to miss anything that, as you have pointed out, Cooper Securities is paying me quite handsomely for. Now, if something else is bother you and you’re finding it easier to take out on me than handling yourself, I suggest you get the hell out of my office and let me work!”

Paula knew he was miffed that she had been to lunch with Evelyn. And she now wondered why he felt the need to come to her office instead of just calling her. Had he been out since 3 this afternoon and just now getting back to the building? If he needed the report so badly, he would certainly not be on his way out.

He stood there for a moment, anger brimming at his collar, then calmed himself. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I apologize. I just need to get things moving on this, so we have something concrete to give Alexander.”

“I don’t disagree. In fact, I tried to find you earlier to discuss me going to meet with the New York team, but Kylie couldn’t locate you.”

Ian waved his hand absentmindedly in the air, “Oh, I had a meeting with Alexander earlier.”

She knew this was a lie.

“When are you thinking of going to New York? This week?” She could see the wheels spinning behind his eyes. He wanted her gone.

“No, not until next week. The data breakdowns for Tokyo are in and the others should be here by Wednesday. If they come through, I’d like to get all the reports finished before I go.”

“Hmm,” he huffed. “Are you sure this has nothing to do with your girlfriend?”

“What on earth would any of this have to do with Sophie?” The look on Paula’s face must have clued Ian in that he was out in left field. He quickly poo pooed his statement away.

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “It’s just I thought perhaps with her being ill you might not want to be out of the country. How is she, by the way? Feeling better, I hope.”

Paula finally understood that Ian knew full well that Sophie would be coming to London this week. He had obviously been given an update on her conversations, so she must have been able to meet with Joe after she and Paula had spoken. This was playing perfectly into the ruse, because Paula had not yet spoken to her, which was evident on her face when Ian brought her up.

“She’s fine. Saturday night was a fluke. We just went home and went to bed. She was right as rain Sunday. In fact, we were out most of the day, walking around the city, taking in the sunshine. It was quite a lovely day, in fact.”
“Well, I am glad to hear it. I’d hate for you to be distracted with a sick lover,” he quipped.

Paula hated passive-aggressive bullshit. “If you’re not happy with me for some reason Ian, you just need to say so.”

He was not used to people talking back to him. He looked at her and smiled, a snake of a smile, “Oh, you’ll know if I am unhappy with your work Paula. I won’t mince words.”

She knew he was dangerous. But she was not going to let him intimidate her. “Good. I like to do a good job. And if I am not being thorough enough, I want to know.” She smiled the most clueless smile she could muster. She needed to keep him in the dark.

“Of course. Now, about New York … you’ll leave when?”

“Probably Monday for the week. I really need to get familiar with some of the US idiosyncrasies, walk the exchanges, meet with IT,” she said casually. When ‘IT’ came out of her mouth, his face twitched.

“And why do you need to meet with IT?” he questioned.

“Well, Steve Spencer’s team compiles all the data we are using, so I want to make sure we are utilizing it in the right ways, you know, make sure we are looking at it in all the ways we should. It will help if I can sit with someone from IT and pick their brains about it.” She maintained a casual tone.

“Mmm hmmm. Well, just don’t take up too much of their precious time. They are very busy.”

Why on earth would lead council for a very serious set of charges not want his legal right hand to spend as much time as necessary with whatever department deemed important? Paula knew the answer to Ian’s crimes were with IT and the proof lay dormant in the computer files. She would have to tread lightly.

“Oh, of course. I know they’re busy. I don’t know how they do half the things they do. It’s all so confusing to someone my age! I can hardly use my phone. Sophie is always rolling her eyes at my technological incompetence,” Paula laughed, hoping to keep the wool down. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be telling you that I am not a tech wizard. I always relied on other people for that stuff.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. Nicole and I are both forever trying to figure out how to access our accounts from our phones and must rely on Joshua, our 15 yr old, to help us out. It’s a bit embarrassing at times.”

“How many children do you have, Ian. We never got much of a chance to discuss your family,” inquired the brunette, finding this a perfect time to dig a little.

“I have three. Joshua is 15, Melanie is 12 and Peter is 6 going on 40. He’s quite a character and thinks he has the world figured out.”

“What wonderful ages. I am happy mine are grown, if truth be told,” chuckled Paula. “And they’re all three in school here in London?”

“Yes, Exeter Academy. Costs me a bloody fortune! But, Nicole is quite insistent.”

“Mother’s can be that way when it comes to their children,” Paula commented, remembering the many fights she and Tim had over money.
“I’m afraid I don’t see as much of them as I’d like. Too much of a workaholic, I suppose.” There was a distance in his eyes, some kind of worry hidden just under the surface.

“Don’t I know it,” said Paula, quirking her eyebrow at him.

Just then, Ian’s phone began to ring. “Excuse me for a moment.” He pulled it out of his front coat pocket and Paula noticed the size, color and brand of his phone – Black iPhone X+. “Yes. Mmm hmmm <> ok <> there must be a problem with it then. How do we fix that?” His voice lowered considerably, and he cut his eyes across, looking at Paula quickly, then back. “I thought they were state of the art? <> Well, bloody well figure it out! <> I have to go. Call me later with an update!”

Ian looked slightly frustrated, but wiped his demeanor away quickly.

Paula said nothing. Intentionally. She just pretended to be looking intently at something on her desk.

“So,” Ian broke the silence, “you’ll be in New York next week then?”

“Yes, that’s the plan, unless there is something you need me here for.”

“No, I think that will be fine. Ok, well, send me the Amsterdam report and I will get back to you on that for any improvements or missing insights before I include Alexander.”

“Oh, before you go, we need to meet sometime this week to go over some of the HR data on employee tracking. There are a couple of weird things I noticed.”

“Sure. Just have Gemma look at my calendar.” And he turned and left almost as abruptly as he had entered.

Paula spent the next few hours logged into the network under Evelyn’s id. She mapped out the drives she didn’t have access to, making notes so she could return to dig deeper. It was tedious to explore folder by folder, file after file, nothing seeming to look out of the ordinary. It was difficult to find something when you didn’t know what you were looking for in the first place.

It was nearly eleven, so Paula decided to head home and get her call in to Sophie before she got to the flat for their fake goodnight call and the conversation about her and ‘Kevin’ coming down this weekend. She called for a driver then rode the lift down to the entrance at Cooper Securities. She said goodnight to the evening security detail, as she did most nights, and was met on the sidewalk by her waiting car.

“Good evening Ms. Martin,” said a new driver, one she’d never met.

“Good evening, uhm?” she inquired for the driver’s name.

“Paul, maam.”

“Thank you for coming quickly, Paul. Are you new?”

“No, maam. I usually drive for Mr. Walker.”

Paula tucked that bit of info into her head. She didn’t realize how tired she was until she sat in the back of the car. She decided to text Sophie since she didn’t know Paul or how yet to read him.

*Hi sweetheart! Hope it’s not too late. Just on my way back to the flat*

It only took a minute for Sophie to respond.
Hi babe!!! U poor thing, it’s so late. U must be exhausted. Wish I were there to rub ur feet or ur shoulders or something else … 😊*

*Oh geesh, I think I’m too tired even for that! But it’s a nice thought. So I take it Joe made it over to urs?*

*How did u know that?*

*Just a hunch bc of the way IW was acting earlier. I guessed he was notified that u and ‘kevin’ were talking about coming here*

*yep, we are all set to swoop into town in the clunker Thurs eve. *

*great! Everything here is okay. Spent some time on network but have not discovered a smoking gun just yet. Did Joe give you the audio jammer?*

*yep, he had some thing that read the signals and said it was working great. Hey, why aren’t u calling me now?*

*new driver. Don’t want to talk in front of him. Almost back to the flat, so gonna go for now. Will call you for our goodnight so turn jammer off. Ttys*

*ok. Will be waiting. I love u, babe. And I miss u.*

“I miss u. So much. love u 2 baby XXX*

Paula made her way up to her flat and managed herself a glass of wine before plopping down in her office chair to begin orchestrating the charade. She dialed her girlfriend’s number and waited for her to pick up.

“Hiya babe! You’ve had a long day, eh?”

“Hello sweetheart. Sorry I haven’t had time to call before now, it’s been a busy day. I’m glad you made it back home safely.”

“My train ride was fine, nothing too exciting. Did you get your report done then?”

“Yea, I got that all done and sent off to Ian.”

“Well, that’ll be a load off your mind, for a minute anyway. I hate that you’re back to working a million hours a day. You’re not getting any younger, ya know?” Sophie said with a bit of cheek.

“Listen here youngster, I’ll have you know I am made of tough stuff. Long hours are a lawyer’s lot. It’s not the first time I’ve had to work into the wee hours and it won’t be the last. Just the way it is, love.”

“It may be the way it is, but I don’t have to like it. Once this case is done, and you’ve won because you are the best solicitor in the world, I am going to take you somewhere warm with blue water, white sand and lots of cocktails.” This, Sophie really meant.

“Oh, darling, that sounds magical. But that’s the long game. Right now I just have to focus on getting my head around this case. To be honest, I may have bitten off a bit more than I can chew.”

“Well, what do ya mean?”

“Well, I’ve been digging for evidence out of the data pulls and I am just not finding anything. I can’t
go into detail, but I just don’t know if I am looking at it all wrong.” She had to make Ian think her abilities to reduce data to evidence were questionable.

“I’m sure you’re just tired right now, babe. You will get things managed. You always do.”

“Maybe so. I miss having my cheerleader with me.”

“Well, she misses you too. Buuuut, I may be seeing you sooner rather than later!”

“What dya mean?”

“Well, it appears that our Rosie is coming back from Japan soon and she will be moving to London, so, my dad and I are going to come down and check out flats for her. We can stay at yours while we are there, yeah?”

“Uh, sure you can. But I can’t promise I will have much time to spend with you while you’re here though love.”

“Oh, I know babe. My dad and I will be self-sufficient. You won’t have to worry with us. We just need a place to land while we are there looking.”

“Yea, I don’t think it will be a problem. When are you thinking of coming?”

“Well, my dad has a lull at the garage, so we was thinking of coming Thursday and staying the weekend, if that’s no trouble.”

“That should be ok. I do have to leave for New York Monday, though.”

“What? You’re going to New York?”

“Yes, I have to get over there to meet the legal team and hash through some details on US securities law and how if affects us. I will likely be gone all week, but I will call you, don’t worry.”

“I know you will. I’m actually quite jealous! I’ve never been there.”

“Well, even if you could come, I wouldn’t have time to spend with you, baby. We will go together someday. I promise.”

“We sure are planning a lot of trips … someday.” Sophie laid on the irritation in her voice, hoping Paula knew she was stunting.

“Yes, Sophie, I am well aware that our lives are on hold right now. We have had this conversation a million times. You’re going to have to exercise some patience!”

“yea, I know. My patience will be well toned by the time this bloody job is finished.”

“Listen, I don’t want to fight with you. I just wanted to have a nice conversation with my girlfriend before I go to sleep.”

Sophie remained silent.

“Sophie, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here. I’m just gonna go. You get some sleep, ok?”

“Fine.”
“Fine. I will talk to you tomorrow, if I’m lucky. Good night.” Click. Paula slammed her phone down on her desk and shouted, “Good night to you!”

She smiled to herself while she huffed for effect. She began to mumble under her breath, making sure to exude frustration. Paula wanted Ian to think she was distracted by her relationship rather than focusing on things that might be off at work.

She grabbed her other phone, walked into her bedroom and sent her lover a text.

*That was brilliant, darling! God, I wish I could put my lips on urs right about now*

*Well that makes 2 of us! Glad u knew I wasn’t serious*

*we are all good. Gotta keep dinkus in the dark and if he thinks I am distracted he will let his guard down*

*we are a good team, martin. Told u I’m more than just a pretty face*

*Ur a gorgeous face! And other things 2, mainly that sneaky brain of urs – loving it*

*I love u*

*me 2 u my love. Wish I wasn’t in my bed alone 🎀*

*The thought of u in ur bed alone makes me ache for u*

*What r u wearing? 😊*

*Oh, u don’t play fair*

*lol … never have, never will*

*I don’t think I’ve ever wanted u more than I do right now*

*Good … gotta keep u on ur toes*

*yea, well now I’m aroused and ur not here … not fair*

*sorry lover … but maybe this way u will dream of me*

*would do that anyway. Don’t need any help*

*me neither, baby. And u will be here Thur. can’t wait … my body misses yours*

*stop it!*  

*lol … wanna a nudie shot?*

*NO!*  

*hahahahahahahaha … just kidding … won’t do that 2 u*

*phew … i’d rather catch the live show thur nite*

*u r so perfect 4 me!*  

*ur so right … I am … and don’t u forget it!*
Paula settled down in her bed, missing Sophie terribly. She pulled the extra pillow to her and inhaled deeply. She could smell Sophie’s strawberry shampoo and it made her smile. Only a few more days. She had no idea how she would manage without Sophie again after she was gone, no real end in their separation in sight. She would just have to get to the bottom of the Ian problem quickly, so Sophie being in London wasn’t questionable and she could be with Paula more often, provided Yasmeen didn’t throw a fit over Sophie being gone so often. The last thing Paula wanted was for Sophie to jeopardize her job because of this mess she was dealing with, but she needed her lover’s help. She now had Evelyn and Joe working with her, and maybe they would uncover something concrete soon. Joe was an excellent investigator and he would certainly be a huge asset. She just hoped Ian didn’t catch on to her knowledge of the listening devices and her ability to block the signals when she needed. She had instructed Joe to bring some bugs that Paula could plant if the chance arose. It would be invaluable to be able to turn the tables on this prick and get a listen into his world for bit. A dangerous game for sure, but likely a necessary one.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Sorry this update took so long … busy week. Hope you're all still reading. Beginning to develop some layers and some suspense. Enjoy!

Paula walked quickly along the street, pulling her coat up around her for warmth, heading to the café not far from Cooper Securities. She had been frequenting the little hole in the wall, finding that getting out of her office, out of the building, and away from listening devices, was keeping her sane. She had managed to keep both of her phones on her always, away from the threat of having a bug planted, but the thought that someone might be listening to her was wearing on her and making her paranoid. She hated having to keep track of which conversations she had in her office, which she had in her flat, which she had with Sophie on her safe phone versus the bugged phone. She had to keep straight who was supposed to know what and when. It was exhausting. And she hated that she was in this position, worse that she had inadvertently involved Sophie.

She ducked out of the blustery weather and into the small restaurant for a coffee and a chance to think through the last few days and what she had pieced together from her digging. She had not been able to locate anything specific that pointed a finger at wrong doing. She knew it was all there, but without an understanding of what Ian was doing, she was searching for a needle in a haystack. She had completed the reports for Hong Kong, Amsterdam, Tokyo and New York, and was now working on Shanghai. Each report was similar, showing nothing remarkable in the trading trends. She was missing something, not looking closely enough, and it frustrated her. She was also still waiting for her teams to summarize the discovery from the Feds, so she could perhaps begin to figure out whether the charges had legs or not. Ian should already have had the discovery broken down. He had had months before Paula came on board to get this information handled. What the hell had he been doing? Then it occurred to her, perhaps he was dragging his feet for a reason. Why would he want to delay the internal preparation? This was a question she would have to take up when she met the team in New York next week. Ian was stalling, but why? He needed time, for something.

The coffee was nice and hot and doing the trick. Paula was beginning to relax. She checked her watch – 4:38p. It was Thursday and Sophie and Joe Tucker were on their way to London, due to arrive, barring any traffic delays, by 7pm. Paula had arranged for Sophie to park the Mercedes in a lot near her building, so they could access it easily. She missed having her car and the freedom that it provided from prying ears. She checked her phone and realized she had a text from Sophie that came through twenty minutes prior.

*Hi babe … we are on our way, about an hour in, all is well. We come with lots of tech equipment. U should c some of this stuff! I know ur busy. Text me when u can. Can’t wait to c u! XXX*

Paula texted back, just to touch base.

*Glad ur on the road. Plz be careful. Text me when you get into London and I will head over to meet u at the parking garage. We can take a cab from there. Don’t want anyone knowing where my car is XXX*

She needed to get back to the office to finish Shanghai and get it sent to Ian. She would then have all the reports finished and could compare her findings side by side. She knew something was there, she
was just missing it. Perhaps fresh eyes would help. Sophie was good to talk things over with. She headed back to her office and her ‘lovely’ assistant, who was surely wondering where she had gotten to.

Sophie had never driven in a place as traffic crazy as London before, much less in Paula’s expensive car. It was making her a bit nervous. Joe was doing his best to keep the conversation light, so Sophie wasn’t too stressed. The pair had gotten along great, making it easier to pull off the ruse of them being father and daughter. He had schooled her on how some of the equipment worked and how best to do the sweep of the flat with active listening happening. He told her a lot about his profession and how he loved finding pieces of information that led to putting the puzzle together to prove or disprove theories. He told Sophie how highly he thought of Paula and how lucky she was to be attached to such a smart lady. Sophie almost got jealous, but he confessed to being a happily married bloke for nearly 30 years, his wife being a jewel and understanding his job kept him away at times.

The GPS lead them to the parking garage with no problems. The time was 7:18p. Paula wasn’t there yet, but should be, soon. Sophie was excited to see her. She pulled the car up to the attendant’s alcove and turned the car off. Joe began unloading their bags whilst Sophie spoke to the attendant. She was filling out paperwork when a cab pulled up and Paula stepped out, a huge smile pulling across her face at the sight of her young girlfriend, who was looking so good in her jeans and boots, albeit a little road-weary.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she said as she wrapped her into a huge hug. “You are a sight for sore eyes!”

“I am so happy to see you,” Sophie professed as she kissed Paula a few times. “I feel like I’ve been away from you for ages!”

Paula released Sophie from her grasp and walked over to Joe. “Hello, you!” Paula said, stretching her hand out.

“None of that nonsense!” he said as he hugged Paula. “You’re looking as good as ever! This one here is a little bit in love with you, I think,” he said, motioning his head at Sophie, a big grin surfacing on his face. “You’d better watch out or you might have some competition! She’s pretty smart, this one.”

“Well, you’re certainly right on that one. And I’m afraid I might be the one a bit in love with her, but don’t tell her that,” Paula said, winking at her old friend.

“What are you two talking about,” questioned Sophie as she walked over to the pair. “They’ll be taking the clunker from us now. Here’s your claim ticket,” Sophie said, handing Paula a piece of paper.

“You’ll need to keep this so you can get the car tomorrow. You’re going to be going on an information hunt with your dad here,” the solicitor smiled and grabbed Sophie’s hand. “You ready to head to the flat?” Paula asked, motioning toward the waiting cab.

The trio arrived at Paula’s building, Edward coming out unawares. “Oh, Ms. Martin, I wasn’t expecting you in a cab.”

“Oh, I was just picking Sophie and her dad up. Can you assist with the bags, Edward?”

“Yes, maam,” indicated the doorman. Sophie made sure to hand him her bag, not Joe’s, because they
They all loaded into the lift and made their way up to the flat, Joe making sure to chat like a father would about the swanky building. Paula laughed internally at how good this guy was. They entered the flat, and he really got into how lucky his daughter was to have found such a good provider as Paula. Sophie played along well, swatting him on the arm.

“DAD! You don’t say things like that to people! Stop embarrassing me. I told you to behave,” Sophie scolded.

“No worries, baby. Your dad and I have an understanding, don’t we Kevin?” Paula said, laughing at the antics.

“Yes, we do! I don’t make a fuss as long as you’re happy, my baby girl!”

“Dad!”

“Will there be anything else, Ms. Martin,” said an ‘ignored’ Edward.

“Oh, so sorry Edward, forgot you were there. No, we are fine now, thank you,” chuckled Paula.

Edward retreated.

“Well, show me to my room so I can unpack then … give you two love birds a moment,” said Joe, miming that he was going to unpack his equipment and begin his sweep of the flat.

Paula gave the thumbs up. “It’s this way, Kevin. We will just be in my bedroom unpacking Sophie’s things.”

Joe oohed and aahed over the room. “You two behave, you hear me?”

Paula pulled Sophie into her bedroom, keeping up the pretense, “Come here, you. Mmmmm,” she said as she kissed her lover deeply. “I have been missing you. It took every ounce of control not to do that right in front of your dad!”

“Well, we still have to be careful, babe. He might walk in! The last thing I need is him seeing us, you know, doing stuff.”

Paula mouthed to Sophie – where is the audio jammer?

“What kind of stuff do you mean? Like this?” she asked out loud, then leaned into Sophie’s ear, “turn the bloody jammer on! I need to feel you.”

“Babe! My dad’s right out there,” Sophie shrieked. “I don’t have the damn thing. Joe does,” she whispered in Paula’s ear, trying to hold her libido in check.

“Well, can I have a few kisses before we have to go back out there, then?” Paula pleaded.

“That I think I can manage,” breathed a hoarse Sophie as Paula ran her hand up under her shirt to cup her breast, squeezing it.

The lover’s kissed, trying to keep their arousal contained. They had work to do and no time to take things further. After a few very deep and passionate kisses, Paula pulled away, knowing she was not going to be able to stop herself if they continued, bug or no bug.

Thankfully, Joe knocked on their door. Sophie went into the en-suite to splash some cold water on
her face as Paula opened the door. “Yes, Kevin?”

Joe just grinned. He was going to have a bit of fun with his friend. “Uh, I’ve unpacked. What are you two up to?”

“Just doing the same,” squeaked Paula.

Joe pulled a small device out of his pocket and flipped a switch. A red light came on. “Ok, so this will give you about a 12 foot radius of white noise, essentially blocking what you’re saying from the bug. There is a bug in the guest bedroom, so I am assuming this guy has the entire flat wired up good. I will start scanning in here now and we will know where the damn things are. Generally, if you keep one on you and Sophie one on her, you should be fine, no matter how many devices he has in here.

Sophie appeared from the en-suite and Paula held the jammer up in her hand, indicating it was ok to talk freely. “Oh, there it is! So, he gave you the spiel on it then?” Sophie asked Paula. “Find anything yet?” she asked Joe.

“Yes. In the spare room.”

“That means there are about a million in the flat!” Sophie was never short on hyperbole.

“We’re about to find out!” Joe grabbed his scanner and the jammer and went to work in the bathroom and bedroom. Paula and Sophie went into the living room to discuss dinner plans.

“Where should we take your dad for dinner, sweetheart?” inquired a semi-serious Paula, whose stomach was beginning to rumble.

“Uh, wherever is fine. He’s easy really. A good pub will do.” Sophie nodded to Paula that it also sounded good to her. She could go for a pint.

“Yea, ok. That sounds good. Let me search for something close by.” Paula pulled out her phone and searched the area. “Yep, here’s one. The Fox and Hound. It’s only a couple of miles. Website shows good food choices.” Joe had moved from the bedroom into the kitchen, then to the office and was heading into the living room.

“Sounds good, babe. I’m starving!” Sophie was serious. “Uh, dad, you about ready to head out for dinner?”

“Yes, I am. Give me a minute to change my shirt.” He flipped the jammer back on. “Ok, you’re loaded. One in every room.”

Sophie wanted to vomit. “Can he actively listen, like live to what’s going on?”

“Oh, yea. Certainly can,” confirmed Joe. “But the jammers will take care of that now. He won’t be able to hear a god damn thing while it’s on.”

“Yea, but what about what he’s already heard?” Sophie stood up and began to pace. She wanted to cut his balls off.

“Well, we caught on quickly, baby, so he hasn’t heard too much.”

“TOO MUCH? He’s heard a LOT of stuff, Paula. I feel completely violated!”

“I know. I’m sorry, baby. I —“
“That bastard is going to pay for this. I promise you that!”

“Now, you can’t go off on him when you see him, Sophie. We have to act like we know nothing!”

“I don’t know how you can be in the same room with that slime ball.”

“He is obviously hiding something really big. We just need keep up the pretense, for our own safety. Maybe you should go back home tomorrow.”

“NO! I am not fucking leaving. I know I need to calm myself down and use my head, not my emotions. I promise to get myself under control. Just give me a minute, okay?”

Paula walked over to Sophie and put her arms around her, feeling horribly guilty for putting her in this position. “It’s going to be okay, love, I promise. We now have the control of what he hears, and we need be smart about it or he is going to get suspicious. Are you sure you want to stay?”

“Yes! I want to help. I’m not leaving!”

“Alright, love. I’m not going to push. Let’s just go to dinner, yeah? A drink will do us all a bit of good,” suggested the solicitor.

Joe handed the jammer to Paula to keep on her. He handed one to Sophie as well. “Keep them on you and charge them at night. I will leave a couple more in case something goes wrong with either of them.”

“Ready to go?” Paula asked the others. They nodded. She flipped the jammer off. She picked up the land line and rang Edward to call for a cab. She had intentionally talked about where they were going so that Joe could see if they were being followed. He was an expert at counter-surveillance and could train the women on what to look for.

A couple hours later they arrived back at the flat after having a nice relaxing dinner and a few drinks to take the edge off. Joe had not noticed anyone tailing them or anything suspicious at the pub. Maybe Ian was off doing something more important. In any case, at least now they had the ability to block the intrusion.

“Well, I am exhausted and have to be up quite early, so I am going to turn in. Sophie, are you coming to bed, baby, or are you going to stay up with your dad for a bit?” asked Paula.

“No, I’m coming to bed, too. ‘night dad,” Sophie said to Joe, who gave a thumbs-up.

“’night you two. See you in the morning. Soph, you and I have six listings to get to tomorrow, so no sleeping in. Our first appointment is at 9.”

“Yes, dad, I know.” She laid on the irritation at being treated like a kid. “See you in the morning.”

The women went into their bedroom and went through the ritual of getting ready for bed and talking about how tired they both were, which wasn’t far from the truth. They put on pjs and got into bed, kissed goodnight, then let the room fall silent for a few minutes. Paula flipped the switch on the jammer and reach out for Sophie.

“You okay, love?”

“No. I’m not,” she said into the darkness. “I feel so angry right now, Paula. I know that asshole can’t
hear us, but he listened to the most private and intimate parts of our life and he probably got off to it. It makes me sick.”

Paula pulled her girlfriend into her arms, cuddling her up to her side, placing her lips to Sophie’s temple, “I’m so sorry, Sophie. I wish I had clued in faster to what was going on, so I could have spared you this. I feel like I should have protected you better.”

“Babe, it’s not your fault. I am not angry with you. I’m just angry that people can do this kind of stuff and get away with it. It’s so unfair.” Sophie sighed and pulled her head back to face her lover. “I’m sorry if you feel like I’m taking out my frustration on you. I don’t mean to. You’re the most important person in my life and I don’t blame you for any of this,” said the young brunette, tracing a finger along Paula’s face and leaning in to capture her lips softly. “I missed not being here with you these last few days,” she said as she moved her body closer to her lover.

“I love having you with me,” said the solicitor, wrapping her arms around her lover, pulling her tight.

“Why exactly did we put clothes on, again?” asked an aroused Sophie.

“I have no idea,” Paula whispered. “I think it’s time we take them off though, don’t you?” Paula moved her mouth to Sophie’s neck and began to sensually move her lips against the skin there. “You taste like heaven,” breathed the solicitor, her eyes closed, her mouth taking in Sophie’s earlobe.

“Keep talking like that and you might get lucky, Ms. Martin,” Sophie breathed in the older brunette’s ear. She could feel the solicitor’s hands sliding down her back as she rolled Sophie on top of her, her fingers reaching the rim of her pajama bottoms. As she began to push at them, Sophie kissed her and grinned, then said, “I hope you’re ready for a reward …”

Paula looked at her, her eyebrows scrunched together in question.

“I’m going commando …”

“Oh, you are a very naughty girl, Ms. Webster … and it’s time you were taught a valuable lesson,” said Paula, attaching her lips to her lover’s again. “Never go commando unless you want to get fucked.”

“I’m all yours, babe,” breathed a very aroused young brunette. “I need to feel you. All of you. Now!”

The lover’s enjoyed their amorous activity until they both gave in to exhaustion, falling asleep where they belonged, wrapped up in one another, completely satiated.

Morning dawned with the beeping of Paula’s alarm at 5am. It was Friday, but that really meant nothing, because the solicitor was used to working 7 days a week. She reached over and silenced the alarm, reset it for 5 minutes later, turned off the jammer, then shuffled back down into bed with her girlfriend, pulling her body as close as she could. She looked at the beautiful woman in her arms, and knew that she had made the right decision to get back together with Sophie, no matter the problems they were facing at present. She loved her and that was all that mattered. They would get through this craziness with Cooper Securities together, then live their lives and be happy.

The alarm sounded, and Paula groaned internally. Back to reality. She kissed her lover’s shoulder, and Sophie rolled over and reached out for her. “Come snuggle with me for just a minute?” the young -brunette requested through sleepy eyes. Paula couldn’t deny her, so she shuffled back under the covers and placed a kiss on Sophie’s lips and whispered to her, “the jammer is off, so careful
what you say.”

“Can I tell you how very much in love with you I am?” asked Sophie, smiling up at her lover.

“I will never get tired of hearing that, baby.” Paula captured Sophie in a passionate kiss, wishing she could stay and make love to her all day. “I have to get in the shower, honey. You go back to sleep, okay?”

Sophie scrunched up her face, completely opposed to Paula leaving their bed. “Okay for now, but you are all mine later, you hear me?”

“Sounds like a date! I will call you later. Good luck with the flat hunt today!” She kissed her again and headed off to the en-suite.

Sophie and Joe were out early and cabbed over to pick up the Mercedes, so they would have freedom in the city. Joe had things to get done and was going to teach Sophie a thing or two about surveillance and investigation. His target was one Ian Walker. He needed to get a handle on Ian’s personal life, and that was going to take some legwork and personal contact. He had done some research online and had their day mapped out – children’s school, gentlemen’s club, houses, wife’s friends, etc. He would do more research online when he had Paula to clarify.

Over at Cooper Securities, Paula had finished all the reports on the trade breakdowns for each of their offices. Seven years’ worth of data trends sat in front of her. *C’mon, Paula, use that brain and find what you know is there.* She poured over the reports, the trends, the statistical breakdowns and found nothing. It was beginning to drive her crazy. She knew it was here, but she couldn’t decipher it. She knew she was going to need help. Her human brain could not work fast enough, and she was going to need computer assistance. Perhaps she would find the right person to help her in New York next week. She shifted gears to digging again into the network files.

She called out for her assistant, “Kylie, can you bring me a fresh pot of coffee?”

There was no response. “Kylie?” Paula called again in vain. She got up and opened her office door and walked out into the outer office where Kylie’s desk was. An empty chair, empty office looked back at her. This was rare. Kylie was always at her desk. Paula walked over to see if anything was suspicious, see if she could find an of Ian’s influence at work. Her computer was opened to a worksheet outlining some of the discovery Paula had sent her earlier. Nothing remarkable was on her desk, either. Not surprising. She would surely be more careful than to leave anything incriminating out in plain sight. But, maybe Paula would find something in her drawers. The solicitor looked out in the hallway for any sight of the blonde, then padded over to the desk and began rummaging through, drawer by drawer, careful not to move anything too far out of place. She came across the jade green dragon trinket on Kylie’s keys. She picked it up to observe it more closely. It was quite extraordinary, made of silver and inlaid with green crystals and painted enamel with a ruby for an eye. She flipped it over in her hand and noticed two initials, JB, imprinted into the silver.

“What are you doing?” came the question from the doorway.

Paula nearly jumped out of her skin and looked up to find an inquiring Kylie staring at her. “Oh, I, um, was just looking for staples. I ran out,” the solicitor lied.

“Why do you have my keys?” Kylie asked, very annoyed.

“Well, while I was looking for staples, I saw the dragon. It’s beautiful. I thought I might get one for
Sophie. I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

Kylie eyed the solicitor with contempt and held out her hand.

Paula placed the keys in her outstretched palm. “My apologies.” She really has no personality!

The blonde walked around to sit at her desk as Paula began to retreat to her office. “Ms. Martin?” Kylie called to her.

“Yes?”

“Your staples.” The assistant held a box out to her boss.

“Oh, yes. Thank you,” said the mildly flustered lawyer. “Oh, and Kylie, can you bring me a fresh pot of coffee, please?”

“Of course,” responded the blonde.

Paula went back to her office and closed the door. She fucking gives me the creeps. Ian knows how to pick them.

Joe and Sophie had made it over to Exeter Academy and Joe had been able to infiltrate the office under the pretense of inquiring about information on tuition, matriculation and extra-curricular opportunities. He refused to speak to the admissions director, instead demanding, loudly and emphatically, to speak directly to the head, knowing he needed to mine for information from the inner office. He had talked their way into the head’s office, where they were now sitting, waiting, for Dr. Mathews to enter.

“Look around for computer access information – id’s, passwords, etc.” he told Sophie. “If I can get into their system, then I will be able to access everything I need.”

“Ok,” said a very nervous Sophie. She walked around to the side of the desk, looking at pictures and certificates on the wall, while glancing onto the desk. Joe was on the other side, looking out the window and on the ledge full of books for any helpful information.

“You know, it’s perfect that we have that car,” he said, pointing at the Mercedes, visible from the head’s office. “Give’s off complete legitimacy to this ruse. Now, go stand in front of the door, Soph. In case this bloke comes in,” he directed.

Sophie did as she was asked, standing right in the doorway, hand on the knob.

Joe pulled open the desk drawer and bingo, found what he needed. He shook his head at how predictable humans are. He took his phone out and snapped a shot of the post it note. He moved the mouse to wake the sleeping computer and snapped another shot. He sat and logged in and installed a program giving him remote access to the computer, which he would later log into for a full review of all the Walker information available to the head master. He accessed the computer’s IP address, then hid his tracks.

Just then, the door began to open. Sophie knew she had to stall.

Joe darted back to his seat as the door opened, and Sophie stuck her foot in the way of the door, a loud thud sounded. Dr. Mathews thought he had just struck the person on the other side of the door in the head.
Sophie stumbled back, allowing the door to fully open, her hand held up to her forehead.

“Oh, my goodness, are you alright? Please accept my apologies. I didn’t know you were coming through the door!”

“I just needed the toilet,” faked a ‘stunned’ Sophie.

Joe was up and out of his seat, holding her arm, laying it on thick. “My darling girl, are you sure you’re okay?” He winked at Sophie.

“Yes, I’m fine. I just need to sit down,” feigned the young brunette.

Dr. Mathews called for some tea and fawned all over the visitors for fear of litigation, many of his client’s being lawyers. About 20 minutes later, they were leaving the school with the information for which they came – complete access to the school’s computer.

At 4pm Paula headed over to Ian’s office for their meeting on the discovery and the HR anomalies Paula had clued into. She was going to downplay the information just in case it had something to do with his misdeeds. She walked into the outer office, but Gemma was not at her desk. Ian’s door was slightly ajar, so Paula walked as close as she might dare, and listened intently.

She could hear Ian speaking heatedly in Spanish! Damnit, my Spanish is weak. She pulled out a pen and scratched down words she could decipher and could translate later.


Then she heard something that sent a chill up her spine. “Paula Martin.” He was talking about her to whomever was on the other line.

Just then, Gemma came back into the office. “Oh, hello Paula. How are you? I don’t get to see much of you these days.”

“You know, just buried under all this paperwork,” she said. “I have a meeting scheduled with Ian at 4.”

“He’s on the phone at the moment,” she said, pointing to the red light on his phone line. “Just have a seat. I will let you know when he’s available.”

Paula clued in to the fact that Ian was on an international call, discussing deposits, the Cayman Islands, Paula and surveillance, all on the very accessible Cooper Securities phone line. This was a new lead for her to follow up with, and seemingly careless on Ian’s part. She could locate the number and location with some digging.

After her pointless meeting with Ian, Paula headed back to her office to begin translating the words she picked up from Ian’s conversation. And to figure out if she could access the phone records. As she was about to turn the corner into her office, her phone chimed. Kylie looked up from her computer screen at the noise. It was Sophie.

*Hi babe! It’s almost 6 so wanted to touch base and see if you were going to be able to get away for dinner later … and maybe a hot bath with ur hot gf? XX*

*Most definitely … to both! Can think of nothing I’d rather do … well, maybe 1 thing 😊*
*That will happen later 2. Been a long day and def need 2 feel u against me. What time will u be home?*

*Y don’t u come pick me up at 7 at my building. Unless ur cooking?*

*C u at 7 outside ur bldg in a cab! Plan to eat a nice dinner out, then eat something better later at home …*

*ok, not fair 2 do that 2 me. Now I’m horny*

*Good. Me 2! Always am w u*

Paula sat at her computer and immediately began digging in to see if phone records could be accessed. She surfed around and found access to the phone bills in accounts payable. They should have records she could download, but it was going to take some time to weed through. She needed help. Joe would know what to do, so she would discuss it with him later at dinner. She then pulled out the pad on which she had scribbled down the words Ian had uttered earlier. She used her phone to pull up a translator. Some words she knew – money, deposit, trade, account, Cayman Islands, surveillance, and, of course, her name. What she didn’t know were: Short buy, under control, next drop and real estate.

So, this madness has to do with real estate. That I can understand, but how? And what does shorting have to do with this? Not a lot of information, but it was something … a few more small pieces to the puzzle. The most concerning part of it all was the mention of her name and surveillance. Ian conveyed to the person on the other end of the line that everything was under control, so at least he had not caught on to the fact that she knew something was up. But why bring her up in conversation at all? She had to figure out what she had to do with this before things got out of hand.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Paula flies to NY and encounters an interesting man. Sophie stumbles onto some information that could be useful.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for wonderful and flattering comments. Sorry to have kept you waiting for this chapter. I will try to post the next one quicker. Cheers!

Paula’s flight to New York was set to depart in 37 minutes. She was sitting in her seat enjoying a cocktail prior to take off, thinking about her impending visit to the Big Apple and all the information that she was going to have to dig for on the down low while she was there. She and Sophie were beginning to piece together the still very incomplete picture of Ian Walker’s criminal activity. Joe Tucker had yet to uncover anything out of the ordinary in Ian’s personal affairs, at least nothing that pointed to a motive for breaking the law to a severe degree, but he had only just begun his mining tasks. When Paula returned from New York, she was hopeful he would have a much richer picture for her. Paula had hit several walls while digging into the records at Cooper Securities. She could not access human resources data or the phone records she so desperately wanted. She knew she was going to have to get access to this information while in New York, all without Ian knowing. He was keeping a tight rope on the information to which he was allowing access, and that confirmed for Paula that the information she needed was under his lock and key.

The solicitor’s thoughts shifted to Sophie, who had gone back to Manchester the day before. She was already missing her lover, though she knew the best place for Sophie to be was far away from London and Ian Walker. Paula wasn’t sure if Ian was having Sophie watched, but nothing was indicating such action. She was fairly confident Ian had not discovered their ruse, so Sophie was safe, for now. The pair had enjoyed being together over the weekend, brainstorming about the information they had, making plans about New York, taking some time for a few nice meals and making the most of their time together in the evenings. Thinking of their love-making aroused Paula. The simple thought of Sophie’s naked body sent shivers down her spine. They had finally been able to enjoy their sex shop purchase and Sophie had named one of their toys after the iconic clock tower in the heart of London. Paula smiled at how animated and witty her lover could be … and how very talented she became with Big Ben so quickly, making the solicitor nearly scream at the top of her lungs. She closed her eyes and let the feeling flow through her and she said a silent prayer in thanks for their reconciliation. It was getting harder for Paula to be away from Sophie and she knew she wouldn’t last an entire year without her.

Paula was pulled rather abruptly from her reverie as the passenger sitting next to her took his seat and buckled in. At least she was in first-class and had plenty of room. Her window seat would provide a semblance of privacy as she could tuck up against the wall if necessary. She had flown with some quite obnoxious travelers in her time and hoped this flight would offer her some peace and quiet.
She eyeballed her neighbor out of curiosity. He looked normal enough. Maybe late thirties, tall and slender, dressed well, didn’t smell awful, which was a plus. He glanced over at her and gave the obligatory smile and head nod. She took a sip from her drink and returned her attention back to her Sophie. She promised she would text her before her flight took off, so she pulled out her phone and typed out a message.

*Hello sweetheart! My flight is on time and we will departing in a few minutes. I will text once I get to the hotel, tho it will be the middle of the night here, but u will know I’ve landed safely. I will text tmr when I get up. U have all my details – will let u know my room number when I get settled. Am missing u like mad, remembering Saturday night with Big Ben! XXX*

The response came immediately.

*M Missing u 2, babe … esp our epic session Sat! Wish I was going w u so we could do that some more - wait! Did u take BB with u ?*

*M Maybe …*

*I don’t know if I should be jealous or not*

*U can’t be jealous of silicone! Besides, it’ll be fun having phone sex with some assistance!*

*How we gonna make that happen with the time difference?*

*We will make it happen, baby. I can’t go 2 long without u. just thinking about u now makes me want to go to the loo and call u*

*Mmmm, I’d be ok w that!* 

*So wish I could but we are departing soon and don’t feel like getting yelled at by the flight crew*

*Can’t blame a girl for trying! Hope u have a calm flight and don’t sit next to some minger! I love u. XXX*

*I love you. So very much. Will show u when we r 2gether again. XXX*

*U bet u will … and just remember what I like to do with my tongue! Travel safe my love. Mwah! Xxx*

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome aboard flight 427 non-stop to John F. Kennedy Airport …” The in-flight direction and niceties began. Paula tuned them out. She would rather close her eyes and remember Sophie’s tongue –

“Business or pleasure?” came the question from the stranger sitting next to Paula. She opened her eyes and looked over.

“Pardon?” said Paula, not sure if he was talking to her or someone else.

“Are you going to New York for business or pleasure?” questioned the man again.

“Oh, uh, business,” answered the solicitor.

“Sorry, if you don’t want to talk, I understand. I just find that on long flights it’s easier to communicate if one establishes a rapport early on.”

Paula smiled gently at the man, “Of course.” She stuck out her hand, “Paula.”
“Richard,” he shook her hand gently and the softness of his hand registered in her mind. “I hope this bloody flight is turbulence free. The last time I made this journey I felt like one of those balls connected by a string to the center of a paddle!”

“Oooh, rough one, then?”

“I hate flying. Something about a rather heavy chunk of metal lifting so high into the air seems rather unnatural to me, especially while gliding over a deep and expanse body of water!”

“I see your point. But, alas, I trust the fact that thousands of flights a year take off and land successfully, a good sign that these things really do work.”

“Ah, so you’re one of those, then?”

“One of those?”

“Optimists!”

Paula chuckled. “If that’s what you want to call it, then I supposed I am.”

“Let me guess, you are the CEO of some very charitable organization that saves puppies or children or something equally worthwhile?”

“Not exactly.” She began to speak and was cut short.

“No, wait! I want to get this. I’m a great judge of these things.” He put his hand to his chin and rubbed it, “you’re an advertising executive, a creative soul that knows precisely how to sell ice to Eskimos?”

“Mmmm, nope. Afraid you’re very off the mark.”

“Off the mark,” he mumbled, thinking. “Oh, I’ve got it! You’re a banker! Bankers are always happy because they can’t fail.”

“Wrong again.”

“Motivational speaker?”

She shook her head.

“World renowned spleen surgeon?”

She just chuckled some more, shaking her head again.

“Oh, bloody hell, I suppose it’s apparent I’m not very good at this game.”

“There are a lot of professions in the world and you’ve only known me for all of 10 minutes, so I wouldn’t be too hard on yourself.”

“I am going to figure this out, so please do not tell me!”

“Fine by me.”

The aircraft had taxied out to the runway and was lining up for take-off. Richard grabbed onto his hand rests and closed his eyes.
“So, Richard, what is it that you do for a living?” asked Paula, hoping to take his mind off the propulsion and revving of the jet engines.

“Oh, I, uhm,” he swallowed rather visibly. “I am a rare books dealer. You know, mainly first edition hard back kind of thing – rare and rather valuable. I have meetings at Sotheby’s tomorrow to discuss the bard himself!”


“Quite astute, I must say! Perhaps this flight won’t be horrible after all. Makes me think … perhaps you’re a Professor of Comparative Literature?” he asked, hopeful in his assertion.

“Sorry …”

“At any rate, it has thus far been a pleasure trying to tease this out.”

“I don’t mind telling you, Richard. It’s no great secret.”

“NO! I will get this,” he exclaimed, placing his palm up to Paula. “Would you like another cocktail? Dinner will be served shortly and there is no reason we shouldn’t enjoy ourselves a little bit.”

“I’d love one. Bourbon, please,” her mind again wandering to Sophie. Oh, how she missed her.

Richard got the attention of the flight attendant and requested their drinks, then turned his attention back to his neighbor. “So, Paula, tell me about yourself, BUT not about what you do! I’ve noticed a few times your face go soft … thinking of someone? Husband, perhaps?”

Paula knew not to divulge too much information to a stranger, but she also knew if this bloke was a plant, she could not be too guarded. She wouldn’t put it past Ian to send someone to spy on her, so she thought it best to stay close to the truth and not raise any red flags.

“You’re very observant, Richard.”

“I’ve studied the master of romance most of my adult life. You know love-sick when you see it.”

“Right on the mark this time.”

Their drinks arrived as if on cue. “Get this down your neck and tell me all about him. What does he do … this you can tell me!”

Paula sipped at her bourbon. “Well, her name is Sophie and she manages a restaurant.”

“Oh, a modern woman, then? Excellent! And how long have you and Sophie been together then?”

There was no need to get bogged down in details. “Five months.”

“Oh, you’re definitely in the Shakespeare phase still. All poetry and romance.”

“It’s quite nice, I must admit. What about yourself?”

“Me? Oh, that’s a boring story. Wife. Married for 18 years. Sort of happily, sort of not.”

“Been there, too.”

“Ah, divorced, then? Let me guess … married young, got the career and the kids, drifted apart …”
“Pretty much.”

“I don’t know if humans are meant to be monogamous for too long. I know we are creatures of habit, but variety is the spice of life, so says William Cowper, not William Shakespeare. Don’t get me wrong, I love my wife, I do, but I find myself completely bored with my life most of the time. Rotten, aren’t I?”

“Human, I suppose. The key is to figure out how to stay in love. Right now, I want only to be with Sophie. No one can hold a candle to her.”

“Not even on a business trip so far away?”

“Nope. No interest whatsoever. But women tend to be different about monogamy, don’t they?”

“Do they? Really? I think women are catching up on that front and that’s why we have so much divorce. Women are now doing what men have always done – be selfish – and people split up quite easily now days. Not like it used to be, is it?”

Paula knew there was a lot of truth in what he was saying. She had certainly made a selfish decision that broke up her marriage. But, she was so happy now, she didn’t regret it like she used to.

The flight attendant came around to take dinner orders, interrupting the deep conversation the two were having. Paula thought they should turn things to something a bit less serious. If this guy was a plant, she did not need to divulge anything more personal than she already had.

“So, Richard, tell me more about Shakespeare.” If this guy was a true Shakespeare expert, he would not know when to stop. Paula reclined her seat and settled in to see if Richard was a real pro. She had studied Literature at Uni and knew a thing or two about it. She wondered when he would break out the killing of all lawyers.

Sophie finished up her shift at Speed Daal and headed home. It was almost 11p and she knew Paula was somewhere over the open water of the Atlantic. She wouldn’t land until almost 4am UK time, so Sophie would likely have a text when she woke up in the morning. Paula was staying at the Four Season’s in downtown Manhattan, close to Cooper Securities – Sophie had mapped it on Googlemaps. She couldn’t help but worry about Paula and what she was going to attempt to do while in New York. Her efforts to access the human resources files, and also to obtain detailed phone records, had been met with walls and obstacles because of Ian’s iron grip. Paula had to find an insider who could help her; someone who could fly below the radar. Sophie sighed just thinking about it. The pair had argued about Sophie accompanying her. Paula was dead set against it. Sophie knew she was just trying to protect her, but Sophie felt very apprehensive about Paula being there all alone with no one to look out for her. In the end, Paula had won out, to Sophie’s dismay.

The young brunette plopped herself down on the couch and turned on the telly. She was too wound up to go to bed. BBC News sprang to life in front of her and she was about to turn the channel when she heard the words ‘real estate fraud’ come out of the mouth of the news anchor.

“The Real Estate Investment Trust, Falcon Investments, has become the target of a fraud investigation by the Security Service, claiming ownership deflated the value of the fourteen apartment complexes in its portfolio for a short sell of its stock prior to zoning approval for commercial development in areas around the holdings which caused the value of the properties to
skyrocket. The SIS maintains the short sellers were in collusion with the board members of Falcon Investments, reaping the profits on both ends of the stock sale.”

Sophie did her best to take in what was being said. It didn’t make sense to her, but because Paula had overheard Ian talking about real estate, she wanted to be able to talk to her about this. She jotted down what she could remember on a pad by the couch and made a note in her mind to tell Paula when she talked to her. Sophie was hungry so made herself a sandwich and sat down to watch a couple episodes of *Friends*. She needed to wind her mind down, so she wouldn’t worry so much about her lover.

Paula finished her dinner, enjoying her conversation with Richard over a couple glasses of wine. They chatted about many topics, including his two kids, his wife, his desire to learn to sail. The conversation was benign, and Paula thought he was just a regular guy on a business trip. She wanted to try to catch a nap, so she wouldn’t be exhausted upon arrival in New York. Flying west was always easier, so she wasn’t concerned, but a rest would be nice. She thanked Richard for good dinner company, then tucked up under her blanket and drifted off, wishing Sophie was there to keep her warm.

Paula’s slumber was interrupted by the sound of a whispered conversation taking place next to her. She had not been able to sleep deeply since her children were born, her brain keying in to the sounds around her in case there was a problem. She realized Richard was speaking to someone in hushed tones – his posh accent had changed significantly. She allowed herself to wake up but kept her eyes closed, keeping up the ruse that she was fast asleep, and listened closely.

“Well, Jordan is a woman. Nothing like professional jealousy to cause someone to get sloppy, especially a man being directed by a woman. I’ll have to remember to try to use that against this prick. So, he’s no rare book dealer; who is he working for? Who is Jordan? Who is Lawrence? Are they Ian’s cronies? How am I the key to the “whole operation”? This just gets more complicated every day. Well, someone’s eyes are on me and my hotel room will likely be bugged, so I am going to have to get clever about that one. Glad I have the audio jammer with me. Shit. I need to figure this out. New York just became very, very important.

Paula remained “asleep” as Richard sat and began to jot something down on a pad. She wished she could get her hands on that phone of his to gather numbers or any evidence she could. She needed to know what time it was, but didn’t want to risk alerting him to her consciousness, so she just sat there and listened intently. She shifted a bit and resettled and intentionally snored a little. She needed to get positioned so she could peek through nearly closed eyes and get a look at what he was doing. Thankfully, she had placed her brief case under the seat in front of her and rested her feet on it. He
had no chance of getting to it. She had her phone in her right pocket, away from him and next to the
window and the other phone was in the brief case. There was nothing available to him that would
give him any information, at least information that he didn’t already have. His little diversion about
guessing her profession had been part of the game, pouring on the homely charm as a way to make
her trust him. And, admittedly, she had. He was trained well, by someone.

She gave it another 30 minutes or so, then began to stretch and fake waking up. She yawned, quite
convincingly, and sat up in her seat. She looked at her watch – 148am UK time. The flight was due
to land at 10:40pm NY time, so she had about two hours to go. The flight crew would be coming
around with a heavy snack soon and she would get a coffee for a caffeine boost. She knew Richard
was going to chat her up again, so she prepared for the onslaught. She needed to the loo, but didn’t
want to leave her brief case, so she did the only thing she could – she took it with her. She climbed
over a ‘sleeping’ Richard, grabbed the case and headed for the toilet.

When she returned, Richard was awake and smiling at her.

“Goodness me, you must be carrying something valuable in that case.”

“Oh, I couldn’t find my medication in the dark and didn’t want to turn the light on and disturb you,
so I just took it with me. I forgot to take my meds earlier and with the time shifting …”

“Oh, I understand. What medication do you take?” Quite a nosey question.

“Blood pressure. Too much stress, you know?”

“Indeed! Well, hopefully you rested. You seemed quite peaceful.”

“Out like a light! I sleep like the dead, me. Sorry if I disturbed you at all. Once I’m out, I’m out!” she
lied.

“Well, we have just over an hour in flight. Food should be coming soon.”

“Yes, I am a bit hungry, though I certainly wouldn’t be eating at 2am if I were at home, would I?”

“I suppose not, no.”

“So, Paula, tell me how long you will be in New York. Perhaps we could meet up for dinner one
evening, us both being solo in the city?”

“I leave Saturday. And, though I would love to commit to having dinner, I really don’t know how
my schedule is going to pan out, so I’d hate to make plans with you then need to cancel.”

“Oh, come on, I won’t mind if you call to cancel. I’ve been to some lovely restaurants. It will be my
treat. Please say you’ll meet me.”

Paula thought for a minute. It might be interesting to see the questions he asks her, to see what kind
of information he thought she had ‘discovered’ so she agreed. “Well, ok, sure. Let’s say Thursday?
Do you have a card? I’ll text you Wednesday, how does that sound?”

“Perfect! He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a card, rumpled and worn so as not to
appear too new – these people were good. “Richard Williamson – Shapero Rare Books, London.”
She would google it later.

“Okay then. Dinner Thursday. It’s a … plan, for now. Don’t know how Sophie is going to like me
having dinner with a strange man I met on the plane!”
“Oh dear, I hope it won’t cause you any distress. My wife won’t care.”

_of course, she won’t, she’s fictitious!

“Sophie will be fine. She knows how much I love her. Honestly, I don’t even notice people in that way anymore. Sophie is just …” she trailed off, thinking of her hot girlfriend.

“Ah, to be in love like that again.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Quite!”

“Well, just so we are clear, our dinner will be strictly platonic. If you have other ideations, we can just call it off, because I have no interest in playing away. I am committed to my girlfriend, end of.”

“Oh, Paula, I have no plans to try to seduce you. I simply enjoy your company. I assure you, I am being quite honest with you.”

“Okay then.”

The rest of the flight was uneventful, and the plane landed on time. Paula couldn’t quite shake Richard, who followed her through customs then out to the taxi line. They shared a taxi into Manhattan, dropping Paula at the Four Seasons first. As the cab pulled away, she felt relieved to be rid of him finally, but she knew it would be short-lived. Now she just had to get checked in and figure out what to do about the almost certainty that her room would be bugged. She would just have to use the audio jammer when needed.

The bellman gathered her bags and took them inside to the front desk, and waited for her check-in.

“Reservation for Paula Martin, please.”

“Ah, yes, Ms. Martin. We have you booked until Saturday, is that correct?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“May I have your passport please?”

She handed her passport over for check in and listened to all the details about the hotel amenities. What she really wanted was to get to her room! The clerk handed the key to the bellman, who picked up her luggage and followed her to the lift. He pressed the top floor. The view ought to be nice!

Her suite was on the 24th floor. What is it about the number 24?

“Here we are Ms. Martin,” indicated the bellman, opening the door for her and standing aside for her to enter. It was a luxurious suite, with good space and lots of windows. Her view was north-facing and she could see midtown and everything in between. It was beautiful. She was now regretting sending Sophie back to Manchester instead of bringing her along.

“Where would you like your things placed, Ms. Martin?”

“Oh, just there is fine, thank you.” She reached for her satchel and handed him a tip.

“Thank you, Ms. Martin. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to ring the front desk. Good evening.”
She stood in front of the wall of windows and took in the incredible view. It was a clear night and she could see the city moving beneath her. *This really is the city that doesn’t sleep!* She snapped a picture and texted it to Sophie.

*This is my current view. And although it’s quite spectacular, I’d much rather be looking at u. It’s just after midnight here now and I am exhausted, so going to bed. Must be at CS tmr morning at 10am. Met an interesting fella on the plane. Will tell u all about it tmr. Hate to be wrong, but wish I’d brought u with me. I love u. XXXOXXX*

Paula unpacked her things, hung up her suits, put Big Ben in the drawer, took a hot shower and climbed into bed. She snuggled down into the ultra-soft sheets and hugged the extra pillow to her, longing for her lover. She sighed heavily and listened to the sounds of the city wafting up from the streets – honking cars, sirens, engines moving up and down the streets. She hoped she could sleep with the new noises filling her senses. Tomorrow was an important day with a lot riding on her ability to stay under the radar and make headway to getting to the right information. She needed to make sense out of all this nonsense and get herself, and Sophie, out of the mess she’d stumbled into.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Paula’s first day in New York is telling and she sets a few people straight about her authority. She and Sophie connect on a new level.

Chapter Notes

This one gets a bit explicit at the end. Hope everyone is continuing to enjoy the story as it all unfolds. Comments are always appreciated, so if you like it and want me to continue, let me know! Cheers!

Sophie woke and eyeballed the clock – 9:12am. It had taken her awhile to get to sleep the night before as she was worrying about Paula being so far away. It was one thing her being in London, two to three hours from her, but all the way across the Atlantic and inaccessible to Sophie made her a nervous wreck. What if something were to happen and Sophie couldn’t get to her? The young brunette knew she was truly in love with Paula because she would literally give her life to keep her lover safe. It made her crazy thinking of Paula being in any kind of danger, especially of the unknown variety. The pair were still not very close to understanding what was motivating the surveillance Ian had placed them both under, and without that knowledge, Sophie felt exposed and unprotected. Paula was really smart and had them both on high alert when it came to anything happening out of the ordinary, but they had no idea how deep any of this went, or how long it would be before they could figure it out.

Sophie reached over and palmed her phone, knowing she would have a message from Paula. She took in the view in the picture and read the message. At first, she smiled, because Paula always knew just what to say to make her feel loved, then she rolled her eyes thinking about the fight they had had about Sophie going to NY with her. I should have fought harder. I could have been helpful to her! Oh well, too late now. She shot a quick text back, hoping Paula’s phone was silenced and wouldn’t wake her.

*See, babe, I told u I should have come with u! We should be enjoying that view together … along with other things … but I am not going to pout. Glad u made it safely. I am have a short shift at tea time, so will be around most of the day. Call/text when u can. Miss U xxx*

With most of the day off, Sophie thought she would get a run in. The only exercise she’d been getting lately was between the sheets, so she knew she needed to get herself back on a regular workout schedule. She put on her running clothes, grabbed her phone and earbuds and headed over toward the Red Rec. As she left Coronation Street, she kept her eyes peeled for anyone following her, per Paula’s request. Joe had given her a few pointers on how to detect a tail and, more importantly, how to slip one if necessary. Music played in her ears and she got about a mile into her run when she felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck. She paused her run in-place and took a nonchalant look around, pretending to check her pulse. She didn’t see anything suspicious, but she felt something was not quite right. She continued her path forward, but couldn’t shake the creepy
feeling that someone was indeed watching her. It was broad daylight, so she didn’t feel unsafe, but she made sure to run in areas with high foot traffic just to be on the safe side.

When Paula woke, the first thing she did was check her phone for a message from Sophie. She smiled warmly when she read her text, regretting, again, her unfortunate decision to leave her lover in the UK. But, she had lots to do here and wouldn’t have had time to spend with her anyway, so it was all for the best.

*Morning (afternoon) baby. Slept well and now going to grab a shower and room service. Dreading the things I have to do here. Def need a snuggle from my favorite lover. Sigh. Just wanna stay under the duvet if I’m honest. Gotta get in the shower. Love you, baby. XXX*

While she was in the shower, Sophie sent her a response.

*Afternoon is right, lazy bones! Lol Sending snuggles across the ocean to u … wish we were under that duvet, naked, together, touching, kissing, other stuff. Thinking of u now, naked, in the shower, wishing like hell my tongue and I was there to help you relax. Can we try phone sex ltr? My body is craving u. XOXOXOX*

Paula’s shower did the trick and woke her up nicely. She had slept soundly, had a hearty room service breakfast, and was dressed and ready by 9:30am. She wore a solid black skirted suit, with a white silk collared blouse and four-inch heels. Her signature gold hoop earring adorned her left ear, along with a diamond stud. She took a selfie and texted Sophie.

*This gf is missing her hot lover. Now off to bring home the bacon. Phone sex tonight for SURE! Will reach out ltr once my day gets going. Gotta run so I’m not late. Missing that tongue of urs! XXXXXX*

She checked herself in the mirror, then shrugged on her coat and headed downstairs. The bellman hailed her a taxi and she was off to Cooper Securities to begin her infiltration of the New York office.

It was a short cab ride over, which gave her ample time to get security measures handled. When she stepped into the building, she stopped at the security desk to obtain the badge that would allow her entry into the building all week, therefore bypassing the need to go through security every day.

“Good morning. Paula Martin from the Cooper Securities London office,” she announced as she presented her London credentials and her passport.

“Yes, Ms. Martin. Mr. Spencer is expecting you. I have your badge right here. Please, when you enter the building, swipe the badge through the scanner here. The elevators are to the far left,” the security officer pointed to a corridor. “Mr. Spencer is on the 40th floor. Cooper Securities offices are on floors 36 through 40. You will need to swipe your badge on the code reader in the elevator before you can select your floor.”

Security in most major cities was very tight these days. “So, tell me, can other building employees access Cooper Securities floors and vice versa?”

“No, your badge allows you access only to floors you’re authorized for.”

“And other people coming in and out of this building? Can they access floors 36 through 40?
The security officer gave Paula a slightly offended look, as if to question her authority to question his. “Mr. Wilson,” she said while reading his name badge, “I am a high ranking legal representative of this company, with authority to speak directly on behalf of Alexander Cooper. I need to know how secure this building is! If people are allowed unauthorized access to supposedly secure floors, I will certainly have legal grounds under which to sue the property managers for violating the trust placed in them via the Cooper Securities lease terms. So, I strongly suggest you give me a full briefing of the security measures your company employs, thereby insuring my confidence, otherwise I will be contacting the CEO of,” she looked at the logo and company name on his badge, “Jones, Lang, LaSalle, Incorporated once I reach Steve Spencer’s office.”

Jim Wilson swallowed visibly, and his eyes widened as he registered Paula’s importance. “Yes ma’am, Ms. Martin. Well, as you can see, each employee has a chipped badge that allows them access only to the company floors as approved by the building manager, Mr. Wilbourne.”

“And where is this information stored? And what’s the process for floor access approval?”

“Uhm, Mr. Wilbourne has that information, Ms. Martin. The chips are programmed by his staff and then provided to each employee on their first day, just like I gave yours to you.”

“And what kind of screening process does each person have to go through? You do realize Cooper Securities handles extremely important and confidential information?”

“As do many of the companies in this building,” he shot back.

“The security requirements of your other tenants are not my concern, Mr. Wilson. I represent the interests of my client’s company and I just need reassurance that the information housed here is secure.” She shifted her approach to a more amiable position, not wanting to isolate the front-line security officers. She had established her authority and had them afraid of her, now she needed to get them on her side. “Mr. Wilson, I am sure you do your job well. I am not questioning your ability or your authority, but I would not be doing my job effectively if I did not question the reliability of the safeguarding measures in place. Believe me, everyone hates a lawyer until they need to explain themselves in court, at which point, said lawyer becomes their best line of defense and protection.”

“Yes, ma’am. I understand. I apologize if I have acted unprofessionally in any way.”

“Not at all,” Paula shook his hand. “You’ve been perfectly helpful, and I thank you.” She smiled at him, putting him at ease. “I may want to speak with Mr. Wilbourne at some point, though. Only to go over the protocol so I am clear about the process. I have no intention of causing problems for him, you or your company, Mr. Wilson.”

“I will let him know he might hear from you. Mr. Spencer has his contact information.”

“Great! Thank you. Now, please walk me through access to the lift if you would?”

“Of course, Ms. Martin. This way, please.”

Jim Wilson showed Paula where to swipe her badge for access to the lifts and then where to swipe once inside. He pressed floor 40 for her and it lit up, then he stepped back out into the corridor. He gave her a gentle smile. “Have a nice day, Ms. Martin!”

When the lift doors closed, Paula pressed the buttons for floors 36, 37, 38 and 39, which all lit up, letting her know she had access to all CS floors. As she the lift rose, she tested the security measures and pressed the buttons to other floors. She could not gain access to any other floors. The doors opened on 36 and she could see directly in front of her, carpet with the CS logo woven into it and a
large granite reception desk with a raised backlit CS logo on the wall behind the receptionist. The other floors did not have a reception desk, but all had luxurious carpet, granite, oiled wood and glass doors. The 40\textsuperscript{th} floor arrived, she stepped off and looked around for someone to point her to Steve Spencer. No one paid any attention to her, a stranger standing in a supposedly secure area. She walked around, down hallways, peering in and out of offices, and still no one paid her any mind. \textit{So much for secure! If you have a badge that gives you access, you can slip around unnoticed.} Interesting. \textit{That means Mr. Wilbourne or one of his staff could be bribed.}

Paula walked back out to the lift and pulled out her phone and dialed Steve Spencer.

“Steve, it’s Paula <> Where am I? It’s 10:02 and I am standing on the 40\textsuperscript{th} floor just outside the lift. The question is, where are you?” then she hung up the phone. \textit{This is ridiculous!}

About 40 seconds later, a man she assumed was Steve Spencer came walking quickly toward the lift. He was still pulling on his suit jacket, which meant he was unprepared for her arrival. This irritated her.

“Paula?” he asked. \textit{What kind of an idiot is this guy? Isn’t it obvious?}

“Steve, we need to discuss a few things! Please take me to the office I will be using while I’m here.”

“This way.” He led her to an empty office and flipped on the light.

“How long have you been at Cooper Securities, Steve?” Paula asked casually, appearing to be making conversation.

“Uhm, about a year. Came over from Morgan Stanley.” She could now hear his thick accent. \textit{New Yawk.}

“And Ian hired you, correct?”

“Yea, it was the weirdest thing. He called me one day, said a friend had recommended me. Ian was in New York, so we set a meeting. We went out to the nicest strip … uhm, dinner, and he offered me almost double what MS was paying me. How could I say no? The guy knows talent when he sees it!”

\textit{Oh, dear heavens. This guy is as sharp as a marble! His hubris will be his downfall.}

“Mmm hmm. And you head up the legal department here, correct?” Paula asked, knowing that, one, it was going to be easy getting information out of him, and two, this guy was not her in with IT.

“I do. Right now, it’s a fucking pain, with the lawsuit and all, but hey, you gotta do what you gotta do, right?”

\textit{I need to find a female associate. I will get straight answers, then … that is, IF there is a female lawyer here.}

Paula sat with Steve for a few hours going first, over the lawsuit charges, how New York was involved, what the US discovery showed and what his team was doing to find evidence contrary to the charges, and second, who she could talk to in IT to set up a meeting as soon as possible to go over things. She got no pushback from this guy, but had to be careful because he would likely be having a conversation with Ian later about what she was up to. She downplayed the IT discussion, telling him she only needed to get some info on processes, nothing more.

“Oh, Steve, I need a list of all the lawyers in this office and their numbers. Also, need to talk to the
building manager, Mr. Wilbourne, so please email me his contact information. And don’t forget to email me the IT director’s name and extension.”

“Yep, will do, Paula. Nice chatting with you. Call me if you need anything else.”

It was just past 2pm and Paula needed some caffeine, but had no idea where to get coffee. Steve had not given her any information about the building or given her a point of contact, other than himself. She couldn’t even connect to the networks with her laptop, so she was going to have to find IT on her own to get herself up and running. First, coffee. She pulled out her phone and mapped for a Starbucks. As she was in America, there was practically one on every corner and as luck, or commerce, would have it, there was one just a few blocks away.

Paula spoke to Mr. Wilson as she exited the building, making sure Mr. Wilbourne had gotten her message about meeting. He assured her he would be in touch later in the afternoon. She walked the few short blocks to the mega coffee retailer, looking forward to getting her desired caffeine infusion. Even late in the afternoon, the place was bustling. There was a queue of about 10 people and the café was packed with people in suits on their laptops, tapping away, chatting on their phones, or having conversations with co-workers. This was the financial district, so it wasn’t surprising to find this kind of atmosphere. She finally stepped up and placed her order, paid, then stepped aside to await her name being called once her order was ready. Like everyone else, she decided it a good time to check her phone. Sophie had sent her a picture and it made her smile – a selfie of her girl sending her a kiss.

*Loving that photo! I am standing in Starbucks, needing coffee! Jet lag taking its ugly hold on me. Miss you! Xxx*

She put her phone back in her pocket and waited for her coffee. She looked around to people watch a little bit.

“Paula,” the barista called out. She took her cup of liquid pleasure and found a seat by the window and continued to people watch. Most of the patrons were men, in suits, most with some type of badge hanging from their pant pocket. Paula eyeballed the names – most of them financial in nature – bank this, financial that. Then one caught her eye – Cooper Securities. She followed the badge up to the face of a young man who couldn’t be much older than Sophie. She watched him intently. He was alone, sipping his coffee, looking at his phone, just like everyone else.

Should I talk to him?

Paula decided to see how he would respond to her. She walked up and stood in front of his table. Initially, he didn’t react, then, startled that this person hadn’t moved, he looked up to meet her smiling eyes.

“Sorry to disturb you,” said the solicitor. “Uhm, I just noticed your security badge. You work at Cooper Securities?” she inquired, holding her badge out for him to see.

The young man nervously stood up, “Uuuhh, yes. I uh, I just came out for a coffee. I was just about to head back,” he said, as though he had been caught playing hooky.

“I had the same thoughts, actually,” shared Paula, smiling at the man. “May I sit?”

“Oh, uh, sure!” the man said, pulling her chair out for her. “Uh, I’m Mark. Mark Chapman.” He stuck his hand out.

“Paula Martin,” she said, shaking his hand.
“Are you new, Paula? I’ve never seen you before, not that I would have really. I don’t get out of my office much, to tell the truth.”

“Uh, I’m in from the London office for the week.” Not wanting to intimidate the young man, she added, “I’m just doing some legal work up on 40.”

“Oh! Wow, well that’s exciting. I could tell you’re not from around here, huh?” he chuckled. “I’m, uh, I’m down on 38. I work in IT. Nothing too thrilling,” Mark laughed.

Paula couldn’t believe her luck. “And what is it that you do in IT, Mark?”

“Well, I’m a systems administrator. I work mostly in telephony. You know like, email systems, network drives, video conferencing, stuff like that. Mostly communications stuff. Without me, you couldn’t have secure conversations!”

“That’s very interesting! And quite important considering our business. If information isn’t secure, a whole host of problems present themselves.”

“Yes, exactly! Wow, you get it. Most people think what I do is insignificant!

“Oh, not me, I assure you. In fact, Mark, would you be willing to help me understand the systems and how they work better? I know enough to be dangerous,” laughed the solicitor.

“Uhm, sure, I guess so. If my boss is okay with it. I don’t want to get fired.”

“I understand. You let me handle that part of it. Who runs the IT department?”

“Mike Mitchell.”

“And what can you tell me about Mr. Mike Mitchell?” Mark’s face was blank. “You know, what kind of boss is he, does he know his stuff, do you respect him … that sort of thing,” Paula clarified.

“He seems alright, I guess. I’ve only been working there for four months, so I don’t know much about him, really. I work under John Moore so I don’t interact much with Mr. Mitchell. From what I’ve heard, he’s been at Cooper for about 5 years, went to NYU, worked at Morgan Stanley prior to that, so I guess he has lots of experience with financial companies.”

Paula immediately made the connection that both Steve Spencer and now Mike Mitchell had come from Morgan Stanley. She wondered if there was some significance. “So, you’d say he has a thorough working understanding of the trade and how IT interacts with it?”

“Oh, yea, it’s really important that our computer security is state of the art for the SEC. If we don’t keep things iron clad, we could be in a lot of trouble. In fact, I heard Cooper is under investigation for fraud!” Mark realized immediately that he shouldn’t have opened his big mouth. “Oh, I really shouldn’t have said anything about that. I don’t know anything. I’ve just heard things, ya know?”

“It’s ok, Mark. I know all about it. It’s what I am here working on. Just don’t talk about it anymore, yeah? It’s part of the reason I need to know what all the security measures are and how you keep information from being compromised.”

“So, what is it that you do, Paula?”

“I’m a lawyer and basically I am running the defense over these fraud allegations.”

“Oh, I thought that was Mr. Walker.”
Paula was surprised that Mark knew anything about Ian. Attorneys and IT staff don’t really mix, but she was all too aware of Ian’s grip on information. “I thought you didn’t know anything about the charges?”

Mark was on the spot. “We aren’t supposed to talk about it. Mr. Walker met with our staff last time he was here. All information released from our department has to be authorized by him. If we perform searches, set up video conferences, mine into the databases, etc., we have to have his permission. I assume you know all about that.”

“Not exactly. Mr. Walker is a bit of a control freak, if truth be told,” Paula feigned laughter, trying to set Mark at ease. He was going to be her in with the IT department. He was not too high up the chain to be noticed and the lad seemed to know his stuff. The trick now was getting him to do what she wanted without letting anyone know.

“Yea, I got that impression! You’re not going tell him I talked about it, right? I can’t lose this job!”

“No, don’t worry. But listen, don’t tell anyone we had this conversation. I really should go through proper channels so as not to get you into any trouble. When I see you again, just act like you’ve never met me, okay?”

“Sure, Paula. Whatever you say. Thanks.”

“Well, Mark, it’s been a pleasure chatting with you. I suppose I should be getting back. Lots to do while I’m here.” She stood and shook his hand. “I’ll be seeing you soon, then.”

“Okay, bye.”

As Paula walked back toward Cooper Securities, she checked her phone as she’d heard it chime while she was talking to Mark. There was a message from Sophie.

*America has got you now, Ms. Starbucks! Sorry ur lagging, but that jet fuel you’re drinking should do the trick. At least ur doing something exciting, not sitting in boring old Weatherfield. Am missing u 2 and hoping we can talk properly tonight. Xxx*

Paula texted back as she walked, like everyone else on the sidewalk. She snapped a quick selfie and sent it to Sophie.

*Jet fuel doing its job! On my way back to work, but we are def on for a ‘talk’ later … thinking more about a little bit of playing with BB If ur up to it? I certainly am … xxx*

Sophie shot a message right back.

*Ooooh, Ms. Martin, now ur talking! Will look forward to our ‘chat’ ltr then. Be safe in that big city without me. U look awfully sexy today! Xxx*

The message excited the solicitor. She had only been away from Sophie for a couple of days, but the thought of her lover warmed her heart and sent a tingle up her spine.

*Will try not 2 make it too late. Get a nap in, bc I’m going to need some relief and ur the only one that satisfies me …*

*Oh, I will be ready … and waiting to satisfy*

*I’m going now. Won’t do me well to slide into work …*
I’m yours now Webster! Paula was grinning when she entered the building and approached security.

“Having a good day, Ms. Martin?” inquired Mr. Wilson.

“I am, in fact, Mr. Wilson, thank you. Any word from our friend Mr. Wilbourne?”

“Yes, ma’am. I spoke with him and he said he would be in touch around 5 today.”

“Excellent! Mr. Wilson, you’re a prince among men!” she commented as she headed for the lift.

The solicitor got on the lift and headed to the 38th floor to have a conversation with one Mr. Mike Mitchell.

Sophie had only a couple more hours of her shift to go, then she would head home and try to rest before her call with Paula. Truth be told, she was really quite nervous about the prospect of having phone sex. She’d never done it before and really didn’t know what to do or what to expect. She didn’t want to disappoint Paula, who sounded like she really needed some stress relief. If only Sophie had gone to New York, she’d have been able to provide excellent relief to her woman, multiple times, in multiple places.

Sophie was pulled from her thoughts as Alya waved her hand in front of her face. “Earth to Sophie!”

“Oh, sorry. I was a mill … well, a couple thousand miles away.”

“Thinking about a certain solicitor, perhaps?”

“How’d ya guess?” asked Sophie sarcastically.

“Have you talked to her? She’s in New York, right?”

“We’re planning to talk later. I just miss her, ya know? I wanted to go to New York with her, but she killed that idea, said she wouldn’t have time to spend with me.”

“Well, she’s probably right. You’d have just gotten frustrated being in that amazing city, wanting her to be with you, and her having to be stuck in an office all day. Doesn’t sound like a fun time.”

“Yea, I know you’re right, but I don’t have to like it. I don’t even know when I am going to get to see her again. It totally sucks!”

“I’m sure it does. You’re barely into your year apart, Sophie. How are you going to survive this separation?”

“I’m going to have to, Alya. The only other choice is to break up, and I definitely don’t want to do that!”

“Then I suggest you just learn how to deal with it. At least you’ll get to talk to her tonight, right? Maybe have a little –” Alya waggled her eyebrows up and down.

“Alya!”

“What? Are you telling me you’re living in another city and you don’t, ya know, have some play time over the phone?”
“No, we’ve not … done that, yet.” Sophie blushed. “Have you ever, ya know … before?”

“Never had to. Are you nervous?”

“Just a bit! I don’t know what to do or how you even do it, do you?”

“Don’t ask me!”

“Guess we will just figure it out as we go.”

Alya giggled. “Good luck. Hope it all works out.”

Paula stepped off the elevator onto the 38th floor and looked around for a live body.

“Excuse me,” she said to a young woman who was standing in an office doorway, her back to Paula.

“Yes,” said the woman, seemingly not at all alarmed at the sight of a stranger standing there. Rude. She reminds me of flaming Kylie.

“I’m looking for Mike Mitchell,” commented the solicitor.

“Is he expecting you?” inquired the young woman.

“Not exactly.”

“Well, you should probably, like, call him first,” rolling her eyes as she began to turn back around to continue her conversation.

“What’s your name, dear?” inquired the solicitor, trying to keep her temper under control.

“Jennifer.”

“Well, Jennifer. Have you ever heard of Alexander Cooper?”

“No, who’s he?” said the young woman, flippantly.

I can’t even believe this! “Ok, well, he’s the guy whose name is on your paycheck. And he is the person who sent me here to talk with Mr. Mitchell, so I suggest you either fetch him for me, or tell me in which office I can find him.”

The young woman’s eyes widened, as did the eyes of the young man whose office door she was loitering in. “Uhm, I’ll see if I can find him. What’s your name?”

“Paula Martin. From the London office.”

“Okay, just wait here,” said the snotty girl. If Paula didn’t have bigger issues to deal with, she’d be having a serious conversation with Steve Spencer about how this office runs. Once this mess was settled, she would have a long talk with Alexander.

A few minutes later, Jennifer returned with Mike Mitchell following behind. “That’s her,” pointed the young woman.

“Ms. Martin, I’m Mike Mitchell. You wanted to see me?”
She really didn’t have time for niceties, so she got right to the point. “Mr. Mitchell, I assume you know who I am and why I am here. If you don’t, well, take that up with Steve Spencer. I am going to need someone from your team to walk me through all the computer security measures you have in place, how they work to keep the data secure, how often you require staff to change passwords, proof of those changes, how HR records are handled, how phone records are secured, etc. Now, Ian Walker has already expressed his thoughts about not taking up too much of your time, so I thought perhaps I could commandeer a lower level staff member while I am here. I need someone who understands telephony and database management and I will need said person through Friday evening.”

“Well, Ms. Martin, I’ve spoken to Mr. Walker about this and assured him that our security is top notch and no information is being compromised. There’s really no need for you to spend your precious time going over these matters.”

Jennifer stood there with a satisfied grin on her face.

Paula bobbed her head, as if to agree with him. “So, let me get this straight, then. You’re suggesting that when I am questioned by the SEC day after tomorrow, as part of the Cooper Securities lead legal team, I am to just let them know that Mike Mitchell said everything is secure and top notch? And they will certainly be completely assured that Cooper Securities has appropriate security measures in place and is in complete compliance with all SEC requirements and standards, because Mike Mitchell says so? You don’t think they might perhaps need to know what those measures are, how they are put into place, how the CS IT department secures its servers, its email accounts, its communications systems, its databases – all of which are the highways upon which billions of dollars, pounds, yen, yuan and euro are traded annually? Am I to tell the SEC officers, those same officers who hold documents charging this company with securities fraud in five countries and five major exchanges, that they should just ignore those fraud charges because Mike Mitchell says, without a doubt, that Cooper Securities has not been hacked, has not divulged any privileged information, has never had an employee commit insider trading? Because, if you are that sure of your abilities, Mr. Mitchell, and you can satisfy the SEC, then you can take that meeting Thursday morning, and I will put on my blue jeans and take a fucking tour of the city and go see a Broadway show!!! Now, I am going to say this once again and hope that you are listening clearly – I need a member of your staff to work with me so that I am prepared to answer the questions which I will undoubtedly be asked about the security of the data this company is responsible for, and I will be god damned if I go in there without every fucking minute detail outlined to my satisfaction! Do I make myself clear, Mr. Mitchell?”

Mike Mitchell stood there, red faced and angry that he had just had a few strips torn off him. “Yes. I understand.”

“Do you have a list of IT employees and their job descriptions?”

“I do.”

“Then, let me see it and I will pick someone.”

“Please, follow me to my office.”

A crowd of people had gathered in doorways at the raised British voice that dressed down one Mike Mitchell. A whisper followed as they passed by, on their way to the office of the IT Director, including Mark Chapman, who just grinned, but said nothing. He was quite impressed by the woman he’d had his earlier conversation with. She was one smart lady, and he would enjoy getting to know her better in the coming days.
Paula was back to her hotel by 8pm. She would order some room service later, if she was hungry, and she likely would be if she was able to get Sophie on the phone. She was planning to sweat a bit. She’d had a harrowing, but satisfying day. Her understanding of how this NY office was being managed was telling and she was developing a much clearer picture in her mind about how these fraud charges might just have roots. Alexander had obviously taken a back seat to the usual iron-fisted management of his company, and either his board members and managing partners were not paying attention, or they were colluding with the fraud. The management was sloppy at best. Her first stop in the morning would be at Simon Heller’s office, the manager of the New York office. The management of the office really was his responsibility, and she would be able to determine if it was his fault there were so many obvious issues or not. She would also get another piece of the picture tomorrow when she met with Mark Chapman, her choice of IT employee, and when Steve Spencer walked with her over to the New York Stock Exchange for her initial run through. She would walk the floor once the opening bell rang to observe and get a feel for the largest trading floor in the world. It would help her flesh things out in her mind.

In the meantime, she was tired, but she was also missing her lover and really needed to hear her voice. Her body was worked up and tense, so she definitely needed to see if she and Sophie could connect only with their voices and give each other some pleasure across the phone line.

She located the audio jammer, flipped it on, and sent Sophie a text.

*U up baby?*

It didn’t take long for the reply.

*I’ve been waiting for u all night, babe. Took a nap earlier, so I am all rested!*

*Don’t forget to turn on your audio jammer … and get ready to cum*

Sophie flipped on her device, sending white noise out into the night, blocking the signals to the bug in her phone.

Just then, her phone rang, a selfie of she and Paula kissing showing on the display. Sophie grinned and her stomach flipped in anticipation. She’d wasn’t sure what to expect and she didn’t want to disappoint Paula.

“Hello sexy,” said the young brunette when she picked up the call.

“Oh, god, it’s so good to hear your voice, baby. You just make all the bullshit melt away, you know that?”

“Hard day?”

“Oh, you have no idea! I have so much to tell you, but first I just want to be with you. I’m aching for you. Put your Bluetooth headphones in. You’re going to need both hands.”

“Hmmm, someone’s eager! I don’t even get a kiss hello?” whined Sophie, trying to wind her lover up.

“Am I being selfish? I’m sorry, darling, mmwah, how has your day been?”

“Well, I ran a few miles this morning … my ass is getting flabby.”
“Uhm, your ass was just fine last time I checked … I had my hands quite full Saturday night if I recall.”

“Yea, well, I’ve been letting my cardio slide a bit, so ran a few miles. Besides, it helps me keep my need for you under control!”

“Been missing your old bird, have you?” Paula smiled, loving that Sophie missed her.

“Yea, and I hate it. Being away from you is like torture, babe. I want to be near you all the time, and you’re flaming thousands of miles away right now. It sucks!”

“I’ll be back Saturday. It’s not like I’m gone forever.”

“Yea, but I don’t know when I am actually going to see you, do I? You might be back in the UK, but when are you going to be back in my arms is the question I want answered.”

“I see your point. I don’t know, Sophie. We are just going to have to see what kind of information I can dig up while I’m here. I need to keep you safe. There are some real problems in this office and I’m starting to think maybe the charges have some merit. Ugh, I don’t want to talk about this right now. I’ve been working all day.”

“I’m sorry, babe. I just worry is all.”

“I know. I’m sorry, love. I have just been thinking about you, and your body, and your mouth on me all day. I need you. I want you. Can we just move on to more important matters?”

“Of course, we can. I’m just a bit nervous. Have you done this a lot?” questioned Sophie, curious at Paula’s confidence and know-how.

“Honestly, no. This will be a first for me. What about you?” Paula half giggled.

“Thank god! Neither have I. I’ve only seen it in movies and such, and that’s never real anyway. What if it doesn’t work?”

“Hmmm, hadn’t thought of that. I suppose it might not, but, we’re gonna still try, right?”

“Hell yes, we’re gonna try. Hold on. I have to put my headphones in.” Sophie found her wireless headphones, plugged them in and laid on her bed, door locked! “Ok, so how do we do this?”

Paula, also laying on her bed, said in a low and sexy voice, “What are you wearing?”

“Uhm, just some pajamas, why?”

“Sophie! You have to play along. You have to set the stage in my mind, so I can picture you doing what you’re saying.”

“Oh.”

“So, what are you wearing?” Paula asked again, her voice low and seductive.

Sophie thought about it for a moment. What turns her on? “Uhm, you know that red silky thong you like? I have that on and nothing else. What about you?” She felt a little weird and not very relaxed.

“I have your favorite lingerie on, the black lace, with fishnet stockings. I’m wet and wanting you,” purred Paula over the line. She was thinking of her beautiful lover, laying in the bed, so sexy, her hair splaying out beneath her, her full, amazing breasts waiting to be touched.
Sophie started to see how this worked. She felt her stomach flip. She closed her eyes. “Ok, uhm, I am going to put my mouth on you. I am kissing your bare stomach lightly, running my tongue from your belly button up to your right breast. I’m taking off your bra, pulling the straps slowly down your arms, kissing you gently as I go. My hands are now squeezing your beautiful breasts. I’m sucking on your nipple and it’s getting hard in my mouth.”

“Oooh, I like that. Your hot mouth feels good on my skin,” moaned Paula. “I am kissing and biting your neck and my hand is in your hair. My other hand is making its way slowly down your side to the inside of your thigh. I want to feel you. Are you wet for me?” Paula began pinching her own nipple, making it hard.

“Oh, yes, I’m wet, babe. I’m so wet for you.” This wasn’t a lie. She could feel Paula’s voice caressing her body.

“My fingers can feel you. You’re happy to see me …” hummed Paula.

“I feel your fingers on my clit.” Sophie’s hand had traveled down to her clit and she was playing out Paula’s direction in her head. “I am squeezing your other nipple with my fingers and kissing your mouth. I can taste you with my tongue. You taste so good, babe. I want to taste your pussy,” Sophie moaned, her fingers working at her clit slowly.

“My pussy is dripping wet for you. Please put your mouth on me and lick me. I am moving down your body with my tongue and I am going to fuck you with my mouth. I’m going to lick every drop of you dry.”

“Oh, babe, I feel you,” cried Sophie. “I want you to taste me, swirl your tongue around my clit and plunge it into me. Oh, god, you taste so good. I am licking you and sucking your clit so hard. Can you feel me?”

“Oh, Sophie, baby, yes, I feel your tongue inside me. Put your fingers inside. Deep down inside. Please.” Paula was wet and ready. She waited for Sophie.

“I’m putting my fingers in you, babe. In and out. Oh, you’re so fucking wet. I love feeling you all over me.”

Paula plunged Big Ben deep inside her vagina and began to writhe on the bed, pushing it in and out. She used her other hand to work her clit, pinching it as she listened to Sophie’s voice fuck her. “I can feel you squeezing my fingers, babe. I want to make you cum. I want you to cum hard for me. I’m kissing your mouth, my tongue is tasting yours. You taste so good, so wet, so warm. I’m squeezing your breast and pinching your nipple. It’s so hard. I’m putting it in my hot mouth and sucking it. Do you like that, babe?”

“Oh, yes, I like that. Bite me, baby. Oh, god, I’m going to cum, I’m so close, faster. Oh, fuck me fast, Sophie. Yes, I’m fucking you with my mouth, licking you so hard. I can’t get my tongue far enough in. I’m scraping your wall with my hard tongue and I’m rubbing your clit with my fingers and I’m pinching your hard nipple with my other fingers. You’re the fucking sexiest woman in the world, baby. You taste so fucking good. I love licking your pussy.”

Sophie thought she was going to explode. She was thrusting her own fingers into her vagina, pulsing as she listened to her lover get so close. “I’m pushing into you, feeling every inch of you, can you feel me fucking you?”

“Yes, yes, yes, baby, yes. Oh, god, I’m coming.” Paula released a strangled moan as she fell over the edge.
Just listening to Paula come, made Sophie fall too. They both rode out their pleasure, Paula moving the dildo in and out slowly as she came down.

Sophie pinched hard at her own nipple and rubbed her clit as her body jerked in pleasure.

The pair laid there, both coming down, together. Each could hear the other breathing, and mumbling incoherent nonsense.

Paula spoke first. “That may be how it’s done. What do you think, sweetheart?”

Sophie’s laughter filled the line and Paula wished she could actually touch her lover. Though she was physically satisfied at the moment, she craved the whole feeling of holding Sophie after they made love. “Uhm, if we failed, I hate to see it when we succeed. I’ll be a puddle in the sheets. That was pretty amazing. I felt like I could really feel you.”

“I know, right? That was, wow! I feel great right now. I wish I could kiss you for real, but as a substitute, I think we can work with this.”

“Oh, man, that felt good. You’re fucking incredible, babe. You really do have the sexiest voice in the world.”

“Well, thank you young Webster. Glad my sultry tones were of help in getting you off!” Paula laughed. “As usual, your tongue did me in … and a little help from our friend Big Ben.”

“You cheated?”

“What do you mean, cheated?”

“You used something other than my voice! That’s cheating!”

“No, it’s not. The goal was to have an orgasm, baby, and boy did I ever! I told you I brought it with me. But I would never have had an orgasm that good without you and your dirty talk. I quite like it when you talk dirty.”

“What came over you, miss naughty mouth. I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say pussy so many times before.”

“I’m not sure, really. Something just kind of took me over. I wanted you to get into it I guess. Did it work?”

“Uh, what do you think?”

“I think that you, Ms. Webster, are the fucking sexiest, most exciting woman I’ve ever known and if I was there with you right now, my hands would be all over you again.”

“What’s stopping you from doing it now?” asked Sophie, her voice low and sultry.

Paula grinned, loving that Sophie’s confidence had grown so much. “Absolutely nothing,” whispered the solicitor. “Wanna fuck?”

“What are you wearing, lover?” purred a very turned on young brunette.
Chapter 18

Wednesday dawned bright and early in the Big Apple. It was still dark when Paula’s taxi delivered her to Cooper Securities at 6am. She had a lot on today, so thought it best to get in and get her day moving quickly. She put her briefcase down on her desk and went to make herself some coffee in the break room she had stumbled upon quite by accident. The 40th floor was deafeningly quiet. She was the only person working and it was a bit creepy. In London, there were usually others at work this early, mulling around, having conversations. Here, she had no assistant and didn’t really bother talking to anyone she didn’t have business with, she just didn’t have much time for that.

She sat down at her desk and fired up her laptop, hoping for several emails on which she was waiting, several from Steve Spencer, including a list of lawyers in this office. Paula wanted to identify the law staff to see if anything suspicious popped up. She had a feeling in her gut that Ian had been hard at work over the last year stacking the deck in his favor by hiring staff that would be loyal to him or not interested enough to ask questions when something didn’t seem quite right. Steve Spencer was a prime example. Paula was not at all impressed with his law acumen or his nonchalant attitude toward the troubles the company was facing. She had yet to meet an employee in New York who impressed her, except for Mark Chapman, the young IT guy whom she would have helping her later.

After their personal time together last night, Paula filled Sophie in on what she had discovered thus far on her trip, including the charade that presented himself as Richard Williamson, rare books dealer. She wanted Sophie to get his name to Joe Tucker for some research. She needed to know who he was before her dinner date with him. Sophie was none too pleased Paula was having dinner with this man, not because she was jealous, but because he might be dangerous. Why would someone be following Paula to New York? And how was she the key to their operation? Too many questions loomed for her not to follow through with their dinner date. Paula thought they were being careful about being listened to, but perhaps she was wrong.

Paula thought back to her meeting with Mr. Wilbourne yesterday, and while getting the rundown of how employees were provided access to the building and secure floors, it became very obvious that it would be very easy for that system to be compromised with simple bribery or blackmail. She was going to ask Mark if he knew how to hack into systems. Most computer nuts his age were quite adept at hacking and did it just for fun or for the challenge. She would find out his skill level and use it to help her figure things out. If the building system was hackable, it took some of the suspicion away from the property manager, but they were still culpable.

She took out her legal pad and continued writing notes by hand about what she knew and what she still questioned. It was a bit of a safeguard measure in case her laptop was being monitored somehow. She knew some things about surveillance, but certainly not all the modern techniques and apps that were available. So, she decided to be as safe as she could with her thoughts.

Sophie had been at work since 10am, getting things prepped and ready for the lunch crowd. She fielded a delivery and managed the kitchen staff, but she was distracted today. Her evening with Paula was quite eventful, both of them enjoying their new-found way to pleasure one another over the phone. Sophie was amazed at how her body responded to her lover’s voice. She felt lucky to have found someone she connected with so wholly, and she wanted to make sure not to screw things
up between them like she’d done before.

Just then, her phone rang.

“Hiya Joe, thanks for calling me back. Listen, Paula needs you to find out as much as you can about this guy she met on her flight to New York. <> mmm hmm <> his name is Richard Williamson and he said he’s a rare books dealer from London <> name of the business is Shapero rare books <> yea, she said she overheard him talking on the phone and knows he’s a phony. She’s been trying to work out who might have sent him to spy on her <> she’s having dinner with him tomorrow in New York <> Yea, that’s what I told her, Joe, but she don’t listen to me! <> you do your research and call her asap if you find anything, yeah? And tell her not to go to dinner with that guy! <> She thinks she’s invincible, Joe. Maybe she’ll listen to you <> okay then. Yea, we’ll talk soon. <> Bye.”

Sophie hoped he would find out that this guy was legit and maybe Paula was just being a bit paranoid.

Paula looked at her watch, 7:33am. She had a few minutes to check in with London. She dialed Ian’s cell and only got answer phone. She hung up. Then she dialed her office line and waited for Kylie to pick up.

“Hello, Cooper Securities, Paula Martin’s office,” said Kylie with her usual terse tone.

“Kylie, hi, it’s Paula,” announced the solicitor.

“Mmm hmm,” responded her surly assistant.

“How are things at the office? I tried calling Ian, but he didn’t answer.”

“He must be busy.”

Really? Maybe it was a Cooper Securities problem, these idiot staff members. “I didn’t see the finished comparison reports in my email this morning. Are you going to have those for me anytime soon?”

“I’m working on them now. Should be finished today.”

“And what about the video conference meetings for next week with Hong Kong and Tokyo?”

“I am trying to get Mr. Walker to sign off on the requisition for those. Once he approves, I will send that to New York for them to set up.”

Paula wanted to pull her hair out. Getting anything done was a ball of red tape. All she wanted was to talk to her legal teams in both cities to make sure they were doing their jobs. She wasn’t able to do her job – she stopped her thoughts cold. Ian doesn’t want me to do my job. He doesn’t want the charges defended properly. “Okay, well, I have a meeting Kylie. Call my cell if you need anything from me, otherwise I will expect to see the comparison reports today.”

“Mmmm hmm.” Click.

Paula just shook her head. Unbelievable!

She picked up the office line and dialed Steve Spencer. It rang out. He’s not even here yet. It’s nearly 8. The opening bell is at 9:30. She slammed the phone down.
“Everything okay, Ms. Martin?” asked a stunned Mark Chapman, standing in her doorway, briefcase in hand.

She jumped at the sound of his voice, “Oh, you startled me, Mark! Come in. You’re early.”

“I can go get some coffee if you’re not ready for me.”

“I’m ready. I’m just frustrated with the nonchalance some people employ around here,” she said half under her breath. “Listen, why don’t we go grab some coffee and then we’ll get started. Follow me.”

Paula walked down to the break room and brewed a fresh pot. She was going to need it. As she was waiting for the coffee to brew, her phone chimed. “Excuse me for a moment, Mark,” said Paula as she looked to find a message from Sophie.

*Haven’t heard from u, babe! Just checking to see if ur able to walk this morning 😊 Had a wildly wonderful time last night! Xxx*

Paula smiled and shook her head. Mark watched out of the corner of his eye.

*I will have u know I have been at work since 6 and walking just fine. It will take a lot more sex than that to knock this old gal down.*

Paula pointed at the pot, “Coffee’s ready. Get yourself a cup.” Mark grabbed two mugs and poured a cup for Paula first, then himself. He handed Paula her mug and turned his attention away to give her some privacy. He could tell she was doing something personal by the look on her face.

*Is that a challenge, Ms. Martin? Bc I am more than up for it when you get home*

Paula put creamer in her coffee. “You ready?” she asked Mark, who nodded. She typed as she walked.

*U won’t know what hit u when I get back, young Webster. U will be putty in my very capable hands*

“If you need some time Ms. Martin, just let me know,” said Mark.

“Oh, I’m just texting my girlfriend. I’m sorry. I’m being unprofessional.”

Mark’s eyebrows shot up on his forehead at the word ‘girlfriend’ and Paula laughed at his reaction. “Am I shocking you a bit, Mark?”

He swallowed visibly, “Uhm, well, let’s just say I wasn’t expecting that. I mean, hey, whatever works for you, right? I’m an open-minded kind of guy. What’s ur girlfriend’s name?”

“Sophie. She manages a restaurant in Manchester, where we are both from.”

“Mmmm, well I’m sure she’s great. Anyone dating you would have to be great.”

“You think so, huh?”

“Yea, you’re really smart and pretty and all.”

“Well, thank you, Mark. That’s kind of you to say,” commented Paula. She didn’t know what it was about this young man, but she really thought highly of him. He was polite and knowledgeable and kind. “Would you like to see a picture?” She knew this was very out of character for her, but she felt
safe showing Sophie off to him. She hadn’t socialized much in London, but she trusted this lad for some reason.

“Yea, sure. I’d love to see one.”

Paula brought up the gallery on her phone and chose one of her favorites. “Here is my love.”

Mark tried not to show too much reaction to the picture for fear of offending his coworker. “Wow! She’s really ho … um, pretty!”

“Yea, she’s really hot, right? I’m a lucky lady! Sometimes I’m not sure what she sees in me, but –“

“Oh, Ms. Martin, don’t say that. You’re awesome! I can see why she likes you. Like I said, you’re like, really smart, and pretty –“ He stopped talking at the look on Paula’s face. “Oh, god, did I offend you? I’m so sorry.”

“No, Mark, not at all. You’re very sweet. I’m actually not used to people reacting so positively toward Sophie and me. Most people think awful things because she’s so much younger.”

“Well, don’t listen to those people! I may have been raised in the south, but I believe love is love and you should grab it while you can,” the young man stated. “Do you have a picture of you both together? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Sure,” she said, scrolling through her phone again. “Here, this is a good one.”

“Oh, that’s nice. You really love her, huh?”

Paula just looked at the lad with soft eyes, “Why do you say that?”

“Well, if you don’t mind my saying, look here,” he said, pointing to the photo, “see how your smile reaches your eyes? That’s not fake, that’s real, Ms. Martin.”

“You are just the loveliest lad, Mark!”

“I really like the way you talk, Ms. Martin. I’ve always wanted to go to England. Maybe someday I will get there and you can show me around.”

“I’ll make sure of it, Mark. You’re a real asset to this company and I will make sure the right people know. Ok, let’s get down to business then. I made a list of all the things I want you to show me.”

Paula and Mark spent the next hour going over the things she needed to see. He said he would write down instructions for certain things she could do when she needed, and the others he would have to show her when she returned from her journey over to the stock exchange.

“Mark, I need to ask something very important of you, and it might make you uncomfortable, so tell me if it does, ok?”

“Uhm, sure, Ms. Martin.”

“First, please call me Paula. Second, I need for you to keep our conversations private. In other words, I don’t want anyone knowing what we are talking about or the things I am asking you to show me. I can’t really explain it to you right now, but it’s very important to the fraud case.”

“Oh, well I don’t really even talk to my girlfriend or my friends about my work stuff, so don’t worry.”
“Well, that’s great, but I also mean people here. No one can know what we are talking about, not your boss, not Mr. Mitchell, not Mr. Spencer and especially not Mr. Walker.” The solicitor knew she was asking a lot of this young man and he really had no reason to trust her other than the rapport they’d built. She continued, “Listen, I know this is a big ask, and I wouldn’t put you in this position without a really good reason. Mark, can I trust you with something very important?”

He appeared a bit nervous, “Yea, sure, Ms., uh Paula.”

“I have reason to believe there is extremely illegal activity and collusion happening in this company and it’s partly why the fraud investigation is taking place. Now, I don’t have all the answers right now, but I am working on figuring out what exactly is going on. I don’t want to put you in a bad position, but I really need for you to work with me on this. When your boss or Mr. Mitchell, or even Mr. Walker, ask you about what you’re doing for me, I want you to keep it simple and tell them just top of the line stuff, like you’re explaining to me how the IT department keeps the systems secured and up to SEC requirements. You can even let them believe that I am not quite catching on and don’t fully understand how things piece together. I need for them to think that I know just enough to explain things to the SEC! Do you understand?”

“Yea, I think so. You’re trying to catch them doing illegal things and you need proof before you can call the authorities in, and you don’t want to tip them off to your understanding before you have the information?”

“Yes, exactly! Oh, Mark, you’re smarter than anyone I’ve encountered at this office. You help me, I will make sure Alexander Cooper knows what you’ve done. If you decide you want to move to England and work for CS in London I will make it happen.”

“You really know Mr. Cooper?”

“He’s an old friend. I’ve done work for him for years. He’s actually a very honest bloke, a rich one, but an honest one. That’s why I know something is going on here. He’s just not the type to commit fraud. The man’s a bloody billionaire, why would he put that in jeopardy? Just so he can make another billion? It just doesn’t fit. Someone else is at the helm of this and I am going to find out who.”

“Well, you can count on me, Paula. I give you my word. I’ll play dumb and we will get you the information you need to make things right.”

Paula’s office phone buzzed. “Paula Martin <> yes, ok, I will meet you at the lift in two minutes.”

“Was that Mr. Spencer?”

“The one and only. I am off to the exchange. I am hoping to be back by noon. Stay here and make notes for me – handwritten notes. And scan my laptop to see if there is any spyware on it. I want to know if I am being monitored. I also really need access to phone records and human resources records and it all has to be done with finesse, if you get my meaning. And if you leave, take my laptop with you. I don’t need anyone snooping around it.” She gathered her notes and her brief case, “Here is my cell number. It’s international, of course, but call me if you need me while I am out.” She gave Mark a grateful look. She had now involved this lad in the dubious dealings that were at hand, but she really had no choice. She hoped it would all work out well in the end and Ian Walker would pay for his involvement, whatever that turned out to be. Paula was getting the feeling this thing was way more complex than she originally thought, and she would need to involve the authorities sooner rather than later. Time was running out. She made sure she had what she needed and headed to the 40th floor lobby to meet Steve Spencer.
Sophie walked into the Bistro to meet her mum for drinks as promised. She’d worked until 4 and needed something to take her mind off Paula, so she’d invited Sally for catch up over a bottle of red. She hadn’t had much one on one time with her mum since her release and Sophie thought maybe Sally was avoiding the whole Paula discussion. Though Sally was back on good terms with her old friend, Sophie didn’t know how she felt about their reconciliation. They had not really talked much about Sophie’s relationship with Paula because the focus was on the trial and all the carnage that arose out of the decisions that were made that ultimately led to Sally being found guilty. And by the time Sally was released, they had broken up and it wasn’t even a topic of conversation. But, now that they were together again, it was time Sophie forced Sally to talk about it.

“Hiya, mum!” chirped Sophie as she rounded the table where Sally was sitting, already waiting for her daughter.

“Oh, hi love. I’ve already got a bottle ordered. Kate should be bringing it ‘round and minute now. I ordered it 5 minutes ago,” announced Sally in her usual disapproving tone. “So, how was your day?”

“Uh, yea, it was fine, I guess. Nothing too exciting to report,” Sophie said, looking up to see if Kate was even in the restaurant. Sophie was going to need some wine before she broached the subject of Paula. “And, how was the factory?”

“Oh, not much new there, either, I’m afraid. Carla’s been a right moody cow with Nick around. We just try to stay out of her way.”

“Yea, probably a good idea.”

“Here ya go,” said Kate as she finally brought over two glasses and their bottle of wine. “Sorry for the wait. Robert had to go to the cellar and get some more of the red. Some days it just goes like wildfire.”

“How are the wedding plans coming along?” inquired Sophie.

“Uh, yea, fine. There’s a lot to do. I had no idea it would be this much work! But, it’s exciting, too. We can’t wait,” said Kate, smiling with her eyes as she thought about Rana.

“Well, if you need any help, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Soph. I appreciate it. Well, I better get back to work. Enjoy!”

Sally sat with a sour look on her face as she poured them both a glass. Her opinion of Kate had never improved, and it most likely never would, despite Sophie’s efforts to show her mum she was well over Kate. “Bottoms up, Soph,” encouraged Sally.

Sophie took a nice healthy gulp and thought the first topic to broach with her mum would be Gina. “So, mum, when are you going to get over this thing with Auntie Gina?”

“Never,” said Sally with a bit of a tone, angered that Sophie continued to bring this subject up.

“Mum, you can’t just leave it like this. She’s your flaming sister. You’re not going to just ignore her for the rest of your life, are ya?”

“You just watch me. I owe her nothing, after what she did.”

“Yea, I know what she did was awful, but you really need to try to forgive people instead of holding
onto your anger. You’ve done things that people had to forgive you for. What if they hadn’t, then where would you be?”

“I’d be none worse for the wear, love. What Gina did was well out of order, way worse that anything I’ve ever done, mind you. And I wish you would just leave it and stop trying to fix things. I am not going to forgive her, and that’s final!”

“Alright, alright, keep your hair on. I just thought that after you’ve experienced such misery in prison, you might be more compassionate toward others. I’ll leave it alone, then.”

The two sat there in silence, not knowing what to say next. Sophie downed her glass and poured herself another. “Have you talked to Rosie lately?”

“Yea, I spoke with her this morning. Ya know, I just don’t know what’s gotten into her lately. All she can talk about is some designer she met on her show. She really couldn’t care less that I spent months in prison!”

“She doesn’t even know Paula. Why would she care if you’re dating her again?” snapped Sally. Sophie sighed and looked her mum in the eye. “She’s my sister and she’s supposed to care about my life, too! And Paula is a big part of my life. Mum, you need to be able to talk to me about this. You cannot keep avoiding my relationship with Paula.”

Sophie knew Sally was conflicted. On one hand she was grateful that Paula had done what she could to free Sally, but on the other was the fact that her old friend was actually having a sexual relationship with her youngest daughter. Sophie didn’t know how to help the situation.

Her mother looked at her and took a drink from her glass. “Soph, I know you’re a grown woman, but you’re still my baby and I just have a hard time with you and Paula together. She’s my age! My age! How are you even attracted to her?”

“Mum, without trying to sound gross to you, but, have you seen her? She’s gorgeous! But, it’s so much more than just a physical attraction. We just, I dunno, click. We just make sense to each other. Besides, Tim is younger than you!”

“Yea, by five years! Not 25!”

“What does it matter, mum? We love each other, and we are together and that’s that. There’s nothing you can do or say that’s going to change it, so you should just get used to it.”

“Yea, until she finds another reason to dump you and break your heart again,” said Sally.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“And how do you know that? There are no guarantees in life, Sophie, I should know!”

“Yea, all the more reason to take chances on being happy! Mum, Paula makes me happier than
anyone I’ve ever been with and if she were to ask me to marry her I would do it in a minute!”

“You’re good at that, aren’t you? Running off to get married even if it’s not right for you,” spat Sally.

“I can’t believe you just said that,” replied Sophie, hurt in her eyes at the reminder of her relationship implosion with Sian. “First, Paula and I are not getting married, mum. I said it because I love her that much. And second, I was barely 17. That was a long time ago and I am way more mature and know what I want now. And I want Paula! And if you can’t handle that, well, then you’re just going to be living your life without any of your children around you.”

“Sophie, you mark my words, Paula Martin is a selfish woman and she is going to get bored with you and then she is going to dump you just like she did before. She’s a snob, Soph. I don’t know why you can’t see that. She’s too old for you and you’ll be able to see it one day when she judges you for being immature or not smart enough or not posh enough or for not using big words like she does. I’m sorry Soph, but you’re headed for a heap of heartache unless you listen to me!”

Sophie got up and stormed out of the restaurant, leaving Sally there to ponder. She walked over to her dad’s and went to her room, tears streaming down her face. It was just after 6, which meant it was 1 in New York. She wondered if Paula had time to talk.

*Babe, are you available to talk right now? My mum’s just upset me and thought maybe you could cheer me up?*

Sophie sat on her bed and pulled her knees up to her chest and cried. Why couldn’t Sally Webster ever see beyond the nose on her face? Paula would make her feel better. She just had to wait for her to text back.

Paula and Mark were deep in conversation about what he was able to discover while Paula was over at the stock exchange. He had uncovered a slew of information she had asked for – emails and phone records – all indicating activity between Ian Walker, Steve Spencer, Mike Mitchell and the legal heads and IT heads of all the other offices under the Cooper Securities umbrella. There was a huge conspiracy at work here. Paula instructed Mark to dig deeper, search human resources records for anomalies and links. As they were brainstorming and making progress, Sophie’s text came through. Paula sighed. She didn’t want to ignore Sophie, but she couldn’t stop her progress. She shot a quick text back.

*Sorry, darling, but I am buried. Can we save the talk for later?*

She and Mark continued to dig. Mark’s ability to infiltrate the network files far surpassed Paula’s and, with Evelyn’s access, they were bound to find information that would help put the pieces together.

Sophie’s phone chimed and her heart leapt. Paula never let her down. She read the text and the tears started again. She knew Paula was busy, but her heart was wounded at being put off. She curled up into a ball on the bed and cried herself to sleep.
Paula’s phone chimed again. This time it was Joe Tucker.

*Got some very interesting information for you. Call when you have time to talk. – Joe*

“Mark, you keep digging. I need to make a call. We are looking to cross reference the dates on those emails from Ian about hiring to human resources files.”

Paula dialed Joe’s phone. “Joe, it’s Paula. What have you got for me?”

“Hello, dear! How’s New York?”

“Proving to be quite interesting, in fact. Did you find anything on Ian?”

“Well, nothing out of the ordinary on Ian, but when I looked into his wife’s background, whoa! Turns out that Nicole Walker used to be one Jessica Warren, the daughter of a high court judge in Johannesburg, South Africa. Led a very privileged life, as judge’s children often do, with a trust fund, stock portfolio, country club membership, several rather large bank accounts with several international banks.”

“Ok, so she was rich, that’s nothing exciting.”

“Well, initially, that’s what I thought. But I kept digging. And stumbled onto a couple of newspaper articles from 1992, about Jessica Warren being arrested on drug trafficking charges. Her father, the honorable Charles Warren, was suspected of blackmail and bribery to get the charges expunged. The reporter was found murdered. Nothing ever came of the investigation into his death, and the charges disappeared. There is no record of them anywhere. Another journalist picked up the story, but only to quash all rumors of any wrongdoing. And you’ll never guess who sat on the board of the Johannesburg Sunday Times?”

“Charles Warren.”

“So, Ian’s wife was a drug trafficker when she was, what 18 or so? Can I find the article online?”

“Yes, I will text you the link. It’s an interesting read. I am going to keep on it, see if I can follow the money to anything interesting. But, I can’t imagine Ms. Warren stopped her activities if she was flying under the radar and protected by daddy, can you?”

“So, she might be a player somehow,” Paula stated. “Great work, Joe. Keep going and let me know if you find more. And text me that link. OH, Joe, did you ever find any information on Richard Williamson?”

“Yep, he’s a phony. No such person. There are about 200 people in the UK by that name, none of which deal in rare books. There is one quite outspoken Catholic Bishop, but I didn’t think that was our guy.”

“Just as I suspected. I’m sure Ian had him follow me over. I’ll handle it from here. Take care of yourself, yeah?”

“Will do, lady. Oh, how’s our girl doing?” asked Joe, regarding Sophie.

“She’s amazing. I miss her like mad.”

“I just bet you do. She’s a good’un Paula. Don’t let this one go. She’s worried about you, ya know? Doesn’t want you going to dinner with strange men. Can’t say I blame her.”
“I know she worries, but I don’t really have a choice if I want to keep her safe! This Richard could have some big answers. Thanks for asking after her, Joe. We’ll talk later, yeah?” Her thoughts drifted to Sophie. *I need to call her.*

“Bye, love,” said Joe, then the line went dead.

Paula sat and thought for a moment. Perhaps Nicole Walker was more important than Ian was. She had a criminal history, though it wouldn’t show up with a high court judge for a father. Paula would bet a million pounds Jessica Warren, aka Nicole Walker, was an only child.

“Everything ok, Paula?” asked Mark.

“Yea, just another piece of the puzzle.”

Her phone beeped. The link to the articles.

Paula pulled up the articles on her phone and read through them. Jessica Warren was caught with 5 kilos of heroin in her luggage on her way back from China, via Kabul, Afghanistan. There was evidence that she had been flagged to pass through customs without search, but a mix up of paperwork instead alerted customs agents to flag her for search, where they discovered the illegal substance. She was detained, charged and released on bail. Then, without explanation, all charges were dropped when the evidence went missing. Judge Charles Warren and Police Chief Anthony Theron were under suspicion for burying evidence and trying to blackmail officers who had expedited the arrest and subsequent charges against Jessica. *Pretty obvious what happened there.* Then the reporter was found dead with a shot to the back of the head. *Executed.*

One of articles showed a picture of Jessica Warren, her arm shielding part of her face from photographers as she left her house after her bail release. Something interesting caught Paula’s eye. She quickly grabbed her laptop and loaded the article, so she could see the picture better.

*Holy Shit!*

“Paula, are you ok? You like you’ve seen a ghost!” said Mark, concern growing in his eyes.

Paula stared at the photo. Dangling from Jessica Warren’s hand was a set of keys with a jade green dragon attached, just like Kylie Sharp’s. *This is a Chinese drug cartel that dates back 30 years.*

Paula swallowed hard. She was in big trouble. This problem was a lot deeper than she ever imagined. She was in danger. *Sophie. Oh my god.*

She turned to Mark quickly. “Mark, how good are you at hacking?”

“I’ve done a fair bit, why?”


“Only one way to find out!” said Mark.

“Wait, if you do it from here, can it be detected?”

“Only if you don’t know what you’re doing!” he grinned. “I grew up in small town in Georgia and I didn’t have much to entertain myself, so I learned computers. I once hacked into Delta Airlines and flew myself to New York City and back, free of charge.”

“Mark, you are quickly becoming my favorite person! Get to it and see what you can find.”
Paula eyeballed her watch. 4:42pm. “Give me a minute. I need to call Sophie.”

“You, sure. This is going to take some time.”

Paula didn’t know if she should alert Sophie to her discovery. Would it scare her? She decided to keep her safe, she would not tell her until she had more information. She dialed her number.

Sophie woke up to her phone ringing. “Hello,” croaked the young brunette.

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry, did I wake you? Go back to sleep, love. We can talk tomorrow.”

“No! It’s okay, I need to talk to you.”

“What’s wrong, sweetheart? You sound awful,” observed the solicitor.

“My mum and I had a row earlier and it just really upset me.”

“What was it about?”

Sophie didn’t want to tell Paula. She didn’t want to upset her, but she couldn’t really fabricate a lie, either. “It was about us. She’s just so—”

“Oh, let me guess. She’s still not being supportive of our relationship?” said Paula, rolling her eyes. She didn’t give a shit what Sally Webster thought of her or if she didn’t want her seeing her daughter. She had much bigger problems to deal with at the moment.

“Well, yea.”

“Sophie, your mum is not going to accept we are together. It’s just how it is, and frankly, I’m getting tired of it being a topic of conversation,” Paula spat, not meaning it to sound as harsh as it did.

“Well, pardon me for caring that my flaming mother doesn’t approve of our relationship. She keeps saying you’re going to get tired of me and dump me again.”

“Do you think that’s what I’m going to do?”

“Well, no, but—“

Paula cut Sophie off, “Well, then you’re just going to have to put on your big girl panties and tell your mum to do one. I don’t have time for this bullshit, Sophie. I am up to my eyeballs here.”

“Okay, well, I’m sorry for disturbing you. I’m hanging up now!” Sophie cut the call off and began to cry again. This was not a good day. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

Damn! Well, I fucked that up royally, didn’t I? I’ll just have to call her later and apologize. I have to figure out this drug cartel thing.

Paula checked in with Mark, who was clicking away at his laptop. “Going ok?”

“Yea, just doing a search of airlines in operation at that time. Like I said, it’s going to take a minute to get this information.”

Paula nodded. She grabbed her laptop and began to search for articles on Chinese drug cartels. She knew Kylie was working for Ian, keeping an eye on her comings and goings, but Paula had kept her
laptop and phones on her or locked up, so she knew Kylie hadn’t gotten into them, a fact that Mark confirmed for her when he scanned through her computer for spyware of any kind.

Just then, Paula’s phone chimed again. Her heart softened, thinking of how rude she’d been to Sophie.

*Paula, hello, it’s Richard Williamson. We met on the flight over from London? Just wanted to touch base and see if you were still available for dinner?*

Oh, the other unknown puzzle piece. Who is this guy? I never gave him my number … so he either thinks I’m stupid or he’s not a very good spy. Only one way to find out.

*Hello back, Richard. You know what, I’ve been working like mad since I arrived. I’d love to have a meal that’s not room service. Are you available tonight?* No time like the present.

Paula waited to see if he’d take the bait. She knew he was expecting some push back and a tentative date for tomorrow.

*Wonderful! Shall I pick you up from your hotel, say half 7?*

*Sounds perfect. I’ll meet you downstairs, half seven.*

Paula would have to get back to the hotel to shower and change. It gave her a little over an hour.

“Mark, I am meeting someone for dinner and I need to bounce over to the hotel to change. I’d rather you not stay here so as to throw suspicion on why you’re working late. Why don’t you come back to my hotel suite and work from there?”

“Uhm, yea, I guess I could do that, if you’re sure it’s ok to have me in your hotel room.”

“Mark, I’m a 51 year-old woman, I don’t need permission to have someone to my room.”

“I was just thinking about Sophie. She’s not going to, you know, get mad or anything is she?”

“She won’t even know you’re there, besides, we have a very solid relationship. She’ll be fine.”

“If you say so!”

“Ok, why don’t you leave now, and I’ll meet you over there.”

“Where, exactly?”

“Oh, the Four Seasons. Suite 2422. Just wait for me in the lobby. My key card is required for floor access.”

“Gotcha. See you in a bit then.” Mark packed up his stuff and headed toward the lift.

Just as Paula was about to exit out of her internet search, a headline popped up “How Mexican drug cartels have infiltrated Hong Kong” – she read through the article quickly. Money laundering!

Things were beginning to flesh out in Paula’s mind. Money laundering for drug cartels with tons of cash, and what better way than to buy real estate? Oh, she had a lot to do. First, dinner with the spy.

On her way over to the hotel, Paula shot Sophie a quick text.

*Sweetheart, I’m sorry for being short with u earlier. I wasn’t a very good partner, was I? I’m sorry.*
Just as she was about to get out of the taxi, Sophie texted back.

*U hurt my feelings. I know ur busy, but blowing me off like that is not the way to get me on ur
good side.*

*I know. Just so much going on. Will fill you in tmr. Having dinner w ‘Richard’ in about an hour.*

*Thought that was supposed to be tmr nite?*

*The quicker I can get an understanding of what he’s up to, the sooner I can make sense out of what
he is after. No one’s been following u have they? And ur using the jammer, right?*

*I’m fine. Call me ltr?*

*Will try but don’t want u to worry, ok?*

*Not gonna happen. I’ll worry always bc I love u*

*I love u 2 darling. Gtg. Xxxx*

Paula found Mark sitting in the lobby when she entered. They made split-second eye contact and she
got in the lift, pressed 24, then swiped her key for access to the suite level. Once she stepped off the
lift, she gave it a few seconds then pressed the down button, so the lift would return. Mark was
smart, so she assumed he would get on and wait for it to deliver him to her floor. A few minutes
later, he stepped off and knocked on door 2422.

“Come in, young Mark! Welcome to casa Martin. Would you like a drink? The mini bar is all yours.
You can set up over here, and feel free to order whatever you want from room service – it’s all on
Cooper Securities! I am going to go get ready for my dinner.”

Paula emerged from her room dressed for her evening. She wore the same black backless pantsuit
she’d worn when she and Sophie had dinner with Ian only a few short weeks ago. How her life had
changed in that time. She had to keep forging ahead with gathering the information, so she could
expose the operation of money laundering at hand. She just didn’t have enough to go to the
authorities yet.

Mark looked up as Paula entered the living area of the suite. He had been busy trying to gather the
information on Jessica Warren and he was almost finished. “Wow, Paula, you look very beautiful.
Sophie sure is one lucky girl.”

“Mark, you’re a love. I hope your girlfriend appreciates what a gentleman you are! Oh, god, I didn’t
even ask if your working tonight was going to interfere with any plans you might have with – I don’t
even know your girlfriend’s name! What a horrible person I am!”

“No worries, Paula. Rachel is working tonight. She’s an actress, but tonight she’s bartending. Gotta
pay the rent somehow, right?”

“Do you two live together?”

“Yea, we met in high school and were friends for a long time. We went to college together and
started dating a couple years ago. We both wanted to see if we could make it in the big city, as they
say, so we decided to go for it.”

“Ah, young love is so … fresh and clean.”
“Well, no matter how old, or young, you are, love is a good thing.”

“You’re right about that one. So, have you found anything on Jessica Warren?”

“I’ve got some information, but give me some more time. By the time you get back from dinner I should have a lot more, if it’s out there.”

“Ok, well, I’m off. Listen, no one should know you’re here, so don’t answer the phone and don’t leave until I get back unless you absolutely have to, okay?”

Mark didn’t want to ask, but he was curious about who Paula was having dinner with. “I won’t. Have a nice time then.”

“Okay, see ya later,” Paula said as she left the room. She headed down to the lobby to meet the man who could give her answers or make her life hell. Either way, she had no choice but to go through with the dinner and pray she could figure out how to keep herself safe.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Paula makes some major discoveries and realizes Sophie is in grave danger.

Paula took a deep breath and put on a smile as Richard Williamson approached her on the curb of the Four Seasons hotel.

“Paula, you look absolutely stunning, if I may be so bold!” crowed Richard, pulling her into an awkward and unwanted hug.

“Thank you! You clean up nicely as well. I hope you don’t mind changing the day for our dinner, it’s just that I have been working non-stop and needed a break!” shared Paula as she stepped into the taxi.

“It’s an absolute welcome, Paula, I assure you! They’ve got you working non-stop then?”

“Yep!” She wasn’t giving anything away. He didn’t know that she knew he knew her profession, so she was going to make him stumble. “And how about you? Make any fantastic deals?”

“This is a hard trade, I must say. People want to have priceless items, but they just don’t want to pay for the privilege! No deals done as yet. We are heading to Greenwich Village to a nice little Spanish place I’ve been to a few times. Their paella is out of this world! And the sangria is second to none.”

“Sounds wonderful.” Paula was being sparse with her words.

“So, tell me, has this been a productive trip for you?”

“Actually, a bit frustrating if I’m honest.”

“How so?”

“Oh, just some information I was hoping to obtain is not readily available. My IT department is not playing nice. Either that or I am just not very IT savvy, if you will,” laughed Paula. “Probably the latter.”

“Oh, I hardly know what ‘IT’ stands for, much less being able to operate efficiently within computer systems. You know me, I am comfortable with pages and words on those pages.”

“Yes, right!” giggled the solicitor. She watched the buildings go by as the taxi traversed its way from downtown up to the Village. “This is such a vibrant city. I wish I had brought Sophie with me, though we are not seeing eye to eye at the moment.” Paula thought she’d throw some distance between her and Sophie as a way to downplay the importance of their relationship.

“Oh, dear. What’s happened?” inquired Richard.

“Oh, just the usual age difference rearing its ugly head. Sometimes I am just too grounded, and she is just too much of a butterfly.” Paula thought up a good lie. “Her ex is getting married, but I just don’t think she’s over Sophie and she keeps sniffing around her. Sophie is so naïve, and tells me it’s
nothing, but I know better.”

“Do you think Sophie will stray with this ex?”

“No. I don’t think so, but …”

The cab pulled up at the restaurant. Richard escorted Paula into the bustling eatery. “Reservation for Williamson, please.”

The maître d’ checked the listing. “Yes, Williamson. Would you mind sitting at the bar until your table is available?”

“Of course,” said Richard.

The pair wound their way to the bar for a seat. “What would you like to drink, Paula? Some sangria, perhaps?”

“Uh, yes, sangria sounds quite refreshing, thank you,” said Paula. She was going to have to keep par with him tonight and not let the alcohol compromise her wits. She was glad she was not a lightweight, but she would have to pace herself without him noticing.

“Will you excuse me for a moment?” asked Richard. “Must find the toilet.”

“Certainly,” replied Paula, eyeballing him as he left her sight, finding this the perfect time to skew things in her favor. She motioned the bartender over and noticed quickly how much this woman looked like Sophie. “Listen, I need for you to make me a sangria with only fruit juice, but you can’t let my companion know, okay? His can be double strong. Believe me, it will be worth your while!”

“Certainly, ma’am,” said the female bartender as Paula slipped her a $100 bill.

“Thank you. And if you can, make sure this service follows me to the table?” Paula asked, then continued. “First date. A girl can’t be too careful!”

“Understood! I’ve got you covered. Stay safe and enjoy your evening,” offered the bartender.

“Mmmm, this is delicious,” said Paula to the bartender, drinking the actual sangria in front of her. “Good thing I asked for some help, this stuff could be lethal on a first date!”

“It kind of sneaks up on you if I’m honest! I love your accent. Where are you from?” asked the attractive woman.

“London,” she offered, admiring the woman in front of her. She was beautiful, like Sophie. Oh, how she missed her girlfriend. It was only last night that her lover was making her squirm, but it was never enough. She literally craved the way Sophie made her body feel. She yearned for her lover and thought she would have to call her once this farce was over and Mark had vacated.

“I’d love to go to London someday. Is it a nice city?” inquired the woman.

"Oh, it really is. You should definitely make it a priority. And thank you, again, for helping me out with the, you know," said Paula, motioning to the drink in her hand.

"No worries. I'm always looking out for our female customers. Well, have a nice first date!” offered the bartender.

Richard returned from the loo, probably more like checking in with whomever he was working, and sat down next to Paula on the barstool.
“Oh, you have to try this. It’s excellent,” encouraged Paula.

Richard took a nice long drink of the fruity liquid. “Mmmm, that’s so good. I told you this place was phenomenal.”

The pair sat together, chatting about absolutely nothing. Paula was wondering what the hell this guy thought he was going to gain from having her to dinner if he wasn’t willing to pry for information. She needed to know what he wanted.

“So, Richard, tell me more about your wife. I’ve spilled my guts about Sophie, probably more than I should have. You just seem so easy to talk to.”

“Oh, that’s just boring. Let’s talk about something else.”

Paula wouldn’t let him off the hook. “Oh, c’mon. Give a girl something.”

“I really don’t want to talk about my wife when I have a perfectly stunning companion sitting in front of me.”

Was he really going to try it on?

“Richard, I already made it clear to you that I am not a cheater and I have no plans to spend any time between the sheets with anyone other than Sophie. So, if you are thinking you’re going to convince me, you’re dead wrong,” said Paula with conviction.

“Okay, but you can’t blame a bloke for trying. You’re a very attractive woman, Paula.”

“Well, I don’t care how much you fancy a one-night stand, it’s not going to be with me. What you get up to on your own is none of my concern.”

“Understood. I won’t push it any further, I promise. So, tell me something interesting about Paula Martin.”

“Your table is ready, sir,” said the maître d, motioning for him to follow.

Paula winked at the bartender, making sure her $100 tip was doing its job. They headed for their table.

Richard took Paula’s wrap and hung it at the end of their booth, then motioned for her to sit. Their waiter delivered their menus and read the specials.

“What are you thinking?” inquired Richard.

“More sangria, for sure! And maybe the seafood paella?” asked Paula.

“Sounds good to me. It’s rather large, so we can share.”

Their conversation went silent for a bit. Paula wondered if this evening was going to be this boring. Just then, her phone vibrated in her pocket. She smiled at Richard.

“I need the loo now. Please excuse me?”

Paula retreated toward the toilets and checked her phone. It was Sophie. She’d sent her a picture of her smiling sweetly with a caption that said, “you are my world” then a text followed.

*I know ur out on ur dinner meeting, but I wanted to remind u that u r so loved and so cherished.
Please will u call me when u get in? xxx*

God, she loved this woman.

*Baby, I love u. And I’d much rather be with u than anyone else in the world. Will call u tmr as I won’t be available until ur fast asleep. Sweet dreams Xxxx*

Paula looked back out to the table where Richard sat. He was on his phone. Reporting in? What was the fucking point of this dinner? Was he going to get down to business or just pussy-foot around? She used the toilet and worked her way back to the table.

Richard’s mood had changed a bit. He wasn’t as cheerful as he had been, and it was noticeable. Probably had talked to Jordan.

“So, you going to tell me what you do, then?” asked Richard, keeping up the charade.

“You’re giving up?” laughed Paula. “Have another drink.” She flagged down their waiter and ordered him another.

Richard was visibly angry.

“Did I do something to upset you, Richard. You seem, I dunno, irritated,” inquired the solicitor.

“I’m sorry, no. My wife called while you were in the loo. She has a way of getting under my skin,” he replied tersely.

“Oh, I’ve been there. Sorry. Marriage can be a lot of work.”

“And, yes, I give up. What do you do, Paula?” His question was curt.

“I’m a world-renowned Opera singer.”

The look on Richard’s face was priceless. He looked like he was trying to divide fractions by fractions in his head. “Oh, really,” he began.

Paula started laughing. “I’m only joking. I’m a boring old lawyer.”

“A lawyer!? I would never have guessed in a million years. Lawyers are cynical and negative! You’re nothing like that!”

“You’ve not seen me cross examine a witness!”

“Suppose not. So, do you work for some international law firm? What brings you to New York?”

“I’m working for a securities trade firm at the moment. They’ve been accused of securities fraud and I am here trying to run the legal teams and get the defense arguments structured.”

“Sounds absolutely … awful!” laughed Richard, who was now half-way through his third drink. “Hey, you need another drink! Waiter,” he motioned the waiter over. They ordered another round and Paula glanced over at the bar as she did, making eye contact with her friend, the bartender.

“Well, I have always loved to argue and make sure that my point of view is heard, so it suits me well.”

“Poor Sophie,” commented Richard.
“Right! She might just kick me to the curb someday because of it.”

“I doubt that. She sounds lovely. I’m sure no-one but you could turn her head.”

Where is he going with this?

“Well, I’m not so arrogant to think she doesn’t find other women attractive, and I don’t think she’d stray, but she’s a very attractive young woman, so, being the pragmatist that I am, I have to admit that I don’t know for sure.”

“Well, that’s rather realistic, I suppose. Perhaps I was looking for an answer that made me believe in love again.”

“Oh dear, the wife really getting to you, then?” Paula asked.

Richard’s face turned sour. Paula was clueless about what he was up to. Why all the questions about Sophie and why this complaining about a phantom wife?

“Frankly, Paula, she’s doing my head in at the moment. She’s just got her nose stuck in telling me how to do my job,” he growled. “Why did you say this, why didn’t you say that,” he mocked. “Who does she think she is? Our relationship is supposed to be equal! But, she’s bossing me around, and it’s just making me crazy!”

Paula realized the sangria was having an effect on his mood and he was likely talking about the mysterious Jordan, the female coworker. Paula was going to push a little.

“Well, that’s marriage for you! You should know by now how to manage your wife, Richard. Women like to get their way, you know?”

“Yes, well, she needs to learn to keep her mouth shut!” spat the man, as he took a rather large tug on his drink.

It took Paula aback slightly that his mannerisms had shifted so easily, and his anger flared.

“Richard, are you okay?” asked Paula. Their food arrived, delaying his response. The waiter served their food from the large dish that sat between them. Boy, that smells so good.

“Can I get you anything else?” asked the waiter.

“Another drink, my good man!” slurred Richard. Paula nodded her head. The sangria did indeed go down like fruit juice but snuck up like a sledgehammer. “This is some really delightful drink, ain’t it Paula?”

His accent was slipping.

Paula started laughing, acting drunk to play along with Richard. She needed to continue to ply him with sangria. Soon, he would start talking.

They tucked into their food and Richard downed three more drinks. Paula’s bartender had done her a solid and kept her drinks strictly virgin, so she was stone cold sober.

“So, Paula, are you sure you wouldn’t maybe like to, uhm, you know?” Richard said, wagging his eyebrows up and down. “You’re a very, very attractive woman.”

“Richard, I think we’ve covered this territory already, twice. No, I do not want to sleep with you,” she stated emphatically.
"Oh, c’mon, love, you know you want it. You’ve been giving me the eyes all night."

Yea, he’s drunk, alright. “I said no, and I mean NO!”

“Bitch,” he said under his breath.

“What did you just say to me?” Paula knew this was going to get ugly. She calmly grabbed her phone, pulled it out of her pocket and started the voice recorder app to capture their conversation in case she needed it later.

“You heard me. You think you’re so smart, Ms. Fancy lawyer, but you don’t know a damn thing.”

“Well, why don’t you enlighten me, Richard.”

“Richard, ha! That’s a laugh. You need to watch yourself or you and your lover are going to wind up swimming with the fishes,” hissed the drunken man.

The hair stood up on the back of Paula’s neck at the mention of Sophie. “What are you talking about? Why do I need to watch anything, Richard?”

“Would you stop calling me that!!” he slurred loudly.

“What should I call you, then?”

He eyed Paula and pointed his finger right in her face over the table, “Never mind that. You just need to make sure no one catches on, you got that? You make sure the operation continues, or you’re a dead woman.”

Paula swallowed hard. “What operation?”

“Oh, don’t act stupid with me. You know exactly what I’m talking about. And you better keep your fucking nose out of our business and just do your job.”

“What job am I supposed to be doing, exactly?”

“The fraud thing, you stupid bitch. You just make sure those charges don’t stick so the Feds leave things alone, and you’ll be fine. If anyone learns about the operation, you can kiss that hot piece of ass goodbye,” he laughed and motioned his forefinger horizontally across his neck. “Well done, by the way. That girlfriend of yours is fit!”

Sophie is their leverage. If I don’t get Cooper Securities out of the quagmire, their whole operation is compromised, and they’ll have to set up somewhere new. And that could take years and cost them millions.

“Oh, you mean the money laundering?” She had to push him.

“Ding, ding, ding, give the lady a prize,” slurred the angry man.

“So, tell me how the operation works, so I can protect internal evidence from the investigation.”

“You mean you haven’t figured that out yet? Thought you had more about you than that,” he drained his glass. The waiter had brought another drink over, and he started on that one.

She had to think fast. “I don’t fully understand what’s going on, so you’re going to have help me out. I know your cartel is funneling money through Cooper Securities by buying real estate, but I am not sure what happens on the back end or how the money is entering the company.”
“Hmm, not as smart as you look, huh? Women, think they’re smart, but they’re not. They’re all the same, really. Only good for one thing.”

Paula wanted to clock this son-of-a-bitch right across his arrogant face, but he was too valuable to her at the moment. She needed more information.

“Well, since you have the answers, why don’t you tell me what you’re dying for me to know,” baited the solicitor.

“Use your brain, woman! It’s not that hard to figure out. Geesh.”

“Well, like you said, women aren’t as smart as we think. We need men to help us sometimes.”

“Look, the money comes in cash deposits through the brokers at Cooper, we buy real estate over market value so we clean lots of money, but, and here’s the good part, when the stock prices fall short, we have short sellers on the ready to buy the paper, recovering the value, then it goes to offshore in Caymans via Cooper and we stay rich on both ends with money as clean as a nun’s cunt. See?”

Oh my god. It made sense. And it was ingenious. And very illegal.

“Which bank takes it on the back end?”

“CHB International, ‘course.”

Hong Kong.

“Just the one bank then?”

“Mmm hmmm.”

“And all the brokers are on the take, then?”

He stared laughing. “There are no brokers. They don’t exist … well, on paper they do, but not in the flesh. It’s all lawyers!”

“Who are the shorts, then?”

“That’s all they do, is buy the REITs once the value tanks. They work for Lawrence.”

Lawrence.

“How much money are we talking here? Say, annually?”

“Oh, God doesn’t even have that much money, honey! Billions. But you already know all this, so why you asking me?” Richard drained his glass. “I need another drink!”

So, that’s why Ian has had an iron fist on the HR records. He created employees that don’t exist. This cartel was funneling and cleaning billions through Cooper Securities right under Alexander’s nose. The money came in to buy overpriced REITs the cartel set up and when their stock prices fell, they had short buyers on the ready to buy the loss. I need to search uncooked data for cash deposits.

“What happens to the REITs once they lose their value?” inquired the solicitor as she pushed another drink toward Richard.

“You don’t really think Lawrence would allow the loss of money, do you? No, they had all this well
planned out. The REITs were usually apartment buildings in obscure places, making it easy for their stocks to plummet. But, they were sitting on zoning officials, you see, waiting for the short buys to go through before the zoning approvals were allowed to proceed, causing the real estate to skyrocket, and the stock prices go through the roof!"

Paula could see it clearly now. They had poured probably 10 years of preparation into getting the systems set up.

"And no one has caught on to this yet?" questioned Paula.

"Not yet, and you're going to make sure it stays that way. The fraud case is a red herring. Ian created false trades to use as bait to distract the Feds from what's really going on."

"So, Ian trumped up false evidence against Cooper Securities and fed it to the authorities …" It was more a statement than a question. And then dumped the mess in my lap. Son of a bitch!

Paula looked at Richard, whose head and shoulders were getting closer to the table top.

“So, who is Jordan? Your boss?”

“She’s NOT my boss … fucking Jordan, that bitch. I hate her. She’s gonna find out how much one of these days.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s waiting for me to call her and tell her I’ve threatened to kill Sophie if you fail!”

“Is someone watching Sophie?”

“OH yea. We’ve got our eye on her, alright. She’s our insurance policy.”

Sophie. She had to get her out of Manchester.

“And where is Lawrence?”

“Oh, you don’t want to mess with her. She’ll fucking shoot you for no reason. She’s in charge of all the money.”

Lawrence is a woman?

“Where is the cartel headquartered?”

“I thought you knew all this,” said a very drunk Richard, his head now on the table.

“I told you I only knew certain things. If I am to protect the operation from discovery, I need to know more,” soothed Paula.

“Well, mainly Hong Kong for the money and Mexico City cuz a tha drugs, and London because that’s where Lawrence is.”

“What kind of drugs are we talking?”

“Heroin, Marijuana and Methamphetamine. Stupid Americans keep us quite busy,” he was barely audible at this point.

“So, is the US the only market?”
“Nope, we are quite global. The US is just the biggest.”

Paula had to get back to the hotel. She had to figure out what to do about Sophie and start digging for proof to provide to the Feds, first to exonerate Cooper Securities and second, to upend the cartel scheme. It was 9:42. Richard was passed out on the table. She scooted over next to him and took his phone, unlocked it with his forefinger and scanned through, writing down numbers with a pen she’d borrowed from the waiter. There was no email. Burner phone. She then reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. There was only cash, no id. His pants pockets were empty, except for a small jade green dragon. She pocketed the trinket.

She wasn’t sure what he would remember of their conversation once he regained consciousness, so she wrote a note and stuck it in his jacket pocket.

Richard,

The sangria proved to be a bit too much for you and you passed out at the restaurant. I didn’t know at which hotel you’re staying, so I couldn’t get you back. The wait staff said they would take care of you. Perhaps we could meet up Friday evening and try again? This time, without the sangria. – Paula

Maybe this would throw him off the scent for a minute. She knew it was only a matter of time before someone at the cartel, likely Jordan, would catch on. Until then, she had a head start. She was frantic to get out of there, so she grabbed her things and gave the bartender another $100, thanked her, and paid the bill with Richard’s cash. She told the bartender to call the police to come gather Richard. He would do quite well sleeping it off in the drunk tank, and it would give Paula the advantage of time if he couldn’t access his phone.

She hailed a cab and headed back to the hotel. On her ride back, she called the airline. The first flight she could catch didn’t leave until 7:20am. She booked herself on it, hoping it wouldn’t flag an alert to those following her every move. It would give her the time to find the proof she needed though, if she got to work immediately. Once she got back to London, she could figure out how best to handle things. But, what about Sophie? How was she going to keep her safe?

She asked the taxi driver to make a quick stop. She ran into the electronics store and purchased 4 flash drives, then got back into the cab and headed off to the Four Seasons.

Paula made her way back up to her room and was quite happy to find Mark still there. She hesitated for a minute … could she trust him? She had no choice.

“Hey, Paula! How was dinner?” inquired her friend. “I’ve got what you wanted. Seems Jessica N. Warren traveled a LOT. She was in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Kabul, Johannesburg, New York and –“

“Mexico City,” finished Paula.

“Right. How did you know that?”

“Let’s just say my dinner was very fruitful for information. Ok, I’ve pretty much worked out what’s going on, now I need to find the proof, and you’re going to help me.”

“Wait, there’s more,” offered Mark. I searched for more aliases and she has quite a few. So, I looked for passports and connections. Turns out she sits on the board of trustees for more than two dozen real estate companies under the name, JN Lawrence. When I searched that name for wire transfers to offshore banks, turns out this woman is beyond loaded.”

Nicole Walker is Lawrence.
Well, you’ve been quite busy, haven’t you? Excellent work, Mark! But, we have a lot more to do. I’ll be right back,” said Paula, as she headed into her bedroom to change her clothes. She pulled off her pantsuit and put on sweats and a t-shirt. She removed her jewelry and stopped as she unclasped her charm bracelet. *Oh, my love. I’m so sorry I got you into this.*

She returned to the living room, opened the mini bar and made them both a drink. “Ok then, let’s get busy.”

They spent hours going through the network drives under Evelyn’s credentials, piecing together HR files, bank transfers, trades, emails, memo’s, requisitions, cash deposits, IT approvals, pay stubs, revenue statements, balance sheets, accounting records and shareholder records. Paula put the information onto a flash drive, then made 3 copies.

“I’m going to have to give you one of these, Mark. I hate involving you, but I have no choice. This cartel is serious business. They’ve threatened me and Sophie, but they don’t know anything about you, and I want to keep it that way. I am going to keep in touch via the email address you created for me. If you don’t hear from me everyday via that email for a week stretch, then you will have to go to the SEC. I have written everything down so all you have to do is get that flash drive to one of the investigators. Do you understand?”

“Well, if I don’t hear from you, will that mean …” he trailed off.

“Likely. But, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I am now equipped with information, and that makes me powerful, but also dangerous. And they will do what they can to stop me. You will be questioned, Mark, and you just play dumb, no matter what they say. You know nothing! And that will keep you safe. And cover up all our tracks. That will make it much harder for them.” Paula looked at her watch, it was half 2. “You need to get home. My flight is in a few hours, and I need to call Sophie and pack.”

Mark gathered his things and headed for the door. He stopped and turned to face Paula. “Paula, good luck with all this. It’s been a real pleasure getting to know you. I am going to pray that everything works out and I will see you again, someday.”

“Oh, Mark. Come here,” said the solicitor. She pulled him into a big hug. “You have been so instrumental in this. I could never have gotten to this information without you. Thank you. And I promise, once everything has settled, I will be in touch. Now go. And please, keep yourself safe.”

Paula reached for her phone and sent Sophie a text.

*I need to talk to u, immediately! Call me on the burner phone after you’ve ditched ur bugged phone*

Sophie was out for a run, trying to shake off a feeling of panic she’d had all morning. Paula had not called her back after her dinner last night, despite Sophie asking her to, so she must have gotten back to the hotel late. She would wait until Paula got to the office, then she would text her. She also couldn’t get rid of the hurtful feelings she harbored from both her lover and her mother from the day before. Paula had ignored her pain and blew off her concerns about the mountain they still had to climb when it came to Sally, but Paula didn’t even seem to care. She was completely consumed with Ian Walker and his stupidity. He was probably just making sure Paula didn’t take his dumb job! She continued to run, her feet pounding the ground rhythmically, as her mind tried to get her anger under control. She loved Paula so much, maybe too much, and it just pissed her off that Paula always had all the power in their relationship. Why did she always seem to have the last word about things? She
basically told Sophie she could not come to New York, despite her repeated pleas. It felt like Paula controlled her life. But Sophie allowed her to, so maybe it was partly her fault for always listening to everything her girlfriend said. *Just keep running, Sophie. It'll help clear your head.*

She stopped again on the Red Rec, checking her pulse while she jogged in place. Again, she got the feeling someone was watching her. She looked around, but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. It was probably nothing, just her imagination. She resumed her run, wondering why she had not heard from Paula. She checked her phone for the time – 9:12am – *It’s only just after 4am in NY. I’ll just have to be patient. Hope she’s not hung over.*

Paula waited, but she heard nothing from Sophie. If she didn’t call soon, Paula would. She pulled out her suitcase and began to pack. As she was placing her folded clothes into her case, she noticed a small package tucked up under one of the elastic bands. She pulled it out, unfurled it and found a note. It was from Sophie.

“I bought this for you while we were at Harrod’s but didn’t have time to give it to you. It has double meaning now. 😊 I love you! Sophie”

Paula unwrapped the white tissue paper and found a charm to go on her bracelet – it was Big Ben. *Some rather nice memories, I’d say.*

She grabbed her phone and dialed Sophie’s burner phone again. No answer. *Where the hell is she?*

“Baby, it’s me. I need to talk to you. Call me back, as soon as possible.”

Paula placed the charm securely on her bracelet and put it on her left wrist. Then finished packing. Her room service arrived, and she ate while she waited for her lover to call.

Six miles later, Sophie finished her run and headed home for a much-needed shower. She ran up the stairs to her room and started stripping her clothes off. She heard her second phone beeping. Paula had called. *Why is she calling so early over there? She’s up at the crack of dawn, as usual. I’ll call her after my shower.*

Paula finished her food and still no Sophie. *God, please let her be okay.* She had to leave for the airport. She’d call once she was on her way. She grabbed her suit bag, her brief case and her other case and made her way downstairs to check out. As she entered the lobby, she looked around to see if anyone was watching her. There were only a few people in sight. *Maybe they’ve not caught onto my departure yet. Richard is likely still in jail.*

The solicitor checked out and had the bellman hail her a cab for Newark Airport. Her flight left in just over 2 hours. Where the hell was Sophie? She sat back as the cab pulled away and dialed Sophie again. No answer. She dialed her other phone. No answer. The solicitor began to panic. *They must have her. Oh god, Richard has alerted them somehow that he spilled his guts and they’ve taken Sophie. Her breathing became erratic and she thought she might pass out. What do I do? Oh, god, what am I going to do? Her phone started to buzz and Sophie’s face lit up the screen.*

“Sophie!!?” Paula nearly screamed.

“Babe, what’s wrong? Are you okay? You sound like you’re crying.”
“Oh, thank god. Sophie, are you ok? Where have you been? I’ve been calling your for well over an hour!”

“I went for a run and forgot to take that phone with me. Then, when I got home I needed a shower. What’s going on, Paula? You sound panicked.”

“So much has happened, Sophie. You need to listen and listen carefully. I don’t want to scare you, but you’re being followed.”

“What, how?”

“Just listen! Things are dangerous for us both, so I want you to meet me tonight at 10pm at our charmed place. Do you understand me?”

“At our what? I don’t …” Sophie realized Paula thought their phones were compromised and she was being careful. Our charmed place.

“Sophie, do you understand what I’m saying? I got the present you left in my suitcase. I love it. Please meet me there tonight and I will explain everything.”

Big Ben! “Yes, I understand. I’ll meet you there. Babe, are you ok?”

“I will be once I see you. I love you.”

Sophie’s heart was beating heavily. She checked her phone for the time. She knew Paula would not do this without good reason. Sophie was just going to have to pack a bag and somehow sneak over to the garage where she parked the clunker. It would take her about 4 hours to drive to London, so she had some time to get herself together and arrange to disappear.

Paula’s plane departed on time, without incident. There was no one sitting next to her this time, which was a good sign, but didn’t mean she didn’t have company. She requested to sit at the back of the first-class cabin, so she could keep an eye on all the passengers and could see if anyone was particularly trying to keep an eye on her. She, again, put her brief case on the floor and placed her feet on top of it. This was going to be the longest flight of her life. All she wanted was to get to Sophie and make sure she was safe.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

A panicked Paula returns from New York.

Sophie walked herself over to Speed Daal to talk with Yasmeen about being gone again. She hoped it wouldn’t take too much explanation and that her boss would be understanding. She couldn’t very well tell her the truth, so she made up a lie about Paula being ill. This story would work for everyone, she realized. So, she let everyone know she would be in London for a few days, then headed home to pack a bag. She grabbed what she needed, then snuck out the back door and down the ginnel so she could creep behind the Kabin and over to the garage where Paula’s car was parked. She opened the door, climbed in and drove off. She kept her eyes peeled for anyone following her. She knew from Joe to take lots of turns and change lanes to lose a tail. So, she drove around the backstreets of Manchester for about an hour before she hit the M6 and headed south toward her destination.

Paula was too paranoid to sleep soundly. Every time she drifted off, something would startle her wide awake. She tried a glass of wine to settle her nerves, but nothing seemed to take the edge off the realization that she had accidentally gotten entangled in the money laundering scheme of an international drug ring.

As she flew, she pondered her next move, trying to figure out how the hell to keep everyone involved safe. She had to reach Sophie as quickly as she could, and hopefully without being tailed. They were keeping tight tabs on Paula, but she wasn’t convinced they knew she was onto their scheme. She knew from Richard that she was under surveillance to insure she was doing her job and that the fraud charges didn’t interfere with their laundering operation, and, provided that happened, she would be okay. What they didn’t know was that a drunken Richard, professionally jealous and disgruntled, had let the veil completely slip and basically filled in all the missing pieces Paula had been searching for. With that information, she was then able to find exactly what she needed to sink their ship, and that information was sitting on a flash drive nestled deep in her jeans pocket, right next to the dragon trinket that seemed to be some kind of calling card.

Paula had no idea how far behind her they were, or how much time she did or did not have to expose their crimes. It all really depended on how much of their conversation Richard remembered. The fact that she left him, passed out, on the table of the restaurant, didn’t bode well for her. She hoped the restaurant staff had called the police and that Richard had spent the night detained and unable to contact Jordan or anyone else. It was dumb luck that she encountered him at just the right time as his personal jealousy and insecurity got the better of him. Richard spilled a lot of information in his drunken hubris. Plying him with double strength sangria turned out to be a genius move on her part. Poor man didn’t know what hit him, and she was hoping against hope that his memory would fail him once he came to.

Paula still wasn’t sure what her next move would be. She had lined up the evidence on the flash drive that would bring to light the entire operation, but she knew once that information came out, the cartel would kill her, and likely Sophie. But, would they have any idea that she was the culprit? If
she could remain anonymous, keeping up the ruse that she was simply a lawyer in charge of the fraud case against Cooper Securities, and do that job to their satisfaction, she and Sophie would be safe. It was a big “if” but it was her only hope.

She knew what she had to do.

Sophie drove into the night, keeping an eye on all traffic behind her, making sure she didn’t spot a tail. It all seemed to be clear, but Paula had told her she was being watched and she hadn’t noticed, so she could be wrong about this. She looked at her phone, 7:47pm. A couple more hours and she could hold Paula in her arms and find out what was going on. Sophie hadn’t heard too much out of her partner this week, so she assumed the trip to New York had been futile. She did know that her IT contact, some young bloke called Mark, had helped her in some ways, but, again, Sophie was clueless about what had Paula so panicked. It was very out of character for her to behave so emotionally, so Sophie knew something big must have happened to incite such panic in her lover and cause her to cut the trip short and fly home suddenly. It was obvious that they were both still being listened to, by Ian Walker no doubt, hence the cryptic message for them to meet at Big Ben. Sophie sighed heavily, a feeling of doom clutching at her chest. All she wanted was for Paula to be okay and for them to be out of this fucking mess. She had only just started to feel like her life was getting on track, then this happened. Would the pair ever just have a normal, boring existence like most people? Sophie longed for a humdrum day at work followed by dinner, some telly, some cuddles and some sex. The thought of her naked lover shot a pulse to her center causing her to shift in her seat to quash the feeling. They had been together for nearly six months, well, on and off, but her desire for Paula had not wavered one little bit. In fact, if anything, the more they had sex, the more she wanted her. It had been Sophie’s experience that over time, her desire to be physical waned while the emotional connection commanded the attention of the relationship. But the bond she had with Paula was so strong that she wanted her all the bloody time. Even when she was angry or hurt with her partner she still found her overwhelmingly desirable. Perhaps this was Karma making up for the heartache she’d suffered too young.

Sophie shook herself back to reality and focused on the road ahead. Time seemed to be dragging by, each kilometer taking forever. She thought maybe Paula would call her once she landed, but she hadn’t heard from her. She does have to go through customs though. Just keep moving, Sophie. You’ll be with her soon.

Paula made it through customs and was heading toward her flat. She couldn’t find a way around that. She knew it would alert Ian to her return sooner than she wanted, but she had already concocted a story to cover her early arrival. She would drop her luggage off at home, then make her way over to Big Ben via Westminster Station, where hopefully, Sophie would be waiting.

The solicitor had planned out how she was going to have to play out the rest of this nightmare, and with a lot of luck, she might be able to pull it off. But first, she had to get to Sophie. The cab pulled up at her flat and an unfamiliar face greeted the car, opening the door for Paula. She exited the car and the cab driver opened the boot for her to retrieve her luggage.

“Where is Edward?” inquired the solicitor as she pulled her briefcase into her hand.

“I’m afraid he’s under the weather, Miss …”

“Paula Martin, 2401.”
“Miss Martin. I am Phillip. I am happy to bring your bags up for you.”

“Thank you, Phillip. I appreciate the assistance. Uh, will Edward be off for long?”

“Not sure, ma’am. The agency didn’t provide that information to me. Just said he was ill.”

Paula just nodded as they entered the lift. She didn’t know if Phillip was a new player in the never-ending game or if he was just a doorman. She hoped the latter. Maybe Ian wouldn’t hear of her arrival. Maybe she had some time.

Sophie used the GPS to guide her into downtown London. She was doing well for time as she had about half an hour to find a place to park and make her way to the tower. London was bustling for a Thursday evening, with traffic and pedestrians moving around hurriedly, all the sights and sounds of the city a bit of a distraction. Sophie drove around, looking for the best parking, until she finally came upon a side street. She saw a car pull out of a space on the street, so she managed to snap the spot before anyone else could. Her parallel parking skills weren’t the best, but she took her time and managed to squeeze the Mercedes in without taking the bumper off. *Now, I just need to find Paula.*

Sophie locked the car and got her bearings. She could see Big Ben towering over the area, so she headed off in the right direction. Butterflies started bouncing around in her stomach as she got closer, the thought of holding Paula driving her feet forward, step by step, one after another, until she reached her destination - 9:52pm. Sophie stood at the base of the monstrous clock, leaned against the locked gate, and waited.

Paula was running late due to a backup on the Metro. She knew if Sophie was there, she’d wait, but she hated worrying her. Finally, the train pulled in to Westminster Station and Paula nearly ran out of train, up the stairs and out into the cold night air. Big Ben was directly in front of her across the street. There was a lot of pedestrian traffic on both sides of the street, but Paula stood still and scanned the area, trying to find Sophie. She couldn’t see her. *Maybe she’s not here yet. I should have brought at least one phone with me.* Paula moved her way to the cross walk and shuffled past people until she found herself on the other side of the street. Once again, she began scanning the crowd for Sophie. She walked frantically toward the river, but Sophie was nowhere to be found. She checked the time – 10:08pm. *Sophie, where are you? Please be here.* She began to panic. She retraced her steps, heading away from the river, looking up at the giant tower piercing the night sky. Then, she stopped. She thought she heard her name. She began to yell, “Sophie? Sophie, where are you?”

Paula turned her head to listen, trying to follow the sound. “Paula!” She looked around frantically, trying to find her, then she caught sight of Sophie coming toward her, “Paula, I’m here. I’m right here!” Sophie ran into Paula’s arms and held onto her, wrapping her arms fully around her lover. “Oh, babe, I’m right here.”

Paula held her tight, feeling a flood of relief fill her senses. “Oh, Sophie, thank god you’re okay!” As they held each other, the immense stress that Paula had been carrying with her broke through and the solicitor began to sob, her body shaking in Sophie’s arms.

“Babe, it’s okay. Everything is okay. I’m right here and I’m safe and you’re safe,” soothed Sophie, rubbing her back. She had never seen her lover in this state before. Usually, Paula was a pillar of strength and composure, but at the moment, she was exhausted, emotionally raw and terrified. “Shhh, babe, it’s okay.”
Paula pulled out of their embrace and looked at Sophie, tears still spilling from her eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m just so relieved that you’re here and you’re alright. I thought maybe …” the solicitor trailed off, her throat thick with fear, trying to push the awful thought from her mind.

Sophie lifted her hand to cup Paula’s cheek and wiped the tears away with the pad of her thumb, then leaned in and kissed her partner sweetly on the lips. “You listen to me, right? Nothing is going to happen to me. I promise. We’re together now, and no one is going to hurt me.”

Paula just nodded her head, more tears spilling onto her cheeks.

“C’mon, babe. You’re shivering. We need to get you somewhere warm.” Sophie wrapped her arm around Paula’s shoulder and started walking back toward where the car was parked. “Let’s get to the car and then you can tell me what’s going on. I assume from the state of ya, that it’s way more serious than we thought.”

“That’s a rather huge understatement, I’m afraid,” said the solicitor as she grasped Sophie’s hand in her own, following her as they made their way through the small streets. “Just don’t let me go, yea?”

“Never,” grinned Sophie softly as she pulled Paula’s hand up to her lips, pressing the softness against her knuckles.

They reached the Mercedes, able to finally get out of the cold wind coming from the Thames. Sophie assumed her position as driver, not even giving Paula a choice in the matter. She turned and looked at her lover, “Now, tell me what the bloody hell has happened that’s got you in such a state!”

“I promise, I’ll tell you everything, but first I want to get somewhere completely safe and off the grid. We can’t be too careful. I left my phones at the flat. Give me both your phones. You’ve been using the audio jammer, right?”

Sophie nodded her head, then handed them both to Paula. She pulled the back off one and used her fingernail to pull the bug out. She rolled the window down and flung it out into the street. Then she pulled the battery from the burner phone, got out of the car and placed the phone behind the front tire of the car for the inevitable crunch it would make when Sophie backed over it. She used the GPS to program in an address, looked at Sophie and said, “Drive!”

Sophie did as she was instructed, and maneuvered the Mercedes out of the tight spot and onto the road. “Where are we going, babe?”

“Somewhere safe, with good memories,” said Paula, leaning back in her seat and releasing a huge breath, happy to be moving along the streets of London, away from the monsters, if only for a short time. She put her hand on Sophie’s knee to anchor her emotions and center her thoughts. Sophie liked knowing that Paula needed her.

Sophie followed the directions on the GPS and pulled up in front of the boutique hotel they’d stayed in that one afternoon a few weeks prior. She loved the sentiment. They valeted the car and went inside. Paula grabbed Sophie’s hand and led her to the lift as she’d already gotten them a room and there was no need to check-in. Once the pair were secluded in their room, away from everything, Paula once again pulled Sophie into her arms and held her tight, just needing to feel her. The older woman let out a long and cleansing breath, then moved to face her lover, holding Sophie’s head gently with her hands. She stared into her partner’s eyes and said in a whisper, “I love you,” then leaned in and brought their mouths together. The kiss was passionate, but not lustful. It was home.

Sophie pulled out of the kiss, not wanting to get carried away before she got an explanation from Paula. “Babe, as much as I would love to tear your clothes off and make love to you, we have got to
“I know. I’m sorry. You’re right,” said the solicitor as she moved over to the mini bar to make herself a much-needed drink. “I’ve not slept much in the last 48 hours. I’m just … I don’t know where to begin.”

Sophie walked over to Paula and took the small bottle from her hands, “You, sit. I’ll make you a drink.”

Paula nodded her head, her eyes bleary, her body weary. She kicked off her shoes and settled onto the bed, her back against the headboard, supported by fluffy white pillows. Sophie handed her a bourbon on the rocks. “Sorry, babe. No burnt orange.” Paula smiled sweetly at her, loving the fact that Sophie knew her so well.

“Make yourself one and come sit here with me,” she said, patting the bed next to her as she sipped her drink, allowing the bitter liquid to coat her mouth and trickle down her throat.

Drink in hand, Sophie placed herself next to her partner, put her spare hand on Paula’s thigh and said, “Now, tell me everything.”

Over the next hour, Paula went through things day by day, detail by detail, explaining it all in a painstaking manner, downing a few more drinks in the process. All Sophie could do was sit and listen. She wondered how Paula had kept her wits about her so well, not imploding under the immense stress of the past few days. It astounded the young brunette how quickly life could change. Just weeks ago, Sophie was posting a letter to Paula, begging for a chance to continue their lives together, and now, here she was, sitting in a London hotel, hiding away from murderers and drug dealers, trying to remain safe and find a way out of a nightmare they had been unwillingly dragged into. Paula was beginning to finally relax. Perhaps she just needed to talk it out, get everything out of her brain and into the air where they could break things down.

The pair were now laying on the bed, facing one another, discussing what would come next.

“So, we’ve got to go to the police, Paula. This is too big for us to handle on our own,” pushed Sophie.

“Yes, I know we do, but I have to be extremely careful. If they’ve been orchestrating this operation for 10 years or so, it’s a well-oiled machine, and they likely have the police in their pocket. I am going to have to evaluate which agency is safest to deal with.” Paula became pensive, furrowing her brow. “In fact, I need to determine if this puts me at risk to lose my license to practice.”

“What do ya mean?”

“As I legally represent Cooper Securities, this information may fall under client privilege, and I could be held responsible for violating that if I turn in evidence against them,” said Paula, thinking out loud more to herself than to Sophie.

“Well, that’s ridiculous! They’re criminals, Paula.”

“That’s not the way the law works, I’m afraid. Everyone is entitled to a proper defense, regardless of guilt. I’m just not sure if I am legally liable for all the clients at Cooper Securities. I need to make a call. Hand me your phone,” she instructed Sophie.

“Babe, it’s after 1am. Don’t you think you should make that call tomorrow?”

“I’m not thinking straight, am I?”
“Babe, you’re completely fried. You need some sleep, and when is the last time you ate? You’re skin and bones!” exclaimed Sophie. “Let’s just table this for now and go to bed. We can talk it all out again tomorrow, once you’ve rested and eaten. Come on, take your clothes off,” instructed Sophie, pulling Paula to sit up. She helped her remove her clothes, leaving her just in her panties and pulled back the covers, tucking her under the duvet. Sophie removed her own clothes, turned off the lights, then snuggled up behind Paula, spooning her, holding her close. She whispered in her ear, “get some sleep, okay? I’m right here and I’m not leaving you, ever.” It didn’t take much more than a minute and Sophie could tell Paula had relaxed into sleep, her breathing slow and rhythmic. Poor baby, you just carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, don’t ya? Well, I’m here now, and you don’t have to do that alone anymore.

xx

A stream of bright light crept its way through a crack in the black out curtains of the hotel room. Sophie stretched and yawned and grabbed her phone to see the time – 8:54am. Paula lay sleeping peacefully next to her, her face calm, her breathing steady. She looked like an angel to Sophie. She reached over and swept some of the hair from Paula’s eyes, admiring how truly beautiful her partner was. She wanted to wake her and make love to her, let her know how much she loved her, but she knew Paula needed to rest as long as her body would allow.

I should go out and get some breakfast. Sophie slipped out of bed quietly, not wanting to wake Paula, and got dressed. She rummaged around for the room key and grabbed her phone and some money and headed out in search of good strong coffee.

The smell of coffee and bacon roused a sleeping Paula, who sat up a bit disoriented to her surroundings. She scratched her head and pushed the hair out of her face, looking around to get her bearings, the sheet dropping to her waist exposing her naked torso.

“Now that’s a beautiful sight, I must say,” smirked Sophie, who was sitting on the small sofa, drinking her coffee and eating her sausage butty.

“What time is it?” questioned the woozy solicitor.

“Nearly ten, you sleepy head! Here, eat and I got you a large coffee, extra cream.”

Paula smiled widely at her love, “YOU are my hero, Sophie Webster!”

“Yea, I know. That’s why you love me … I know what you need, when you need it,” replied the young brunette, mouth full of food.

Paula pulled on a shirt and inhaled the scent of her coffee before taking a sip. “Oh, that’s flaming heaven! Hand me that butty … I’m starved.” She moved to sit next to Sophie and bit into her sandwich with fervor.

“Someone’s feeling better! I didn’t know how long you were gonna sleep, but I dare not wake you because you so needed that, babe. And can I just say how sexy you look with the pillow seam imprinted across your face,” laughed Sophie, partially telling the truth.

“Oh, really? Well, that’s just attractive,” said Paula sarcastically, taking another huge bite of her food. “Good thing you love me for more than my smooth face, right? C’mere you!” laughed Paula as she kissed Sophie playfully. “Mmmm, you have sausage? Can I have a bite of that, too?”

“Hey, get off my sandwich, you hog,” Sophie said, holding it out of Paula’s grasp.
“Oh, I will have some of that,” threatened Paula, leaning over Sophie’s body, trying to grab the sandwich.

Sophie pulled it further out of reach, laughing and shouting, “Oh, no you don’t. That’s mine and you can’t have it!”

Paula saw her prime opportunity and began to tickle Sophie’s vulnerable ribcage. Sophie started to scream, pulling her arm down protectively to her ribs, her body jerking instinctively, “noooooo, Paula, that’s not fair, you cheater!”

“No one ever said I play fair,” laughed Paula, continuing to prod her fingers into Sophie’s side, enjoying the squeal coming from her lover.

“Please stop, babe!” howled Sophie, trying desperately to catch her breath while squirming under Paula’s fingers. “Oh my god, I can’t …”

They suddenly fell off the sofa and onto the floor, laughter overwhelming them both, Sophie right on top of Paula. Then, something shifted in the air and they looked at each other, laughter abating, sandwiches forgotten. A seriousness consumed them both and Sophie whispered, “Babe …”

Paula’s hand grabbed the back of Sophie’s neck and pulled her down, crashing their mouths together, their pent-up need breaking free. The hunger that consumed them had nothing to do with food. The pair fused their bodies together, kissing fervently, deeply, hands roaming.

“As much as I want you to take me right here, I really think it wise for us to move onto the bed, sweetheart,” directed Paula.

Sophie stopped what she was doing, looked up from the floor where she was pinning her lover, and quickly nodded her head without saying a word. She moved up and pulled Paula from the carpet. “No one likes rug burn,” breathed Sophie, wrapping her arms around her partner while placing her lips on her neck, walking them slowly over to the edge of the bed.

Sophie moved her hand up under Paula’s shirt to squeeze at her naked breast, delighting in the feeling of her nipple hardening at her touch. They both moaned as they continued to explore one another. Paula unbuttoned Sophie’s top to open it up so she could get her lips on the bare skin of her chest, pushing the clothing off her shoulder, kissing along her collarbone and down her arm as her fingers lightly grazed her. Sophie fought through her haze to get Paula’s loose top up over her head, exposing her torso. She pushed Paula gently onto the bed and latched her mouth onto her nipple, sucking it gently as she squeezed the flesh sensually. She absolutely loved Paula’s breasts and would never tire of how they felt in her palms and under her tongue. Paula moaned with pleasure at Sophie’s ministrations, her center getting wetter with every lick and flick of her tongue. Paula took back some control by pulling Sophie up to kiss her, their tongues sliding against one another.

“Mmmm, you’ve put such a spell on me, young Webster. I literally want you all the time …” Paula whispered, pulling Sophie back to kiss her again, slowly wrapping her arms around Sophie’s back, where she unfastened her bra and pulled it away from her body. The older woman pushed Sophie’s leggings slowly down her hips and backside, realizing Sophie hadn’t put on any panties. “You’re a very bad girl,” smiled Paula against Sophie’s mouth, plunging her tongue deeper, rolling her over then sitting back to pull the remaining clothing off her lover. Paula looked at Sophie in the sunlight streaming through the window, laying completely naked and exposed for the taking. Her mouth was full and swollen, her nipples were hard, her belly was smooth and taut, her center glistening with wetness – she was the picture of perfection. “You’re so beautiful,” she whispered. Paula pushed her own underwear off, then lay herself on top of her lover, their bare breasts rubbing together. She put her mouth to Sophie’s ear and breathed, “you are my everything and I am going to show you how
much I love you.”

Sophie was enchanted with her lover and would literally give her anything she wanted. “You have no idea what you do to me, do you?” asked the younger of the lovers, positioning Paula’s body between her legs. “My body is on fire for you, babe, only you … always you,” she breathed out as Paula’s mouth assaulted her. “Can you feel how wet you make me?” Sophie grinded her center into her lover. “You’re the most remarkable woman I have ever known, and I don’t ever want anyone else to touch me, to feel me, to make me cum. No one, but you.”

Paula knew she would never feel about another woman the way she felt about this woman, the one in her arms, beneath her body, under her lips. She didn’t know how she had lucked into finding this extraordinary creature, who made her feel again, who made her see again, but she was going to cherish her. She drew back to look Sophie in the eyes, brushing her hair from her brow. She kissed her lips so sweetly, then said, “Come live with me, and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove, that valleys, groves, hills, and fields, woods, or steepy mountain yields.” She placed her lips back to her lover’s and kissed her with such feeling tears stung the back of her eyes. She was discovering, day by day, what loving someone totally and completely meant.

Sophie’s heart was beating rapidly, not only because of her arousal, but from the words her lover had just spoken. “That was beautiful, babe. I didn’t know you were a poet.” Again, the lovers had shifted from pure lust into a realm of pure connection.

“It’s from one of my favorite poems. Christopher Marlowe – The Passionate Shepherd to His Love. It’s how I feel about you. Words fall short for me so often in letting you know, so I had to borrow from a genius,” Paula smiled. “Sophie, I know that making decisions whilst in the middle of passion is never a good idea, but I can’t help myself.” She kissed her again, gently, sensually, then continued, “But I know more than anything that I don’t want to be away from you any longer. I need you with me. I don’t feel whole without you, and when I thought they had hurt you, I …” Paula paused and took stock of her feelings, making sure she wasn’t just responding to her passion. “Sophie, I want you to move to London and be here, with me, all the time.”

Sophie was taken aback by her lover’s profession. It’s all she’d wanted to hear since they reunited. “Paula, I don’t know what to say.”

“Please, just hear me out. I know your job is important to you and I don’t want to disrupt your life or belittle what you’re doing, but there would be so many more opportunities for you here, and frankly, I am finding it difficult to live without you.” The solicitor looked her young lover straight in the eye and grinned widely, “I need you, Sophie. I need you here, with me. Now, I know things are really crazy right now, but the thought of not seeing you every night makes me so unhappy. I don’t want you to go back to Weatherfield. Here, I can protect you and knowing that I can be with you, hold you, make love to you every night …” Paula’s words drifted off.

“Babe, I –“ Sophie started.

“Wait. Don’t answer now. Just take some time to think about it, okay …“

“Paula, stop!” Sophie commanded. She put her hands to her lover’s face, and gave her a long and sensual kiss, trying to convey how much she loved her. “I love you so much, babe. More than you know, or I could ever make clear to you. I want nothing more than to make you happy.”

“What does that mean, though?

“Babe, that means I love you and want to be here with you, always. Always.”
“So, you’ll …”

Sophie smiled widely and rolled on top of her lover, “It means that I want to be with you, no matter where it is. I would move to the moon to be with you. So, yes, of course, I will come live with you, here! Are you fucking kidding me? It’s like a dream come true. Besides, you need someone to take care of you! When I’m not here you work too much, and you don’t eat!”

“Really? You’ll come?” Paula laughed at the double entendre.

“Babe, really? You think I wouldn’t jump at the chance? You bet your sweet ass I’ll move in with you. You are my world and being away from you just puts my life, our life, together, on hold. That’s not what I want. I want you, to be with YOU, no matter where it is.”

“I know it might seem like I’m asking you to be with me because of this madness, but I want you to know that I’ve been thinking about this for a while, well, since I saw you on the train platform the first weekend you visited.”

“Babe, I really think we can make a go of this, I really do. We are good together and I think we both know that,” said Sophie, running her fingernails gently up Paula’s side.

“What about your mum?”

“What about her? She’ll just have to deal with it, won’t she? I’m a grown woman and I think it’s time I started making decisions that are best for me, for us, not for her or dad or Jack or Rosie or anyone else!”

“You know she’s going to kick off, and likely at me. It’s bad enough that I’m screwing her baby girl, now I’m robbing you from her. She’s not going to like this one little bit.”

“I don’t care, babe. You are the most important person in my life, not her. Not anymore.”

“I love you, Sophie Webster. And all I want to do is live the rest of my life with you by my side,” professed Paula, placing her lips on her lover’s, kissing her intensely.

“Well, you have me, babe. All of me. All the time, now,” Sophie smiled just saying it. “And right now, roomie, I am going to make love to you and make you feel so fucking good, you’ll never want to get out of this bed.”

“I certainly like the sound of that,” whispered Paula as Sophie latched her lips onto Paula’s neck, running her tongue along her collarbone.

The pair made love, enjoying each other carnally for over an hour, then finally just wrapped themselves together under the duvet. Sophie was running her fingers slowly across Paula’s ribs, letting the knowledge of them moving in together sink in. It made the young woman incredibly happy and she wished so much it was the only thing they had to worry with. But, the reality of their situation loomed large, and they were going to have to face what was next.

As Paula held Sophie close to her, she wondered to herself what was going to happen next. She had been able to get to Sophie and tuck away from the world, albeit only temporarily. They were going to have to return to the flat soon, and Paula to work, to face Ian Walker and the trouble he posed for them both. Paula’s first order of business was to try to discover what the cartel knew of her conversation with Richard and if she and Sophie were in imminent danger. If she had been rumbled, she would have to go to the authorities immediately. If not, it would give her more time to plan things out.
“Babe, you okay?” asked Sophie, pulling Paula from her thoughts.

“Oh, sweetheart, I am fantastic!” replied the solicitor, hugging Sophie tight. “You have made me so bloody happy.” She paused for a moment, “I only wish we didn’t have this black cloud hanging over us.”

“You and me both! But, it’s all going to work out, I just know it will. We have a life to live where we are fantastically happy, so you and I are going to figure out what to do next, yea?”

“First thing is, I go back to work and evaluate where things are. Then I will know what to do next.”

“Are you going in today?”

“Yep. The more I think about it, the sooner I get in there and get a temperature on things, the better. Besides, it’s almost check-out time. So, get your incredibly sexy backside up! We have things to do.”

“I suppose you’re right. But promise me one thing, will you?”

“What’s that?”

“That you’re not going to try to do this on your own, thinking you’re protecting me? We need to be a team, you hear me?”

Paula wanted so badly to protect Sophie, but she knew she was going to need help, so she nodded her head in agreement. “I promise not to keep things from you. We will make decisions together, BUT, there may be times I am forced to do things before I have a chance to tell you, so you can’t get mad at me when that happens!”

“Okay, fair enough,” said Sophie. “Now, kiss me once more before we have to get back to the real world?”

Paula smiled at the young brunette, “I’d love nothing more than to kiss you,” said Paula, leaning over and covering Sophie’s lips with her own. If she didn’t have very important things to do, she would stay right where she was, and she’d make love to Sophie again and again. She allowed her passion to flare and she intensified the kiss, trying to show the woman in her arms just how much she loved her. And just before she reached the tipping point, she pulled away, her breathing heavy, her heart soaring.

“Oh boy, do I need a shower,” groaned Paula, the innuendo clear to her lover.

But before Paula could get the covers back, Sophie stopped her, pulling her back down to her, “Wait, you can’t kiss me like that then leave me hanging!”

“Sophie, we have to get moving. And I smell of sex and sweat and need a shower terribly. I promise to pick up right at this very place later on tonight when I get home.”

Sophie smiled with her whole face, “Home. Our home. Together. I really like the sound of that, babe. Okay, you’re off the hook this time Paula Martin, but you do that to me again and you will pay dearly, do you understand me?”

“Yes, dear.”

A nice hot shower later, Paula was feeling like a new woman. Her long sleep had rejuvenated her,
and she was ready to face the world again. Sophie had gone down to get the Mercedes from the valet, so Paula gathered their things and checked out of their favorite little getaway hotel. The sight of her beautiful partner sitting in the car, waiting for her, made her stomach flip with excitement. They were, for all intents and purposes, beginning their life together. They would have to travel back to Manchester soon to get Sophie’s things and to clear the air with her family, and that was one thing Paula was not looking forward to. She preferred facing Ian Walker over Sally Webster any day. But, Paula could not let Sophie face them alone. They would be a united front.

“C’mon, babe! What you waiting for? Time to get home,” shouted a smiling Sophie through the car window.

“You seem to be getting quite used to driving my car,” said Paula as she jumped in the passenger’s seat.

“Mmmm, maybe a little,” grinned Sophie, grabbing Paula’s hand and placing it on her own thigh. “But, I promise I will not get so attached that I don’t let you drive it every now and then,” laughed the young woman.

“Cheeky!”

“Off to the flat we go!” said Sophie, pulling out onto the road for their quick journey. “So, babe, what am I to do while you’re at work? Do you need me to do any research?”

“Yes, you can email Mark from that email address. Let him know I am back and we are both safe … to hold tight and I will be in touch. Oh, and touch base with Joe to see if he has any more information for us on Nicole Walker. I haven’t had a chance to catch him up on the JN Lawrence alias and the offshore account information. There are handwritten notes in my case at home. I’ll give you those to go through just in case I’ve missed something. You may have some questions or have some insights as I have been eyeball-deep in this stuff for so long.”

Paula looked over at a grinning Sophie. “What are you so happy about?”

“You keep saying ‘us’ and ‘we’ and I like it.”

Paula just chuckled at her lover and shook her head at how easy it was to make her happy. “Oh, and we need to make a plan about telling your mum and dad about your upcoming move.”

“Ugh, yea, I guess so. Let’s not talk about that just yet, yea?”

“Fine by me. Honestly, it’s not something I want to do either, but we have to face Sally sometime, love. Look, we both know what’s in store, so it’s best we are prepared for the onslaught. But at least we won’t have to listen to her protests for too long.”

A relieved Sophie pulled up to the parking garage, not wanting to have to think about the inevitable confrontation with Sally. They handled the details of parking the car and began the short walk over to the flat. The couple walked up to their building walking hand in hand, then Paula said to Sophie, “follow my lead and let me handle Thomas, ok?” Sophie nodded.

The couple walked into the vestibule of the building where Thomas greeted them.

“Ms. Martin! You’re back!” stated an obviously panicked Thomas.

“Yes, Thomas. Why are you shouting?”

“Uhm, well,” he stammered.
“Thomas? Is there a problem?” Paula could tell by his demeanor she wasn’t expected, which perhaps meant Ian had no idea she’d even left New York and Phillip was just a replacement for an ill Edward. Or it could mean something else was going on.

“I just wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow is all. Where are your bags? And why is Ms. Webster here?”

“Thomas, I don’t mean to be rude, but frankly, that’s none of your business! Now, if you’ll excuse us,” she finished, grabbed Sophie’s hand and headed for the lift, leaving a red-faced Thomas to feel embarrassed.

The lift dinged, and the doors enclosed the stunned couple. “What was that about?” asked Sophie.

“I’m not sure what to think. He’s never behaved that way before.”

“And what did you mean by follow your lead? You didn’t do anything –“

“He was acting so weird I forgot to make an excuse for your presence! It’s probably better that I just cut him off anyway.”

The lift door opened, and the pair stepped onto that landing to find the source of Thomas’ nervous behavior. Now, it made complete sense. No wonder Thomas was about to shit himself!
Sophie almost physically recoiled at the sight of Ian Walker standing outside the flat door, cell phone in hand, looking rather shifty.

“Ian, what are you doing here?” asked Paula, wondering if he had been in her flat.

“I could ask the same of you!” he gaslighted, anger evident in his tone. “Why aren’t you in New York? And why is Ms. Webster here?”

“That’s irrelevant to why you’re standing outside my flat, Ian,” questioned a perturbed Paula, opening the door.

“I came to make sure you were alright. Steve Spencer rang yesterday and said you didn’t come back into the office in New York and he hadn’t heard from you. And James Hardiman from the SEC said you’d left him a message bowing out of your scheduled meeting, stating personal reasons. I assumed I would hear something from you, but no, so I thought something serious might have happened. So, the first chance I got, I came to check on you.” His tone had softened into concern.

This was all plausible.

“What’s going on Paula? You look a bit tired. Are you in good health?”

Paula needed a good lie and fast.

“I was nearly assaulted Wednesday evening.”

“What do you mean, nearly? By whom?” Ian fired questions at her.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Ian. Just know I would not cancel such important meetings without good reason. I just wanted to get back home where I feel safe.”

“Yea, back to me!” interjected Sophie protectively.

“Did you inform the authorities?” questioned Ian.

“No, like I said, it nearly happened, but didn’t, and I just wanted to get away from it. I took the first
flight home I could get.”

Ian was silent for a moment, then spoke, “Well, I am glad you’re alright, Paula. I’m sorry you were frightened. If there is anything I can do, please let me know. I won’t expect you back in the office until Monday.”

“Actually, Ian, I was planning to come in this afternoon. I need to check in with Kylie and make a few calls, so …” said Paula.

“Well, don’t rush back. If you need the time, take it,” he said, checking his Rolex. “I have a meeting, so I am going to take my leave. Make sure you get your feet before returning to work, Paula.”

“Thank you, Ian. I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m feeling fine now. Like I said, I will be in later.”

“Plus, I’m here now and I’m planning to take care of her,” said Sophie. “She works too hard sometimes,” the young brunette added as a dig, getting a look from Paula.

Ian nodded his head then turned to leave and his cell phone began to ring. He viewed the screen, turned his back to Paula and Sophie and begrudgingly answered, “Hello <> yes, dear, I know <> I’m on my way in just a few moments <> yes, everything is fine, L <> I’ll be there soon <> yes, good-bye.” He looked up to see if Paula and Sophie were watching him. They seemed otherwise engaged with each other. “Good-bye ladies. Paula, perhaps I will see you later.”

“Was that your wife, Ian?” asked Paula, noticing he called her “L”

Ian hesitated to answer but realized he was on the spot. “Uh, yes, it was. I am due to meet her, and she was calling to see if I am on my way.”

“We should have dinner, all of us, since she’s in town,” said Paula. She wanted to meet the infamous Jessica Nicole Warren Walker, aka Lawrence. “How about this evening?”

Ian’s eyes widened just slightly. “Let me check with Nicole on that. Her schedule is very busy with all her charities and such. I will let you know later if I see you at the office.”

“Of course. Well, have a nice meeting, then. See you later, maybe.”

“Mmm hmm. Good-bye ladies.”

After the door closed, Sophie began to open her mouth, but Paula simply put her hand up to stop her. “Sophie, please don’t start!”

“But babe, what the hell? You know he was in here, likely going through your stuff, and what the heck was that whole assault thing? And since when do we want to socialize with flaming Nicole Walker Lawrence Jessica, whatever her name is???”

“Have you ever heard the phrase, keep your friends close and your enemies closer? I need to look her in the eye and see if I can read her. IF she knows that I know all the details of her operation, we are in danger and we will have to head straight to Interpol, BUT if she still thinks I am just working on the fraud case, we have some time! Now, she likely knows Richard wound up in jail in New York, so my assault story rings true, albeit without details. I didn’t tell you this, but he tried to persuade me into a tryst, so it wasn’t much of a stretch to –“

“HE WHAT?! Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“Because it didn’t matter, love. I would never cheat on you and it was an irrelevant detail.”
“Maybe to you, but not to me! If I ever see that bastard, I am going to –“

“Oh, just leave it Sophie. We have bigger fish to fry. For one, I need to get into the office. And you have some items on your to do list as well, so get on my laptop and get going, yea?”

“You can’t blame me for being upset, Paula. I just –“ Sophie shook her head.

Paula pulled a fuming Sophie into her arms and kissed her sweetly, trying to calm her down. “Listen, darling, nothing good is going to come from you being upset about something that meant nothing. The arsehole made a few passes at me and I shot him down every time. There was never, ever,” she pulled Sophie’s chin up with her finger, kissed her again, then continued, “ever, not even for a split second, a moment that I was tempted to be with anyone other than you. Not even with the beautiful bartender who looked very much like you,” she added, quirking her eyebrow. “Baby, the only woman I want, ever again, in my bed, is <kiss> you.”

Sophie wrapped her arms around her lover’s neck, pulling her into her and intensifying their kiss. Her head was swimming with the feeling of Paula’s tongue caressing hers and she wanted to place her mouth in a spot much lower on her body, but she knew they had things to do. She pulled away from Paula, “We should stop now, babe. I want our first time making love in our home not to be rushed.”

“Mmm hmm,” replied a very aroused Paula, eyes still closed, hands still holding on to Sophie’s warm body. She pulled back, “You’re right. I should go get dressed for work.”

She gave her partner one more kiss then retreated into the bedroom, leaving Sophie in need of a cold shower. She sat down on the couch with her laptop, placed the already active audio jammer out of her pocket and placed it on the table. Paula emerged 10 minutes later, dressed in her usual power suit and heels, new make-up, causing an already aroused Sophie to internally drool.

“Oh, god, babe, really?”

“What?” asked Paula, while placing her big hoop earring in her left ear, oblivious to Sophie’s dismay.

“Just get your sexy self out of this flat right now before I rip them clothes off ya.”

Paula giggled, then leaned down to press her lips to Sophie’s. “Bye, love. I’ll call you in a bit and let you know when I’ll be home. And we can pick up where we just left off, yea?”

“Yea, yea, yea … whatever. I can see now how difficult it’s gonna be living with you.”

“What do you mean?” said a concerned Paula.

“You’re never going to be early or on-time for work again. Just saying, babe. You’re too sexy for your own good and I am going to struggle letting you out of bed every morning.”

“Well, what if you have to get up first?”

“You know what I mean, missus. Now get going so you can get back.”

Paula winked at the woman she loved, but dare not kiss her again. “I love you, dear. See ya later. And, lock the door!” she chimed as she headed to work.

It was half 2 when Paula stepped into her office. Kylie was sitting in her usual spot, typing away. She looked up when Paula walked in, barely acknowledged her presence, then went right back to
her work, not a word said. Paula almost laughed. *What a bitch!* She put her briefcase down and
pulled out her laptop, firing it up, logged in and began to go through her inbox.

“Miss Martin?” came a voice from her doorway.

Paula looked up to see Kylie standing there. “Yes, Kylie.”

“How was your trip?”

Paula must have looked like a fish, sitting there with her mouth open, shocked that this personality-
less assistant of hers was making conversation. *Drug cartel needs some information apparently.*

“It was a useless waste of time, if I’m honest. The management of that office is in serious trouble and
I’m going to have a bitch of a time defending these charges because of the sloppiness of their record
keeping. Even the IT department needs help. They were useless!” Paula watched Kylie’s face
closely for reaction.

“Sorry it wasn’t more productive. You’re back earlier than planned,” baited the blonde.

*Stick to the vague story, Paula.* “I ran into some unpleasantness and needed to get back home,
besides I felt like I was wasting time there. How are things coming along here?”

“Fine. Nothing new to report. What kind of unpleasantness?”

“Look, Kylie, I really don’t want to talk about it. I misjudged someone’s character and it almost cost
me. And I’ll leave it at that. I do need to make some calls to the SEC though, so, if you wouldn’t
mind closing the door? Oh, and could I have some coffee, please?”

“Sure,” said an unsatisfied Kylie as she closed the door.

Paula wondered if Kylie knew Richard and what, if anything, he had said. He surely had been in
touch with Jordan, and Lawrence via Jordan. She pulled out her phone and listened to the recording
of their conversation again, trying to pull new information from it. As she was listening, her phone
chimed. *Probably Sophie.* She rubbed her head, feeling a headache coming on. Every time she felt
she’d made progress she would hit another obstacle. She had to get a pulse on things.

She looked at the text, surprised to see that it was from Ian.

*Nicole and I are available for dinner this evening if you’re up to it. Let me know and I will make
reservations for 7*

*Finally, I am going to meet the infamous Lawrence!*

*Yes, we would love to have dinner. Let me know where and Sophie and I will meet you there*  

She called Sophie straight away.

“Missing me already, babe?”

“Well, that’s a given, love. But that’s not why I’m calling! Listen, can you be ready for dinner out
with Ian and Nicole by half 6? You can wear the blue dress .”

“What?”

“You’re upset?”
“Why didn’t you call me first? Do you really think it’s a good idea to get that close to her? She’s basically threatened to kill us both, babe, so I don’t know why you’d want to sit and have a flaming meal with her!”

“Sophie, this is not a social thing, it’s an information mining opportunity!” she said in a low voice. “We have to do this if we have any hope of figuring out where things stand. Now I know it’s a bit scary, but we don’t have a choice, love. I will be home by 6 to get dressed. I’ll see you in bit, sweetheart.”

“Yea, ok. See ya later then.”

Sophie rolled her eyes as she hung up the phone. She didn’t have a good feeling about this dinner party. This crazy woman was dangerous, and she couldn’t believe Paula wanted to go sniffing around to see if whats-her-name still wanted them dead. Geesh, we’ve not even had a chance to heat up the sheets and we’re already disagreeing on things.

Paula came through the door right at 6 to find a freshly showered Sophie bouncing around their bedroom, music a little louder than Paula liked. She watched Sophie for a moment, smiling at her as she sang out loud and danced in front of the wardrobe. She grabbed the remote and turned the radio off, startling Sophie.

“Shit!” screamed Sophie, nearly jumping out of her towel. “Oh my god, you scared the crap out me, Paula!”

“Sorry, honey, but the music was so loud you couldn’t hear me. You really need to be more careful. Anyone could sneak up on you.” Paula pulled her into her arms and kissed the smooth skin of her shoulder, “You smell incredible, and I so wish I could just –”

“Yea, well you can’t because WE must go have dinner with a murderer!” bellowed Sophie, pulling out of Paula’s arms.

“Okay, so, call me crazy, but I am getting the impression that you’re a little angry about this dinner,” grinned Paula, pulling Sophie back to her.

“Well, can ya blame me?” asked Sophie, grabbing at her towel as it slipped further. “I think I’m PMSing.”

“Can I just get a hello kiss before we start fighting?” inquired the solicitor, inhaling Sophie’s scent again, moving her lips in to capture her lover’s.

“Mmmmm, you know I can’t resist you dressed like that, babe,” said Sophie as she kissed Paula again.

“Speaking of which,” replied the older brunette pulling away from her lover, “we both need to get dressed.” Paula pulled Sophie’s towel completely off, then slapped her backside playfully.

“I was getting dressed until you so rudely interrupted me!”

“Looked to me like you were practicing for Britain’s Got Talent,” laughed Paula, shedding her clothes, placing them on hangers, and trying to find something to wear.

Sophie was sat gawping at the sight of her partner, standing in just her bra and panties, wanting more than anything to throw her down on the bed and ravish her. “Why is it that we are always having to
go somewhere when all I want to do is fuck you?” whined Sophie, as she placed her naked body behind Paula, running her hands up her sides to cup both her breasts. “I know you want me,” she whispered in Paula’s ear.

Paula’s knees almost buckled, but she contained her composure, “Sophie, you have to stop that, please,” she begged. “You have no idea how much I want you right now, but –“

“Would it kill us to be a little bit late?” breathed Sophie, taking Paula’s earlobe into her mouth.

“I thought you didn’t want our first time to be rushed,” Paula barely whispered as Sophie unclasped her bra and bit at her back.

“Fuck me, babe. Please. I need you.”

All rational thought left Paula’s brain as she spun around in Sophie’s arms and kissed her furiously. They hurried over to the bed, bodies interlocked, hands feverishly touching. Paula pushed her thigh hard between Sophie’s legs, feeling the wetness coat her, reveling in her lover’s loud moan at the pleasure building in her body. There were no words, only sounds of delight as Paula delivered a deep and satisfying orgasm to Sophie, first with her mouth, then the final push with her fingers. The young brunette lay there, eyes closed, breathing deeply as she allowed the euphoric feeling to penetrate every cell of her body.

“Oh, dear lord, thank you for creating orgasms,” praised Sophie out loud, reaching for Paula who had rolled to the other side of the bed. “Babe, come here.”

Paula got up and headed for the en-suite, stopping at her dresser to grab new underwear, not saying a word.

“Babe?” Sophie realized Paula had retreated. “What’s the matter?” she asked as she got up and followed her lover into the bathroom. “Paula?” she said, looking on as her lover was pulling on a bra.

“Just leave it, Sophie. We need to get ready. We’re going to be late,” said an emotionless Paula.

“Wait, babe, are you mad at me?” asked a confused Sophie.

Paula continued to get ready, applying new make-up in the mirror. “Please get dressed,” shot a curt Paula.

“I am not getting anything until you tell me what the hell is going on! I don’t understand … you just gave me a great orgasm and now you’re spitting mad? I don’t get it. I was ready to return –“

Paula cut Sophie off, “Can we just get ready and talk about this later?”

“No, we cannot! If we are going to live together, Paula, we need to talk about things. I don’t flaming care if we are late to a dinner I don’t even want to go to –“

“And that’s what it always comes down to, isn’t it? If you don’t want to do something, then it’s importance becomes irrelevant. As long as Sophie gets her way …”

“Are you kidding me??” flared Sophie’s anger, her tone incredulous. “I get my way about 10% of the time, and those times I feel guilty as hell! Everything for the last couple of months has been about YOU and this fucking job and now about these stupid criminals! I love you so much it hurts, Paula, and I find myself wanting to do everything that I can to make YOU happy, not me! First, I had to wait to come visit my own partner for three weeks, no matter how much I needed to see you, I
played the good little patient girl and waited until I got invited. Then I got dragged into this crazy underworld with drug dealers and jade dragons, got my phone bugged by a maniac and started some clandestine life, using white noise jammers when I want to talk to you, being followed by god knows who, and looking over my shoulder all the time. Oh, then I’m told I cannot go to New York, no matter that I only wanted to be with YOU and try to help keep us both safe! Then I’m summoned to meet you here because you’re panicking, and you don’t tell me why, causing me a lot of distress, but I swallowed all of that, trying to make things between us work, because, honestly, the thought of living without you makes me just want to crawl inside myself and never come out! Paula, you treat me like a child, and I just can’t do it anymore. If that’s the way you see me, then we are in big trouble and this is never going to work. I know we are going to have obstacles to overcome because of the difference in our age, but I need to be your equal, your partner, your lover, not your incompetent immature piece of ass that you find you need to protect and coddle! And If I am only here to give you physical satisfaction, well, what does that make me really? Your personal prostitute? Well, I’ve got news for you, miss high-flying, self-important, arrogant lawyer, I mean more to myself than that and if that’s all you need from me, you’re going to have to find someone else to get you off!”

Paula stood there, looking at Sophie, letting the sting of what she just said wash over her. She visibly swallowed and blinked a few times. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything. She just stared.

“Right, well, I’ll pack my shit and head back to Manchester then.” Sophie marched herself into the bedroom and pulled out some clothes and began to get dressed. Wow, we were successful at living together for all of a few hours!

Paula followed Sophie, watching her throw her things into her small bag. She walked over and placed her hand gently on Sophie’s, stopping her motions. Sophie looked up, anger flaring in her eyes.

“Stop, please,” whispered Paula.

Shaking her head, Sophie shrugged her off. “Why should I, Paula. Give me one good reason.”

“Because I love you.”

“Huh! It’s going to take more than that, babe,” spat Sophie, her emotions raw.

“You scare me,” Paula barely whispered.

“I what?”

Paula sat on the side of the bed and looked at Sophie, “Being in love with you scares the absolute hell out of me.”

Sophie’s anger wasn’t mitigating. Months of pent-up emotion and frustration had finally broken through and she was being blatantly honest with her partner, and herself, about how she felt, no matter the consequence.

“Welcome to my world! Now you’re living where I have been for months. But I suspect that you’re afraid someone is going to kill me and then you’ll be left with the guilt. Whereas me, I am always afraid YOU are going to find some reason, again, to dump me and wash your hands of me for not being something you expect, leaving me to pick myself up off the floor. I can’t live with that feeling anymore, Paula. You either love me for who I am, flaws and all, or you let me walk away, no matter how hard it might be for you.”
Paula’s phone chimed, and they both looked over to where it sat on the bedside table.

“That'll likely be your dinner companion checking to see why you're late,” said Sophie, as she walked into the en-suite to gather any of her things she’d brought to London.

Paula remained where she was. She didn’t want Sophie to leave, but she didn’t know what to say to make her stay. Perhaps it would be for the best to cut Sophie loose, let her go back to Manchester and live her life. She would certainly meet someone her own age and fall in love again, have a family, have the things she deserved.

Sophie came storming out of the bathroom and went to the dresser to gather up the delicates she’d accumulated over the past few weeks. She threw them into the now bulging bag. “If I’ve left anything here, just throw it out,” said the young woman, her throat becoming thick with emotion.

Paula’s phone chimed again.

Sophie just shook her head. “Have a nice life, Paula,” and she headed for the door. Suddenly, she stopped short, turned around and said her final peace, “You know, I truly love you and it is going to take me quite some time to get over you, if I ever do, and over the life I think we could make together. But, at least I can walk away knowing that I gave everything of myself to make us work. I am brave enough to love you, Paula. But you, you’re a fucking coward!”

Something about that word was like a red-hot brand to Paula’s pride, igniting her soul, and her feet, into motion. Before Sophie could reach the door, she felt a hand on her arm, grabbing her and spinning her around to find an enraged Paula.

“You're going nowhere!”

Sophie, again, shrugged out of Paula’s grasp, her cheeks flooded with tears, hurt playing in her eyes as she looked at the woman she desperately loved. “I’ll leave if I damn well feel like it!” she shouted.

“Not until I’ve said my peace. You had your chance, you got it all out. Now it’s my turn. SIT DOWN!” Paula shouted back.

Sophie thought for a moment, her first instinct to head for the door, but she knew Paula had something to say, and, no matter how hard it was going to be to hear, Sophie owed her at least that. The young woman dropped the bag and went to sit on the bed where Paula had just been. She crossed her arms and waited.

Paula paced for a minute, trying to gather her thoughts, her emotions raw and in control. She breathed a few deep and cleansing breaths, then stopped and looked at Sophie. The usually cool solicitor’s hands were shaking, the adrenaline pumping through her getting the better of her. She did her best to steady herself, looking again at her lover, so hurt, so beautiful, so worthy.

Finally, she began to speak.

“You’re right, Sophie. You’re right about it all. I am a coward. I’ve been yanking you around to suit my own needs, not once considering what it was doing to you. Oh, I thought I was protecting you, at least that’s what I told myself, to exonerate myself from responsibility, but I was doing it for me, plain and simple, to protect my own heart from destruction. But the truth is, it was only the threat of destruction. That’s the problem with loving someone, isn’t it, that they then have the power to hurt you? And that power just proved its strength about 45 minutes ago when all you had to do was touch me and ask me to touch you. I hadn’t the fortitude to tell you no, though my brain was saying just that. I literally could not help myself Sophie. I couldn’t get my brain to take over and tell you no
because it simply shut off and my sheer need for you took over. And there was nothing I could do to stop it. But once I got my senses back, I got angry that you have that kind of power over me. Do you have any idea how frightening that feeling is for someone like me?"

Sophie shook her head slightly, starting to understand where Paula was coming from.

“It’s my job to dominate. It’s my comfort zone. I’ve been completely in charge of my life since I was about 15, not letting anyone get close enough to take over, not even my husband. I always maintained command of my life, fully aware, fully disciplined. Sophie, I love you more than I have ever loved anyone, other than my children, but that’s a different love, altogether isn’t it? You have become the single most important person in my life, even above my kids as they have their own lives to live, and the last few weeks, with all this stupid cartel stuff happening, I have wanted to encase you in bubble wrap and put you somewhere safe, not only for your own good, but for my sake, as well. Don’t you see, if anything happens to you, I will never be able to forgive myself for not keeping you safe, for not keeping my own heart safe because, if I lost you, I wouldn’t survive, Sophie. I simply would not be able to go on.”

Tears were spilling freely from Paula’s eyes, the confession so raw and honest, that Sophie also began to cry again.

“When I touch you, Sophie, whether it be with my hands, my eyes, or my heart, I change. I become yours to do with what you will. So, when you say that I treat you like a child, it’s not because I see you as a lesser person, someone who needs to be told what to do … it’s because you are so precious to me, so treasured I can’t bear the thought of you being harmed. Ironically enough, it was me hurting you more than the outside forces I was trying to protect you from!”

Paula got on her knees and pulled Sophie’s hands into her own, “Please forgive me for being a coward and afraid to love you properly.” She kissed her knuckles. “I can’t live without you, sweetheart. I just can’t.”

Sophie took Paula’s head into her hands and wiped at the tears, “Your mascara is running down your cheeks.”

“What a sight I must be.”

“You look more beautiful now than you ever have. What I see is a woman who is brave enough to love with her whole heart, and boy does that make you irresistible,” breathed Sophie, bending down to kiss Paula.

“Are you sure you don’t want to get your bag and do a runner now?”

“Oh, babe, all I’ve ever wanted is for you to love me wholly and fully and with all your heart. And you just proved that you do. I have never ever wanted to leave you. I told you it would nearly kill me to do it, but I didn’t feel like I had a choice. I had to force your hand.”

“You are a formidable opponent, Ms. Webster. Not many people get me into such a vulnerable position … only one I can think of, in fact.”

“I’d say we’re well suited for one another then,” as she kissed her again.

“So, you’ll stay?” asked Paula with hope.

“Yes, of course I’ll stay. I don’t think I have much of a choice, really. I don’t think I’d survive long without you.” said a grinning Sophie, rubbing her nose against Paula’s. “Don’t you realize, you silly mare, that you have the exact same hold over me? I am literally putty in your hands, to do with what
you want, when you want. All you need do sometimes is look at me with those sultry eyes and all the blood in my body drains to my crotch, leaving my poor brain useless.”

Paula pulled Sophie into a full body hug, “Oh, I love you Sophie. Please, don’t ever leave me,” she said, breathing her scent fully into her lungs. “I don’t want you to ever leave me!”

“I won’t, babe. The only place I’m going right now is to our bed to have a lot of yummy make up sex, unless …” she trailed off.

“Unless?” asked a confused Paula.

“You should probably check your phone, yea. The crims are probably mad,” said Sophie, motioning with her head over to the table where her phone still sat.

“Oh, shit. I forgot all about that!” Paula got up off her knees, pulling Sophie up too, and grabbed her phone to look at her messages. She began to grin, then furrowed her brow.

“Uh oh, what’s that look?” asked Sophie.

“Well, the first one is from Ian saying they need to cancel dinner because of a sudden meeting Nicole had pop up.”

“Oh, thank goodness! Now we can go at it for real!” laughed Sophie, placing her hand on Paula’s bum. “And the second?” she asked, as she began to kiss at Paula’s neck.

“From an unknown number,” said Paula as she opened the text. “Holy SHIT!”

“What? Who is it from?”

Paula handed the phone to Sophie, so she could read it herself.

“What the actual fuck, Paula?”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Danger arrives from an unexpected source and Paula is forced to up her game.

Sophie’s eyes widened when she read the message, then looked at her partner with total confusion playing across her face. “Paula, what the hell is this?” She looked at the text and the picture again.

*You left this in my bed after you fucked me. Now it’s my turn – Richard* and attached was a picture of a very worn green cotton bra.

“So Sophie, you can’t think that there’s anything to this?” asked Paula, rereading the text, rolling her eyes at the picture attached to it. “Look at it! It’s not even mine, honey. And if it was true in any way, why the hell would I show you?”

“No, babe, I don’t think it’s true! It’s not that. I just don’t understand why he sent it and what it’s supposed to mean,” Sophie reassured her lover. “Paula, after what we just shared, I will never doubt your love for me again. C’mere,” she said, pulling her lover to her, placing her lips lovingly to Paula’s.

Paula hugged Sophie to her tightly. “Thank you for not getting upset about this,” she said, placing her hand in Sophie’s as she pulled slightly away. “I will always be honest with you, Sophie. Please believe that.”

“I do, babe. I really do,” said Sophie, kissing Paula again. Just as things heated up a little, Sophie abruptly pulled back, her mind focused on the text. “Buy why would he say, ‘you fucked me’ instead of ‘I fucked you’?” questioned Sophie. “It sounds funny, don’t you think, especially for a bloke? And why that god-awful ugly green bra?”

Paula considered it all, looking at the text again, “Well, think about it … he likely got into quite a lot of trouble for screwing up so badly with me, meaning I fucked him by getting him drunk and making sure he landed in jail. And the bra thing, that’s for your benefit, trying to make out that he and I had a fling. Maybe that’s his idea of a sexy bra, who knows … He could see how much I love you on the plane ride over – he accused me several times of being ‘soft eyed’ he called it, so maybe he thinks he’s going to hurt me by making you not trust me or something.”

“Maybe, but don’t you think the color means something? I mean, why green?” asked Sophie as she paced around the room, the movement helping her think better. “You’re the genius with numbers and symbols. What do you think the green means?”

Paula was at a loss. “Green symbolizes energy, growth, nature, spring, awakening … jealousy.”

“That doesn’t fit. This is clearly a threat of some sort,” offered Sophie as she continued to pace, talking out loud almost to herself. “What kind of things are green … moss, trees, plants, spiders, frogs, lizards –”

“Wait!” said Paula, as she got up off their bed and moved over to the dresser. She opened a drawer and pushed aside the folded shirts to reveal the small dragon trinket. “I took this from him,” she said,
returning to the bed and placing it in Sophie’s palm. “Maybe this is more important than I thought.”

Sophie looked at it and turned it over in her hand, taking in its beauty and its weight, clearly hand-made and hand-painted. On the back were two letters, JB. “What do you think the letters JB mean?”

“Kylie’s has the same letters. I have no idea what they mean. Could be of any origin, Mexican, Chinese, African. I think Chinese is the best bet because of the look of the dragon, but how are we going to find that out?”

Sophie stopped her pacing and looked at Paula. “You and I are going on a little expedition tomorrow!”

“What do you mean?”

“Where better to find out about this,” she said holding it up between her thumb and forefinger, “than in Chinatown? Someone in one of the shops must know something about this or where it comes from.”

“You’ve been around Joe for too long, darling. That’s a brilliant idea, but we will need to be extremely careful. If that is some sort of calling card, then it could spell danger for us,” warned Paula.

“Yea, I agree, but we need to try, don’t you think?”

Paula nodded her head, smiling at her lover. “Yes, I think so, too.”

“And what about Richard? Do you think he’s dangerous? Should we be worried?”

“I think he is a very angry man who is frustrated by his own limitations and he will take it all out on whomever he deems a threat. He does NOT like strong women, and he takes orders from at least two that I know of, and got made a fool of by another, so, you do that math,” offered the solicitor.

“Are you going to text him back?”

“Do you think I should? Or maybe just ignore him?”

“Which will mitigate his anger, get him on your side?”

“I guess that depends on what I say, doesn’t it? Frankly, I didn’t think I’d ever have to deal with him again, so I have no idea what to say to soothe him.”

“Well, I think if you ignore him it’s going to anger him even more.”

“Yea, you’re probably right. But, what do I say to this?” Paula said, holding the phone up.

“I don’t exactly know, but we need to think of something!” Sophie thought for a minute, “do you think he’s back in London?”

“Could be, I guess. Why?”

“Maybe we could arrange to meet him, see if we can figure out what he remembers from the conversation that night.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Sophie. I agree that I shouldn’t ignore him, but I don’t think a meeting is wise. Not yet, anyway. Let me think for a minute,” said Paula, reviewing the text again.

“How about this?” Paula typed out the message and handed it to Sophie to read.
*Not sure what ur playing at here or what u hope to accomplish by that threat. I tried to get you to a taxi, but you passed out cold, so restaurant staff had to handle u. I had to fly home quickly for other reasons. Ur obviously angry at me. Why? – Paula*

“Yea, that will work I think,” offered Sophie. “Send it and see if he responds.”

Paula hit send and took a deep breath. “What a fucking day from hell,” she exclaimed, running her hands through her hair. “I am absolutely spent. Are you ready to go to bed, sweetheart, cuz I am!”

“Yea, let’s hit the hay, babe. We both look a right mess.”

The pair readied themselves in the bathroom, turned out the lights, then crawled into bed. Paula sighed heavily a few times, trying to relieve her body from the emotional stress she’d endured over the past 48+ hours. She rolled onto her side and Sophie snuggled up behind her.

“Babe, are you alright? You seem really tense.” Sophie kissed the back of Paula’s shoulder and hung her arm over her waist. “Here babe, roll over into me and let me hold you,” directed the young brunette, laying on her back.

Paula flipped over and placed her head on Sophie’s shoulder, cuddling into her body, and sighed heavily again. “I feel so overwhelmed right now.”

“It’s no wonder, with all this stuff that’s going on, and I certainly didn’t help things any, did I? I’m sorry.”

“Sophie, no, don’t say that, love. You had every right. I needed to hear all of it. I was not doing what I should, and you woke me up to that reality. I am the one who’s sorry. Thank you for staying,” whispered the solicitor.

“I love you,” Sophie said as she rubbed her partner’s back, gently sliding her fingers soothingly up and down. “We’re going to figure this out, I promise. It’s all going to be ok. As long as we’re together, everything will be okay.”

Paula’s body was beginning to relax. She ran her fingers over Sophie’s collarbone rhythmically, back and forth, lightly tracing the protruding bone from one end to the other, following the contour over and over. For some reason, this simple action anchored her and provided the solid ground she so badly needed to re-center herself.

Sophie knew Paula needed to allow her emotions to descend back to a solid place, and she was more than happy to be that place. They had leapt a hurdle earlier, one that could have destroyed them, and were moving on from the obstacle that had stood in their way. Sophie could feel the tension draining from her lover, so she continued the motion of her hand up and down, soothing and reassuring. Sophie could tell by Paula’s breathing that she was not asleep. “You feeling some better now?” questioned Sophie.

“Mmm hmm,” answered a calm Paula. “Just being able to hold you helps tremendously. This is where I belong, right here in your arms, always.”

This statement touched Sophie so deeply it made her heart flutter. If she died now, she’d die as happy as she’d ever been in her life. Prior to Paula, she had loved others, but not to this depth. This love had roots so deep and secure, she felt nothing would topple it.

“I know it’s hard for you, babe, to really need someone, to rely on someone, other than yourself. But, I promise, I am here forever. You can need me, because I will always be here with my arms wide open. I’m going nowhere, except where you are,” offered the younger woman.
Paula turned her head up and smiled at Sophie, “Wither thou goest, I shall go?” Emotion filled Paula’s throat, “I don’t deserve you, but, god help me, I am going to hold on to you for dear life.”

The young brunette couldn’t help herself. She knew they both needed sleep, but she was overcome with desire, so shifted her body and placed her lips to Paula’s. Initially, the brushing of her mouth was feather light and sweet, but it wasn’t enough for either of them. Sophie pulled back slightly but didn’t have to say a word to let Paula know what she was thinking. The older woman smiled, then slowly pulled Sophie to her, their mouths connecting slowly and deeply, tongues sharing the space between them. Though the want had built up in each of them, their interaction remained slow and sensual, with fingertips roaming leisurely over skin, hands pulling bodies together gradually.

“But me love you, Paula. Let me cherish your body with mine,” said Sophie as she moved her mouth from neck to shoulder, rolling Paula onto her front. Sophie dragged her nails softly down her lover’s back, following along with her lips and tongue, lightly tracing fingers over each vertebrae of Paula’s spine, all the way down to her backside. Sophie caressed her lover’s sides and back, again, following with her mouth, so tenderly, giving every inch of skin attention.

The pace at which Paula could feel Sophie’s lips and tongue roving over her body was excruciatingly slow and it was turning her on in new ways. She could feel herself getting wetter with every touch, her nipples were aching and sensitive, her clitoris was throbbing and begging for attention. Despite all the need, Paula didn’t interfere with Sophie’s ministrations. She let her lover continue to torment her senses, teasing her into a new place where ecstasy was just out of reach.

Sophie knew her lover’s body was straining for stimulation and she was having a very difficult time holding her own desire back, but she also knew her slow tactics were working to hyper-arouse Paula. Sophie turned Paula over onto her back and moved her mouth down her neck toward engorged nipples, taking her time, kissing inch by inch, until she finally placed her lips and tongue over the hardened flesh of her right breast. Paula moaned loudly at the sensation. It was sending her body closer to the edge. Sophie swirled her tongue around the taught nub, then bit it gently, causing Paula to arch her back. Sophie moved one hand up to squeeze the other breast, pinching the nipple tenderly, again eliciting a sound of sheer pleasure from her lover.

Once Sophie had given proper attention to Paula’s breasts, she began her descent toward Paula’s dripping wet center. She kissed her way to the solicitor’s belly button, running her tongue in circles around it before heading lower.

Paula’s body was in the highest state of arousal she had ever experienced. She had been teased into a physical frenzy and was literally aching for Sophie’s tongue or fingers to give her some relief, but the young woman continued to take her time in her travels. No movement Paula made could provide enough friction to soothe her need. She began to pull at Sophie’s back and head, demanding hard contact. But Sophie would not relent. She prolonged the agony by licking across her hips and down to the inside of her thigh, biting gently here and there, prompting strangled sounds from her lover’s throat.

“Oh god, Sophie, you’re torturing me! Please, please baby,” cried Paula.

Sophie loved having control over Paula’s pleasure. It was pretty heady stuff to have this kind of power over such a strong person. She smiled to herself, then finding it too much to resist any longer, Sophie licked through the ultra-wet folds, finally reaching Paula’s engorged and throbbing clitoris. It took only four strokes of Sophie’s stiff tongue to push her lover over the edge, the orgasm gripping Paula as she squirted into her lover’s mouth, moaning loudly as she came, her hands gripping at the sheets beneath her. Sophie knew Paula’s pussy was still quite sensitive, but she began another delicate assault on her clitoris, sucking it gently, licking it softly.
Paula’s body was nearly liquid. She cried out again as Sophie delivered another hard-core orgasm when she entered Paula with Big Ben, sliding in and out of her lover, deep and satisfying pulses until she came again, harder than before. The wetness flowing from her lover astounded her. She’d never felt Paula this wet before. The sheets on the bed would need to be changed.

Paula lay silent for a few minutes, her body completely boneless and devoid of any strength. She could not move. Every inch of her body was molten and singing out with pleasure. She had just been reduced to a puddle under the tongue of her very talented lover. She’d never felt quite the way Sophie had made her feel just then, so highly aroused it only took a few strokes of the tongue and a few thrusts into her to make her cum so hard, twice in a row.

Sophie lay next to Paula, waiting for her to regain some sort of consciousness. The young woman was actually quite proud that she’d been able to control her own need and was able to deliver a slow burn to her lover. She knew she’d given Paula two intense orgasms and it would take some time for her to recover. Sophie was patient, waiting for Paula to make a sound, before she snuggled up to her lover, embracing her body with warmth and love.

“Dear god, Sophie. Are you trying to destroy me?” asked Paula. “I don’t think my body has ever felt so … so … I don’t even know the word.”

“I wanted you to feel every inch of yourself, babe, every last cell in your body.”

“I think it safe to say you succeeded,” mumbled the solicitor. “My body is very nearly pure liquid, Sophie. No one has ever done that to me before.”

Sophie just smiled. “No one has ever loved you like I do, either,” stated the young brunette, placing her lips on Paula’s mouth, kissing her softly, lovingly. “Do you think you’ll be able to sleep now, babe?”

“I may sleep until Sunday after that. But, I really think we should change the sheets, darling, unless you want to sleep in the wet spot.”

“Wait here, I will get the sheets, babe,” said Sophie, bouncing out of bed. She returned with a new set of clean sheets and pulled the duvet off the bed, uncovering a naked Paula. Sophie extended her hand to offer Paula help.

“I can get up on my own,” Paula said, swatting Sophie’s hand away as her young lover laughed at her.

“You are so god damn sexy, do you know that?”

“Well, don’t get any ideas, you! I think another round would do me in. I can barely move, you sex maniac! Keep this in mind if you ever want to take out life insurance on me – you could kill me with orgasms and make a bloody fortune,” joked Paula.

“I already have a bloody fortune,” said the younger woman as she placed her arms around Paula’s waist, pulling her in for a kiss. “But she’s not made of paper and she’s worth more than all the money in the world.”

“You’re a big sap, you know that? But, you’re my sap, so it’s all good.”

They stripped the bed quickly and replaced the sheets. And just as they were about to climb back into bed, Paula’s cell phone buzzed.

The pair looked at each other. “Here we go,” said Paula, grabbing the phone to see if it was Richard.
She nodded her head at Sophie, and they both sat on the bed to read the response together.

**“May you live in interesting times”**

Sophie furrowed her brow. “What the hell does that mean?” asked the young brunette.

Paula shook her head, “it’s a Chinese curse. It means I hope your life is shit. I don’t think my friend Richard is very happy.”

Before she could even think of a response, another text came through.

**“Beware the ides of March”**

Then another.

**“Fair is foul, and foul is fair; Hover through the fog and filthy air.”**

Then another.

**“By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that let’s me!”**

Sophie didn’t know what to make of all the quotes and looked to Paula for some kind of explanation.

“It’s Shakespeare. All warnings. He’s not going to be rational, he just wants to be angry.” Paula had put some clothes on and was pacing the room, trying to figure out what to do with this loose cannon. Should she try to meet with him? Should she try, again, to having dinner with Lawrence? The solicitor walked out to the front door of the flat and double checked that it was secure. She then propped a kitchen chair under the handle, just in case.

“Babe, what are you doing?” inquired Sophie, a bit freaked out.

“Just making sure we are secure. Don’t worry. I really don’t think he is going to do anything stupid. All indications are that they need me to keep the feds away from their operation, so hurting me in any way would be counterproductive. And, according to a very loose-lipped Richard, Lawrence doesn’t hesitate to take care of problems quickly.” Paula pondered this thought for a moment, realization settling over her features.

“What? You’ve thought of something, Paula. What is it?” asked Sophie, reading the look on Paula’s face.

“He may be on the run from the cartel, Sophie,” she said, thinking out loud. “Think about it. Nicole pulled out of dinner suddenly, then I get the first text from Richard. What’s he trying to tell me?”

Sophie didn’t like this. The thought of Paula being hurt in any way made her sick. “Should we go back to our hotel, babe? Get off the radar?”

“No, I don’t think he will come here. We should probably just get some sleep and manage this all tomorrow. But I want to send him another text first, see if I can get him to give me something concrete,” said Paula, typing out her text.

*Richard, I am not your foe. Remember, my job is to protect your interests. I’m on your side.*

Paula wasn’t sure what response she might get, but she knew one thing for sure, she would need to finally come face to face with Nicole Walker in order to get answers, no matter how dangerous that might be. Tomorrow, she would push Ian to reschedule their dinner meeting, then she would be able to look this ruthless woman in the eye.
The phone chimed again.

"Double, double, toil and trouble. Fire burn, and cauldron bubble"

"Oh, I’ve had it with this bloke, babe! He’s a real nutter. What is he trying to tell you? And why doesn’t he just say what he means?"

"We discussed Shakespeare on the plane, so he’s just using quotes to try to scare me, that’s all. C’mon, love, it’s late and I am knackered. Let’s get to bed, yea?"

"Do you think we will be okay here? I don’t know if I will be able to sleep knowing that psycho knows so much about you … us … where we live."

"It’ll be fine, love, I promise. He’s not going to do anything. I feel like he is maybe trying to warn me off of something, not threaten me. Things will seem clearer in the morning." Paula shuffled under the covers and held them up for Sophie, motioning her to climb in next to her.

Sophie snuggled down into Paula who wrapped her lover up in her arms to comfort her. The last thing she wanted was for Sophie to be afraid, but deep down, Paula had a sinking feeling in her gut about what was coming and how this troubling situation would resolve in the end. Despite knowing she needed to treat Sophie as her equal in their relationship, she was still compelled to try to protect her love from any harm.

Paula kissed Sophie’s temple sweetly as she rubbed her hand gently up and down the young brunette’s arm. “You doing alright, love?” asked Paula.

“Mmm hmm,” responded Sophie. “It’s been a really long day, hasn’t it?”

“That’s an understatement. A lot has happened, some not so good, but most of it really good,” said Paula, shifting to look at Sophie’s face. “I promise you Sophie, I am going to get us out of this mess, so we can live our lives together, happily,” said the solicitor as she placed her lips to her partner’s.

“I love you, babe,” Sophie whispered against Paula’s mouth. “I know it’s late, but –“

Before Sophie could say anything, Paula stopped her, “baby, you never have to ask me to make love to you,” she said as she took over and proceeded to pleasure Sophie until her body released the tension it had been carrying for hours.

Xxxxxxxx

Paula woke to an empty bed, her head thick and groggy. She sat up, looking around the room, but no Sophie. She listened for the shower, but heard nothing. “Sophie?” she yelled out, hoping for a response. Nothing. She got up and pulled her robe around herself and walked into the living room then through to the kitchen, calling out her lover’s name. As silence returned, the solicitor began to panic. The chair was removed from the front door where she’d put it last night to secure things. *She’s gone out?* She looked at the clock on the wall for the time – 8:52am. *Where has she gone?* Returning to the bedroom, Paula grabbed her phone to see if Sophie had texted. Nothing. She noticed she had a voicemail. *How did I not hear the phone?* Thinking it must be Sophie, she dialed into her voicemail to listen to the message, but noted the number was not Sophie’s.

“You should have heeded my warning, dearest Paula. Now I have your most prized possession and I am going to return the favor and royally f**k up your life.”

*Richard!*
Paula’s head began to swim, and she nearly fainted at the shock her body was experiencing. They had Sophie and it was her fault. She should have listened! They should have moved back to their hotel last night when that bastard was sending cryptic texts. She ran to the toilet and vomited the bile that had crept into her mouth. Then she grabbed the phone and called the number.

“Hello, sweet Paula,” said a sinister Richard.

“If you fucking touch her I will kill you, do you hear me!” shouted Paula, panic consuming her.

“Tsk tsk, now who’s in charge here, Paula, you or me?”

“Richard, listen to me, you don’t want to do this. You don’t want to hurt anyone. Please just let her go and I will do whatever you want.”

“You’ll do what the hell I tell you anyhow, you bitch! I am in charge, not you, so shut the fuck up!” he screamed.

“Just tell me what you want, Richard! I will do anything, just please don’t hurt her,” cried Paula through the phone line.

“Oh, are you worried about your Sleeping Beauty, Paula? She’s really quite fit, ya know? I think I would quite enjoy a taste of her.”

“Richard, please, I’m begging you, don’t hurt her. She’s done nothing wrong. Please don’t punish her because you’re angry with me. Tell me where you are, and I will come to you. You take me, and let her go!”

“Oh, it’s not going to be that easy, dear solicitor. You took something from me, now I’ve taken something from you.”

“What did I take from you?”

“I want it back or she’s dead, do you hear me?”

“Want what back?” asked a confused Paula, trying to calm herself down, bile creeping back up her throat.

“You know what! Don’t play stupid with me. Without it I am a dead man, and so then will be your precious Sophie!”

“Richard, I—“

“STOP calling me that!” he shouted.

“Okay, I’m sorry. What would you like me call you?”

“I am Charles Warren the 3rd god damnit! I am in charge! I deserve the power and the respect and you’re going to give it me!”

Oh, holy shit! Nicole’s BROTHER!

“I’ll call you Charles, then. And I will give you respect, I promise. But you need to tell me what I took, so I can return it,” cooed Paula softly. She knew she was dealing with a very mentally ill person.

“My birthright, you IDIOT!”
“Charles, I have the dragon and I will bring it to you. Tell me where,” she said softly, hoping to calm him. “I’ll bring it right now! Just don’t wake Sophie before I get to you.”

“Meet me at your office at noon, and don’t be late, and if you even think about calling the police, don’t! We have them in our pocket, if you hadn’t figured that one out yet,” and the line went dead.

The stress hit Paula like a brick and she started to cry thinking of how petrified Sophie would be when she woke from whatever drug he had used to knock them out. She had to work fast, so she threw on some clothes and called downstairs for a cab. Where is that stupid dragon? Paula searched her room but couldn’t find it. Where had they put it? She searched the bathroom and the room again, to no avail. She ripped the bedding off the bed, but still nothing. She collapsed onto the floor, tears streaming down her cheeks at her blatant failure, her head in her hands. Paula, you don’t have time to fall apart. Sophie needs you. Think! She got up on her knees and began to retrace in her mind when she last had it. Sophie had it in her hand and set it on the nightstand. She looked behind it, around it, then she spotted the silver peeking out from under the bed. Thank God! She grabbed the trinket, put it in her pocket and headed downstairs. The cab was waiting for her when she got off the lift. Thomas greeted her, but she said nothing, heading straight through the vestibule and out to the curb.

“Where to?” inquired the driver.

“Gerrard Street, Chinatown.”
Paula was furious and trying to contain her emotions at the turn of events. How could she have let this happen? And why the hell had Lawrence allowed her brother to get so out of hand? Paula pulled out her phone and dialed Ian’s number. She was going to have to use whatever leverage she had to get Sophie out of that deranged man’s grasp.

“Paula, what can I do for you?” said Ian Walker, cool as ever.

“Ian, I want you to listen, and listen closely,” seethed the solicitor. “That bastard has Sophie, and if she is not returned completely unharmed, if he even thinks about hurting her, I will kill him with my bare hands and come for you next! Then I will turn over every scrap of evidence I have gathered on your wife and her fucking cartel to the authorities, effectively destroying your billions and your power. I don’t care if Cooper Securities implodes, I will make sure you both rot in hell and I won’t rest until you pay. Do you hear me?” Paula couldn’t scream loud enough.

“Paula, wait! What are you talking about? Who has Sophie?” asked an incredulous Ian.

“Nicole’s psychotic brother, that’s who! Don’t try to tell me she has no idea, because I wasn’t born yesterday. And I am quite serious when I say I have enough evidence to completely destroy her and her entire fucking empire!”

“You mean, Charlie has taken Sophie? But, why? I don’t understand.”

“I don’t care what you understand or don’t, he has threatened to kill her unless I meet him at my office at noon. I suggest you get your wife to handle him, or you can start to look forward to federal prison for the rest of your lives.” Then she ended the call.

Paula couldn’t decipher whether Ian knew anything about the kidnapping or not, but it didn’t really matter anyway. The basic fact was Charles Warren had Sophie and she had to get her back, no matter the consequences.

They pulled up to Gerrard street, and Paula bound out of the cab like a woman possessed, trying to figure out where to go to find some information on the talisman in her pocket. She hurriedly walked Gerrard Street, eyeballing the storefronts for leads – restaurants, cafés, massage parlors, tea houses – all commercially geared for tourists. Nothing that would help. She had to get off this street, so she walked to some of the side streets, continuing her frantic search. Time was running out and she
needed answers of some kind.

She finally located a bookshop that might have personnel who could help her. The bell dinged as she walked into the quiet shop, the odd smell of old books filled her nostrils and made her sneeze. She looked around for a clerk as she walked further into the back, but no one was in sight. She sighed heavily and nearly burst into tears. Suddenly, an old man came through a small doorway and out onto the shop floor. He addressed Paula politely, “Good morning Miss, may I help you?” he asked in a thick Mandarin accent.

“Yes, I hope you can. I am looking for some information on a small dragon trinket I am in possession of. It’s very important. Is there anyone here who might know something about it?” she said as she held it out in her palm. She knew it might draw some reaction, but she had no time to be subtle.

The man looked at it, sitting in her hand and began to shake his head slowly. She turned it over, so he could see both sides. “No, I’m afraid I have not seen this before. I sell books, not jewelry,” said the man.

Paula saw no reaction from him that would cause her to doubt him. “Do you know where I might take it to have someone look at it for me?” inquired the nearly desperate woman.

The man thought for a moment, looked at the dragon again, then said, “There is a small tea room on Neal Street called North Star Tea Room. Ask for Yu Yan. She might be able to help you.”

Paula repeated the information and got rough directions from the man and ran out of the door, shouting a thank you as she retreated. Paula sprinted down the road toward Neal Street, per the man’s instructions. She was out of breath, thinking to herself that once she and Sophie were safe and out of this nightmare, she would begin running with Sophie to get her aging body back into shape. She was grateful to have thrown on jeans and her trainers for this journey.

Paula turned onto Neal Street and only had to travel a block before she located the North Star Tea Room. She stood outside its entrance trying to catch her breath so as not to enter in a crazy manner. She walked through the door and was greeted at the front by a young Chinese woman with a lovely smile. “Hello, and welcome to North Star Tea –“

Paula didn’t mean to be rude, but she cut the woman off to spare time, “I need to see Yu Yan, please. It’s a matter of extreme importance.” The woman took in Paula’s sweaty brown and anxious demeanor, realizing it was important. “Please, I must see Yu Yan,” offered Paula again.

“Come with me, please,” said the woman.

Paula eagerly followed the young woman through the tea room, into a door that led to the back of the shop.

“Wait here,” the woman motioned for Paula to sit on a small couch. She did as she was told.

A few minutes later a rather old woman came shuffling through the opening, a kind smile on her face. The young woman was right behind her. “Yu Yang does not speak English, so I will translate,” she offered.

“My name is Paula, thank you for seeing me. I need any information you can give me on this,” Paula unfolded her hand, showing Yu Yang the dragon.

The older woman’s eyes widened considerably when she looked in Paula’s palm, and she began backing away, mumbling in Mandarin, but Paula could only make out “no, no, no.” The young woman looked at Paula. “Where did you get this?” she asked. “You need to leave here now!”
“Please, you don’t understand. This is a matter of life and death.” She knew mentioning her same-sex partner would not appeal to the likely very conservative old woman, so she instead said, “The man this belongs to has kidnapped my daughter and is demanding it back or he will kill her. I don’t mean to scare you, but I desperately need information.”

The young woman began to speak to Yu Yan, explaining what Paula had said. The old woman stared at Paula, looking at her to see if she was being truthful. She didn’t move, just stared deep into Paula’s dark eyes.

“Please,” begged Paula.

Yu Yan cupped Paula’s hand with both of hers, careful not to touch the dragon, and began to speak. Her great-grand daughter translated. “The dragon represents the evil spirit of mogwai, very dangerous to humans. If you touch mogwai, you are cursed until you sacrifice by burning money, paper notes. Those who use mogwai will have earthly riches – money, power, pleasures of the flesh, but they will suffer greatly in the afterlife. There are many who use mogwai for evil.”

Paula flipped the dragon over, showing the JB on the back. “Does this mean anything?”

Yu Yan narrowed her eyes, looking closely and said, “jiushi ba.”

“Ninety-eight?” said her great grand-daughter, as if to ask Paula if it had meaning. Paula could only shrug. She didn’t understand the significance.

“Have you ever seen this used in China before, as some kind of calling card or key to anything?” asked the solicitor.

Yu Yan, nodded her head and spoke, “Criminals. The opium trade is a blight on the goodness of society and this mogwai is used to identify its membership. Since I was a little girl, I have been afraid. I have watched terrible men destroy good people with their poison. I will never touch mogulwai. You must burn money Miss, you must cleanse yourself of this curse.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me that might help me get my daughter back safely?” Paula begged.

Yu Yan shook her head. “I send you away with blessings that good will win out over this evil Miss. I can see in your eyes you are a good soul and I wish you good luck in fighting the monsters.”

“Thank you, Yu Yan. You’ve been very helpful to me,” offered Paula. She looked at her watch – 11:21. She had to get to her office. She thanked the young woman again and asked where the best place was to get a taxi, then ran out of the tea room and onto the street, ready to fight the monsters.

Sophie began to stir, opening her eyes only slightly as they felt terribly heavy. Her head was groggy, and she couldn’t quite wake herself up. “Babe?” she barely squeaked out. She tried her best to wake up, but just couldn’t quite get there and fell back into a peaceful slumber.

Charlie Warren was at the ready with more chloroform, but did not need to use it on his captive. She had fallen back to sleep, sparing him the task of knocking her out again. They had nearly reached Cooper Securities office building, where he was sure Paula had hidden the dragon fob she’d robbed off him after she’d gotten him drunk enough to pass out. No one was going to take what was rightfully his! Jordan sat across from him in the private car, the kind millionaires are used to using. It wouldn’t be difficult for them to bypass security, as they had done so many times before, cash into the palm of the officer on duty. They did need a way to transport their captive into the building.
though, something Jordan would sort once they arrived.

As Paula’s cab was making its way to the financial district, she pulled up her private email to Mark Chapman, and left him a very specific message quickly explaining what had happened and that if he did not hear from her in two days, he was to go to the SEC as they had planned. There was no way she would allow the cartel to win. She only wished she’d had time to warn Alexander. She dialed his number, but got no answer. How could she get him a message?

*Evelyn.*

Paula dialed Evelyn’s number, and when her old friend picked up, Paula began to quickly explain what was happening.

“Ev, I don’t want to drag Alexander into this mess, but if I have to use the evidence to get Sophie back, I will. And Cooper Securities may go down.”

“Paula, he needs to know what’s going on. I know you don’t have time to call him, but I do.”

“Then call him Ev. But you have to promise me you won’t call the police. Charles Warren blatantly told me the department is in the cartel’s pocket, which I don’t doubt. I have to play this one out on my own.”

“Paula, I’m worried for you. What if they try to hurt you.”

“I have too much evidence on them and that will keep me safe, besides, I don’t care. Ev, all I care about it getting Sophie back safely. This Charles is the wildcard. He’s playing outside the sister’s direction and I am hoping she will put a stop to this.”

“I still can’t believe this is Nicole we’re talking about. I only met her few times, but I would never imagine in a million years that she could be behind so much criminal behavior!”

“You just never know, Ev. I have to go. I’m here.”

“Be safe, Paula. Please.”

Paula headed into the building, showing her credentials to the weekend security officers as she entered. She did her best to keep her hands from shaking, but the adrenaline pumping through her system made it a challenge.

“Afternoon, Ms. Martin. Thought you were in the states,” said the young officer.

“I was, Henry, but I returned earlier than expected. A lot of folks in today?” the solicitor inquired.

“Not too many. It’s a nice day out, so who wants to be cooped up in an office on a Saturday, right?”

“Yea, right. Is Mr. Walker in?”

“No, haven’t seen him, Ms. Martin.”

Paula nodded and headed to the lift. She rode up to her floor, her nerves beginning to get the better of her. She didn’t know what to expect or how to convince Charlie Warren to let Sophie go free without any craziness. She would give him the dragon without a fight and pray that he was rational.
The lift doors opened, and she walked off slowly, listening for activity, looking around for signs of Charlie or Sophie. Nothing. She walked to her office suite and unlocked the door, entering into the outer office where Kylie’s desk was, but it was completely dark and silent. Then she walked into her office, again dark and devoid of any activity. She was early, so decided to just play it cool and wait. She flipped the light switches on, the offices flooding with brightness. She walked around her desk, sat in her chair, checked her watch, and placed the dragon trinket on the flat surface in front of her, waiting for the next chapter in this nightmare to unfold.

Just after noon, Charles Warren III made his way into Paula’s office. “Well, hello dear Paula,” he said in his true South African accent. “Glad to see you’re taking me seriously.”

Paula got up immediately, “Where is Sophie?” she asked, frantic to see that her love was safe.

“All in good time. Don’t worry. She’s being well looked after.”

“Listen, I am not playing games here, Charles. I brought what you want, now let her go!”

“You need to be patient and remember who is in charge here. Do you have my dragon?”

“It’s here, but it’s hidden,” said Paula. “You’ll get it when I see Sophie!”

“No, you’re not calling the shots, dear, I am. So, put it in my hand or else.”

Paula had a decision to make. Should she spar with him or cave to his demands? What use did he have to keep Sophie once he had what he came for? Paula weighed her options quickly, then slid her hand into her pocket and held the dragon out to Charles in her palm.

He was almost mesmerized by the sight of the talisman she held in her hand. It was blatantly obvious that this man was very mentally ill. He reached out slowly, taking it from her hand gently, closing his eyes as his fingers touched the metal, “Oh my sweet mogwai, we’ve been apart for too long.” He pulled it up to his lips, then opened his eyes and looked at Paula, an evil grin on his face.

“Please take me to Sophie!” Paula requested in a gentle voice, not wanting to ignite his anger.

“Why did you have to take mogwai from me? I’ve been beside myself without her. Just like you’re feeling now!”

“Charles, I had no idea what she meant to you, otherwise I would never have –“

“SHUT UP! You left me there in that cold jail cell without her, without anyone. Then you said I attacked you, and I didn’t, I didn’t try to hurt you, Paula, I didn’t!” Charles shouted, then his voice began to shake, much like a hurt little boy.

“Charles, what are you talking about. I never said you attacked me!”

“Don’t LIE TO ME! You told them you left New York early because I assaulted you! And now Lawrence is so mad at me and she is sending me away.” The man vacillated between anger and sadness.

“Charles, listen to me. I never once said it was you who almost assaulted me. They assumed it was you,” said Paula in a soothing voice. She approached the man and put her hand slowly on his shoulder, “I’m so sorry, Charles. I never meant for you to be hurt in all this. I really did enjoy spending time with you.”
“You did?” questioned the man softly.

“I did. I truly did. You’re very intelligent and very witty, Charles. Who wouldn’t like being around you?” asked Paula, sincerity evident in her eyes.

His physical demeanor noticeably shifted, and his body began to relax.

“I will tell Lawrence it wasn’t you who tried to hurt me, if it will help.” Paula was trying to coax Charles into taking her to Sophie.

“I don’t know, Paula. She’s really mad. Said I was spineless.”

This grown man was reduced to a small child in front of her eyes. She could only imagine that he had lived in his sister’s shadow his entire life, brow beaten into submission, and on top of that was the mental health issue. She almost felt sorry for him, but her priority was getting to Sophie, so she gently pushed Charles, “surely it’s not too far gone, Charles. I think it’s important, though, to put this latest problem to rest. Why don’t you take me to Sophie and let’s put this all behind us?”

“You might be right. Come with me. She’s in Ian’s office with Jordan.”

Paula didn’t want to react too severely and scare Charles. Why would Jordan be helping him? She was under the impression that Jordan was his boss, at least superior in decision making. Something felt very wrong here.

Paula nearly bolted out the door, heading to Ian’s office so she could get to Sophie. She reached Ian’s door and burst into the outer office, looking around frantically, but no one was there. Charles came in and walked to Ian’s office, opening the door by waving the dragon talisman in front of a hidden scanner.

What the fuck! Oh my god, it has a chip in it! The cartel has complete access to Cooper Securities offices all over the world!

Paula followed Charles into Ian’s huge office and saw Kylie sitting on the couch next to Sophie, who was sleeping. She looked peaceful and unharmed.

Oh, thank God!

She ran over to Sophie, ignoring Kylie, and checked her over to see if she was okay. “Sophie, baby, wake up, it’s Paula,” she said in a low voice, patting Sophie’s face. She could tell Sophie was beginning to awaken, but didn’t want her to be frightened, so she tucked her into her arms.

Paula looked at Kylie and furrowed her brow, then looked at Charles. There was no Jordan. So, where was she then? “What’s going on, here?” asked Paula. “Was this just some ploy to get me up here? If it was, fine, but you let Sophie go, now!”

Kylie stood up and moved over to where Charles was standing.

“Paula, I am just trying to keep my word. You wanted Sophie, so I brought you to her. She’s unharmed, as you requested.”

“So, what now, then?”

“Now, you are going to give me all the evidence you’ve collected so Lawrence will forgive me. If I save the cartel, she will be happy, and I will resume my place,” he stated.
“What evidence?” asked Paula, trying to gauge his understanding.

“Don’t play me for a fool. I know you must have information that will harm us. I know that’s why you were in New York; that’s why I followed you.”

Kylie just stood there, saying nothing. It was obvious she had been feeding him information on Paula’s every move.

“I don’t have it on me, Charles. It’s in a safe deposit box,” offered the solicitor. “Once I know Sophie is safe, I will get it for you.

“She’ll never really be safe, Paula. You should realize that by now.”

“Then what’s to stop me from turning over all the evidence to the police? You’re not a stupid man, Charles. Surely, you have worked out that I have several copies in different places and mechanisms through which said evidence will be delivered if anything happens to me or Sophie.”

“The police don’t scare us, Paula.”

“Well, does the word Interpol mean anything to you,” the solicitor shot back.

Charles’ eyes slightly widened.

“Or how about Secret Intelligence Services? Or the CIA? The cartel can’t have everyone in their pocket.”

Sophie was come to, taking in the verbal exchange between Paula and some man. She opened her eyes slightly, taking in their surroundings, wondering what had happened and why they were where they were. She could feel Paula’s tense body next to hers, so decided to just listen and not alert anyone that she was awake.

“You forget, I have the advantage,” said the man.

Just then, a hidden door panel slid open and Ian Walker and a short, squatty woman with a pinched-up face entered the room.

“Charlie, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” shouted the woman.

Paula scanned the woman’s features and saw the faint resemblance to the young woman in the old newspaper article photo from so long ago.

Lawrence.

Charles turned to look at his sister, nearly cowering at her voice. “How did you know we were here?” he asked, then looked at Paula. “You told?” Again, the man was reduced to a young boy in his mannerisms.

Paula stood up to face Lawrence. “Finally, we meet,” said the solicitor with venom in her mouth. Then she looked over at Ian, who, like Charles, was on the ready to do as they were told.

“Yes, Paula Martin, we meet. I supposed it’s time to put this silly threat to rest. You’ve been quite like a mosquito, buzzing around my head, annoying me with your digging, threatening me. Well, you’ve now bored me to tears and it’s time I handled you for good.”

Paula scoffed, “and just how are you planning to do that, exactly?” The solicitor knew she was at a disadvantage as there were now four people in the room with just her and Sophie, but she also knew
cowering to this woman would do no good. She only responded to strength, so Paula was going to put up a fight. She walked directly up to the menacing woman, faced her toe to toe and offered, in her cross-examination voice, “The minute you kill me, or Sophie, all the evidence needed to bring down your entire empire will be sent to the proper authorities, then it’s just a matter of time before you will be locked up to rot for the rest of your life. You might as well head for your private jet right now and get to a country where there is no extradition. But, you will certainly have to look over your shoulder for the rest of your life, won’t you, Jessica, because you and I both know you’re a dead woman if that evidence ever comes to light. I have made sure that every federal police entity in every country you operate in will get a copy of the mountain of evidence I’ve compiled, should anything happen to me or Sophie. You might be able to skirt a few of them, but not all of them, and you know I’m right!”

No one in the room moved. All eyes were on the women standing toe to toe in the middle of the expanse and lush office. Paula stared directly down into the cold eyes of the killer in front of her, not blinking, drawing her strength from her need to protect Sophie.

“You forget Ms. Martin, that I can have any number of people killed at a moment’s notice. Mmmm, say your children.”

“That doesn’t change the playing field or the game at all, and you know it. You could have had me killed, or my children, at any time thus far, but you needed me, and you still do. So, if I were you, I would move out of the way and let Sophie and I leave peacefully, knowing that the information I possess will stay out of the hands of the authorities as long as we are left alone to live our lives.”

Paula could tell by the look in her foe’s eyes that the lawyer had her. Lawrence simply motioned her head toward the door, telling Paula to leave, that they understood each other.

Just as the solicitor was about to turn and gather Sophie, Charles started yelling, “WHAT the fuck, Lawrence? How can you be so weak? You’re going to let them get away with this??? Well, I am Charles Warren III and I am going to make my daddy proud!” Then he pulled a gun out of his pocket and pointed it right at Sophie.

Paula’s knees nearly buckled. “Charles, no, you don’t want to do this!”

Everyone in the office was shocked at Charles and his reaction. Paula was looking at him, making the smallest of steps toward Sophie, who was now quite aware that a gun was aimed at her. She remained calm, not saying anything.

“Charles, put that thing down, you idiot!” shouted Lawrence. “I am in charge, here, NOT you!”

Something snapped in the man and he defiantly straightened his arm and pulled the trigger, but he had not removed the safety. Without pause, Paula lunged in front of Sophie as a gunshot rang out. Then another. Then another.

Sophie screamed and fell back onto the couch, the shock settling in to disorient her. She could smell the acrid aftermath of the firearm going off and her ears were ringing. Her hand felt wet and her legs were heavy. She looked at her hand and realized it was covered with blood, then she looked down to find Paula draped across her legs, blood pouring from her left shoulder. “Paaaaaulllllla, nooooooooooo!” she screamed. She looked up for someone to help her.

A flash of blonde hair entered Sophie’s vision, and she saw Kylie bending over Paula, placing her flat onto the ground. She began to speak, “Sophie, listen to me, you need put pressure on the wound.” She stripped off her outer shirt and balled it up. “Like this, keep the pressure on it. Do you understand?”
Sophie nodded her head and replaced Kylie’s hands with her own.

Kylie began to speak into a small device, “This is agent Jordan Brewster, MI6 Id Code 41179, repeat 41179. I have a C5 situation at 300 Wood Street, Cooper Securities, Floor 42, office in far northwest corner. I have three GSWs in need of immediate assistance. Agent in pursuit of perpetrator.” And then she was gone.

Sophie was brushing Paula’s hair off her brow, crying profusely, keeping the cloth pressed to the wound. “Babe, can you hear me? It’s me, Sophie. Please, babe, talk to me. Oh, God, please don’t take her from me, I need her so much. Please.”

“Sophie?” Paula was barely able to speak, gurgling sounds coming from her mouth.

“Yes! Babe, I’m here. I’m here with you. An ambulance is on the way. You have to stay with me, babe. Please, stay with me. Can you do that?”

Paula opened her eyes to see Sophie hunched over her. “You … okay?” she asked, then coughed blood from her mouth.

“Oh, God! Don’t talk, babe. You need to save your strength. Help is coming, but you have to listen to me, ok? You are going to be fine, do you hear me? You stay with me!”

Paula’s brow was furrowed, concern playing across her face. She tried again to speak, “so … sorry …” then winced as the pain infiltrated her system. “love … you … always …”

“I love you, babe. Please stay with me. And you have nothing to be sorry for, honey. You just hang on and everything is going to be okay. We have the rest of our life to live, together, so I need you to fight, babe. Fight like you’ve never fought before.”

“so … tired …”

“I know you are, but this is important. Try to stay awake for me, okay?”

“so much … want … tell … you …” Paula was barely able to gather enough breath.

“Try not to talk, babe. Just hold my hand and feel me. I won’t let you go. I promise!” Sophie held Paula’s hand in hers, the other keeping pressure on the bullet wound. God, please, I’m begging you, don’t take her from me!

It felt like it had been hours. Where was the fucking ambulance?

Paula groaned at the pain, blood was flowing in a trickle out of her mouth and her breathing was extremely labored. Sophie didn’t want to panic, but she was having a very hard time keeping herself together. The shirt was soaked with Paula’s blood, so Sophie stripped off the shirt she was wearing and replaced the sopping fabric with it.

Just then, a man in a security uniform burst through the door and assessed the situation. He called into his walkie-talkie, then bent down next to Sophie. “Ms. Martin, can you hear me?” he asked as he checked her pulse.

“She was talking a minute ago. Please help her! Tell me she’s going to be ok!” begged a frantic Sophie.

He lifted the shirt slightly, then hurriedly put the pressure back on, a look of concern surfacing on his face. “Keep the pressure on. I need to check the others,” he said as he moved over to the other two
people laying in the floor on the other side of the room. Sophie couldn’t care less about the others. Her focus was completely on Paula. The officer talked again into the small mic on his shoulder, but she didn’t listen to what he was saying.

Sophie focused only on the amazing woman in front of her, stroking her hair, speaking to her softly, “Paula, please hang on. I love you so much and you cannot leave me, do you understand? We have things to do still and I can’t do them unless you’re with me, babe. You have to hang on,” begged the young brunette. Then she noticed Paula was wearing the silver charm bracelet she’d given to her only weeks ago and began to cry harder. “Babe, you only have two charms on your bracelet. There are so many more that I am going to give you, but I need you with me, baby, please don’t go away from me. I can’t live without you.”

Then, through the door came the emergency team, and relief flooded Sophie’s senses. “Babe, help is here! Hang on for me, okay. I’m not leaving you. I’ll be right here with you.”

Sophie sat back, letting the medical professionals work on Paula. It was as if all of her hearing was gone and all she could feel was numbness overtake her whole body. Please God, if I have ever done anything right in my life, please make her be okay. They ran a quick IV and hung fluids and gave her oxygen, then quickly swooped her onto a gurney and headed out of the office. One of the security officers removed his shirt and put it around Sophie, while escorting her down to the waiting ambulance, where she and Paula were placed for the ride to the hospital. Sophie could see police cars with flashing lights parked outside the building they were in, and a swarm of officers pouring in.

None of this mattered.

Only Paula mattered.

It was a short ride to the hospital and whirlwind getting Paula out of the ambulance and into A&E, where she was hurried into trauma. It felt like she was in an episode of Grey’s Anatomy. As they wheeled the gurney in, Sophie refused to let go of Paula’s hand, despite the directions of the medical staff.

“Sophie, my name is Dr. Clarke. I am here to help. I need you to let me do my job, so I can give Paula the best care possible. But in order to do that, I need for you to let go of her hand, so we can help her, okay?” asked the doctor. “You go with the nurse and we will keep you updated, I promise.”

Sophie nodded her head and let Paula’s hand go, tears continually streaming down her face. The loss of the warmth of her lover’s flesh sent fear through her body. What if I never get to touch her again? Before she moved, she looked the doctor in the eye and begged, “Please save her! She can’t die, she just can’t. Please.”

“We will do everything we can, I promise Sophie. She’s in good hands,” offered the doctor.

The nurse escorted Sophie down to a waiting area and sat with the obviously distraught young woman. “Sophie, my name is Allison and I will do my best to keep you informed as to Paula’s condition. Can you tell me what your relationship is to Paula?”

“She’s my partner.” As those words flowed from Sophie’s lips, fresh tears sprung from her eyes. She was going to lose her. She could feel it. Her whole life had been full of disaster. She lost Sian, then Maddie, and now Paula. Why was this happening, again?

“Oh, Sophie. Can you tell me if you’re hurt anywhere?” asked Allison.
“No, I’m fine. Paula jumped in front of me and saved me. He tried to shoot me, but she saved me.”

“Sophie, is there anyone you would like us to call for you? Does Paula have other family that might need to be informed?”

“Informed?” asked Sophie. *OH GOD, is she dead?*

“Perhaps she has children or siblings we could call? Or is there anyone we can call to provide support for you?”

*Isla. Mum. Dad.*

Sophie nodded her head. She gave the nurse Isla’s number, then Kevin’s. He would tell Sally. She couldn’t even call them if she wanted to. She didn’t have her phone. She was thankful she remembered Isla’s number.

“Okay, we will handle this for you. You just sit here and try to relax. I know it’s hard, but you’re in shock so your body is not behaving normally. I will bring some oxygen for you and something to drink. It will help. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Sophie sat there, alone, numb, not knowing how to process the sheer terror gripping her. She wondered what had happened and how she and Paula had wound up in an office surrounded by Lawrence and the others. She had no memory, other than a few flashes of consciousness, until she woke up to Paula’s voice. She loved that voice. It was so calm and smooth and sexy. Would she ever hear it again? Would Paula ever whisper in her ear, kiss her with that wonderful mouth, or hold her hand once more?

Despair gripped her again and she cried harder, her head beginning to bang with pain.

Allison arrived with oxygen, placing the mask across Sophie’s face. “I called Paula’s daughter. She is on her way. And I also spoke with your dad. He said he and your mum would drive down and be here in a few hours. Until then, I need you to stay right here and breath as normally as you can. They are still working on Paula, so I don’t have any news yet, but as soon as I do, I will let you know, okay?”

Sophie just nodded. She could do nothing, but wait.

She continued to breathe the oxygen until the shock began to wear off. Allison checked on her every 10 minutes or so, until she finally arrived with an update on Paula. “They’ve had to give her several units of blood, but they finally stabilized her.”

“Is she going to be okay? Please, tell me she’s okay,” pleaded Sophie, standing up as if to rush to Paula’s bedside.

“They have to repair a partially severed artery and her lung collapsed, so they are taking her to theater now. She will likely be there for several hours. Come with me. I’ll take you to the waiting area and when they’ve finished, the surgeon will come speak to you.” The nurse gave a comforting smile. “It’s a good sign they were able to stabilize her, Sophie. She lost a lot of blood. The bullet penetrated the lung and clipped the subclavian artery. That’s why the blood was coming from her mouth. It looks very scary, I know. Now, she’s not out of the woods just yet, but they are rushing her in now, so things should improve once they repair the damage.”

Sophie grabbed Allison’s hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sophie. Would you like a set of scrubs to change into? That shirt is swallowing
you and it’s covered in blood.”

Paula’s blood.

Sophie’s throat began to clog with emotion and tears began to sting the back of her eyes again. But, she held herself together and nodded to the nurse.

“Well, what else did they say, Kevin? They must have given you some better details than that,” pushed Sally.

“I told ya, the nurse said Paula had been shot and was in A&E and Sophie was fine, but needs us! How many times?”

“Well, did you ring her?”

“What do you take me for? Of course, I did. She’s not answering! Just get in the car, Sal. We have to get down there, make sure Sophie is okay.”

“Well, I just don’t understand why Paula would be shot? I mean, were they in a bad part of town or something? It’s a Saturday afternoon, for heaven’s sake! I’m telling you Kevin, Sophie is coming home with us. She’s not staying in that city with all that crime. I don’t know what Paula was thinking, dragging Sophie down to London! I knew nothing good was going to come of their relationship!”

“Could you be any more insensitive, Sal? Sophie’s partner has been shot and you’re going on about how you don’t approve of their relationship. You need to get this out of your system before we get there. I mean it Sal, one negative word to Sophie and I’ll put you on the first train back!”

“I know. You’re right, Kevin. I’ll be there for Sophie. I’m sure Paula will be fine. They said she was shot in the shoulder, right? Well, how bad can that be, really?”

Kevin just shook his head at how ridiculous Sally Metcalfe could be. He hoped, for Sophie’s sake, this would not be a repeat of her losing Maddie. He knew it would take his daughter years to recover if she lost Paula now. He wasn’t a religious man, but he began to pray, for Paula, and for Sophie.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Paula comes through surgery, but Sophie faces a crisis of faith as she waits for her to awaken.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone for the amazing comments. I am happy the story is keeping your interest. Cheers!

Sophie was physically and mentally exhausted. She sat, waiting, for hours, for some news, any news, about Paula’s condition, hoping for the best, bracing for the worst. The shock had worn off and the memories of what happened played over and over in Sophie’s mind – the arguing, Paula threatening Lawrence, the man yelling then pointing the gun at her, shots firing, blood. So much blood. How could Paula survive losing so much? Sophie had done her best to keep pressure on the wound, like she was told, by Kylie and by the security bloke. Had she done enough to save her? Paula jumped in front of a bullet for her, saved her life. Had Sophie done enough to save the lover she couldn’t bear to live without?

Sophie was leaning against a wall, sat in a very uncomfortable chair, when she felt a presence sit next to her. She moved her head to look, eyeing an older gentleman, dressed in expensive slacks, a button-down shirt, and rather pricey Italian leather loafers. He smelled like he had just walked out of the country club – expensive cologne and cigars. With him was a woman, dressed nicely, with kind eyes, a bit younger than the man, but older by her own standards.

The woman spoke first, “Sophie?” she questioned.

Sophie sat up, confused. How did this woman know her? She nodded, skeptically. This wasn’t a doctor.

“Sophie, my name is Evelyn Palmer. I’m a dear friend of –“

“I know who you are,” said Sophie, too tired to greet her with any enthusiasm.

“And this is –“

“Alexander Cooper,” the young brunette finished Evelyn Palmer’s sentence. Sophie didn’t know if she liked or hated this man. It was because of him that Paula had even come to London.

“Hello Sophie. I am delighted to finally meet you, though I am deeply saddened at the circumstances, dear. Is there any word on Paula’s condition?”

“No. I’ve been waiting for hours,” she confirmed. “What’s happened with the man who shot her? Have they captured him?”
“Yes, I’m happy to say he is in custody. The whole thing is a bit of a mess, really. How much do you know about what Paula was doing?”

“Doing?” asked Sophie.

“Gathering the evidence against the drug cartel for which Ian was apparently using my company as a sort of laundromat!”

“She was trying to stop them, but didn’t want to land you in it. She has the evidence, Alexander. She was just trying to figure out how to stay alive …” Sophie’s voice began to break, the reality that Paula could die surfacing yet again in her mind.

“I’m sorry, dear. We don’t have to talk about this now. Let’s just focus on Paula, shall we?”

Sophie nodded, wiping her cheeks, looking up at the doors where doctors had been shuffling through for a glimpse of someone who could give her news.

“Sophie, dear, do you need anything? How about I get you a cuppa?” asked Evelyn.

“Thank you, that would be nice.”

“How do you take it, dear?”

“Milk, two sugar, please.”

“Be back in a tic.”

Evelyn went in search of the cafetera. Tea from a vending machine would be hideous.

Alexander Cooper shifted in his seat, not knowing what to say to the distraught young woman at his side. In his life, he’d handled with ease board rooms full of angry and disgruntled millionaires, powerful people who could have destroyed his company, but sat here, with a frail young woman fearing the worst for her life, he was at a loss. He wanted to comfort her, make her world okay again, but all his money and power were useless.

“I’m so sorry for this, Sophie. If only I had paid better attention to what Ian was getting up to. Perhaps this could all have been avoided,” the older man offered. “When Paula comes through this, I will do my best to make it up to her … to you both.”

All Sophie could do was nod. She didn’t care about his power or his money. She just wanted Paula. She wanted them to spend their life together, free from threat, free from judgement, free from the evils of the world. She sighed heavily, staring at the doors, praying for good news.

Evelyn returned with tea for each of them, handing Sophie hers first. “I also brought you a sandwich. I know you’re not hungry, but you need to keep your strength, dear. So, try to eat some.”

The hot liquid felt good on Sophie’s raw throat. She had done nothing but cry for hours. She thought she must be out of tears by now. The food did not appeal to her at all, but Evelyn had been kind enough to bring it to her, so she did her best to have a few bites. She ate slowly, but as soon as the food hit her stomach, she felt sick, so she left it with just one bite, hoping it would settle without coming back up. She nursed her tea, and looked at the clock on the wall – 4:41pm. Paula had been in surgery for nearly three hours. When would she get some news?

Alexander’s phone began to ring, so he picked up and walked away so as not to disturb Sophie. Evelyn eyed him. She knew he was fielding calls from his board as the news of what had happened
was reaching the press, and the public.

He returned, a dire look on his face. “Sophie, I’m afraid I am needed at an emergency board meeting. I will return once I have handled that. Evelyn, please call me once you have news on Paula. I will keep my cell switched on.” Evelyn nodded and moved to sit next to Sophie.

“I spoke with Isla about an hour ago. She’ll be arriving on the 5:40 train. I believe Tim is coming, too. Will that be okay with you?” asked Paula’s friend.

“I’ve not met him, yet. Isla will probably need him.”

“And your parents, are they on their way?”

Sophie nodded her head. “They should be here around 6 I guess.”

“Well, I will stay with you until then, dear. I don’t want you to be on your own –“

“In case, she dies, you mean?” Sophie asked, her voice breaking, like her heart.

“Now you listen to me, Paula Martin is the strongest person I know. She’s a fighter and she will make it through this. I’ve known her for a long time and I have never once seen her back away from a challenge of any sort. Besides, she has perhaps the best motive to fight.”

“What do you mean?”

“She has you, Sophie. I’ve never seen her more enamored with anyone. She loves you, dear, to her core she loves you, and she’s not going to give up. I promise you that.” Evelyn pulled Sophie in for a gentle hug. “She’s going to be okay, you mark my words!”

Sophie let out a long and cleansing sigh. She needed someone to tell her this, to reassure her that Paula would make it through. Sophie leaned her head on Evelyn’s shoulder and said in a small voice, “Thank you. I just love her so much, Evelyn. I can’t lose her.”

“You won’t, love.”

At half five, two doctors came into the waiting area, calling out “Paula Martin” and Sophie shot to her feet.

“Yes! I’m Sophie, her partner.”

“Sophie, I’m Dr. Wagner and this is Dr. Goldman, we operated on Ms. Martin. The surgery took a bit longer than we originally thought as the subclavian artery was completely severed, and we had to repair it by taking a short section of artery from her leg to patch it together. And we also had quite a time getting her lung cleaned and restored to regular breathing. But, I am happy to report that it all went well, and she should recover without incident.”

The joy that flooded Sophie’s body was unprecedented. “So, she’s going to be okay?”

The doctors looked at one another. “Well, physically, yes. Her body will heal and function properly. We have reason to be concerned about her brain function. She lost nearly half of her blood, causing loss of essential oxygen to her brain –“

Sophie’s knees nearly buckled.

The surgeon continued, “due to the bullet penetrating her left side. You see, the heart pumps up through that artery and others to the brain, but because it was severed, that blood supply was
compromised. Think of it like a broken straw, when there is hole, suction becomes difficult. With the artery severed and the blood volume lowered, the heart had a hard time getting blood to the brain in normal amounts. Whoever administered emergency care did a great job by keeping the pressure on and the blood loss was mitigated, and full blood flow was restored quickly, but we won’t know if there was any lasting damage until she wakes up. She is in recovery now, breathing on her own, which is a great sign, but we will transfer her to ICU in about an hour once the anesthesia wears off. Someone will come to get you once she’s in a room and you can join her.”

“Thank you, doctors.” Sophie nearly collapsed into the chair.

“Sophie, she’s going to be alright. You can’t panic over this. She came through surgery, they were able to restore the blood flow. We have to keep the faith!” said Evelyn, holding onto Sophie, a tear threatening to fall.

Sophie tried to be strong, but fear gripped her gut. They weren’t home safe, yet. All she wanted was to see Paula now, hold her hand, see that she was still alive.

Kevin and Sally entered the hospital and inquired at the front desk about Paula. They were directed to the surgical waiting area on the fourth floor. They headed there, hoping for good news on the surgery, and that their daughter was in one piece emotionally. They stepped off the lift and followed the signs to the waiting area. When they entered they spotted Sophie straight away and Sally nearly sprinted to her.

“Oh, Sophie, sweetheart, we got here as soon as we could!” said Sally, pulling her daughter into a hug. “Any news on Paula?”

Kevin put his arms around his girls and waited for the report.

Sophie explained what the surgeon had shared, tears spilling out in floods.

“Oh, my goodness, I had no idea that a shoulder wound could be so dangerous,” said Sally, full of concern for her friend.

Evelyn took this moment to introduce herself to Kevin and Sally and offered to fetch some tea for them, to give them some time alone with their daughter.

“What happened, Sophie? Were you two in a bad part of town or summit?” asked her mum.

“It’s a long story, mum. I’m too tired to go into the details now, but once I can see Paula I will tell you everything.” Sophie didn’t have the energy to field the onslaught of her mother’s judgement that would surely come once Sally knew what had happened. She would blame Paula.

“When will she be in a room?” asked Sally.

“Probably in about 20 minutes. But she’ll be in ICU, so you won’t be able to come back there with me. And Isla should be here soon, with Paula’s ex-husband.”

Kevin’s eyebrows shot up on his head. “Are you going to be okay, Soph?” Your mum and I will stay here as long as you need us, okay? We’re not going anywhere,” stated Kevin, thinking about his daughter having to deal with Paula’s ex.

“Thanks, dad.”
A few minutes later, Isla arrived. She was tearful and frightened, but Sophie caught her up on the news and that made her feel some better. Sophie looked around for Tim.

“Dad went to the loo. He should be here in a minute. When can we see her?”

“They’ll call us when she’s in her room, but she will be in ICU, and they limit the visitor’s,” offered Sophie, afraid she was going to get booted out because she wasn’t considered family.

Isla picked up on Sophie’s fears, “Sophie, if anyone deserves to be at her bedside, it’s you. No one is going to take that away,” assured Paula’s daughter.

Sophie breathed a sigh of relief, so thankful that Isla was a lesbian and used to being marginalized. “Thank you, Isla. I’ve been waiting for hours just to hold her hand,” she said in a small voice.

“It’s okay, Sophie, I understand. I’m just so thankful that she made it through surgery okay. Can you explain to me what happened? I still have no idea!” asked Isla, looking to Sophie for answers.

Sophie was about to start explaining, when Evelyn and Tim walked in together. Evelyn knew how completely exhausted Sophie was, so she took Sophie’s hand and made her sit down, “I’ll handle this, Sophie.”

Evelyn proceeded to tell them all, briefly, what had happened and how things had unfolded. Sally’s legs nearly gave out, so she sat next to her daughter with fear and incredulity in her eyes. “Sophie, why didn’t you tell me what was going on? I would never have let you come to London had I know all this!”

Kevin shot his ex-wife a look. *First train, Sal.*

“Mum, I am a grown woman and I can make my own decisions! Paula and I nearly split up because she was trying to protect me and keep me as far away from this as she could, so don’t go blaming her for any of this. I chose to come. I chose to be involved. In fact, mum,” Sophie continued, gathering what strength she had left in her body, “Paula and I are moving in together.” Sophie saw no reason to keep it a secret. “As soon as she’s up on her feet, I will be coming back to get my things.”

Isla didn’t flinch, nor did Kevin or Evelyn. Sally’s mouth dropped open, and Tim appeared to be a bit annoyed, but said nothing.

Taking this opportunity, Isla introduced Tim to Sophie. “Dad, this is Sophie, mum’s partner.”

“Hello Sophie. Sorry to be meeting you in these circumstances,” he said as he extended his hand to shake hers. Sophie reciprocated, not able to really read the man in front of her. His demeanor felt a little icy, but at least he was polite. Sophie felt jealous that he had been so important in Paula’s life, the man she had loved enough to marry and have children with … but also the man she cheated on. She decided she was just too tired to worry with him right now.

A nurse entered the room, calling out for Sophie.

“Yes, I’m Sophie.”

“Paula is in her room now. I’ll take you to her. The others can wait in the ICU waiting area on floor 3.”

“What about her daughter? She can surely come, too?”

“Of course, but only two visitors at a time, I’m afraid. Come with me, please,” said the nurse.
Isla and Sophie followed the nurse down one flight of stairs to the ICU. Sophie’s senses were taking in all the noises coming from all the machines – beeping, pumping, whirring. It made her a nervous wreck.

“Now, don’t be alarmed by all the tubes. Paula is doing well, breathing on her own, though you will hear her rasping a lot as that lung works its way back to normal. She has a catheter, a drain tube, and an IV drip for fluids and medication as needed. The doctor will be in later tonight to check on her, but if you need anything in the meantime, just use the call button.”

The nurse opened the door to let the young women enter.

Sophie nearly started crying at the sight of her lover. Paula looked so pale and weak. She rushed over to her right side and pulled her hand into her own, lifting it to her lips and kissing her knuckles over and over. “You’ve given us all quite a scare, babe, but you’re doing great and everything is going to be fine.” She looked at Isla and scooted toward the head of the bed, so she could get in closer. “Babe, Isla is here. She came to make sure you’re okay.”

“Hiya mum! You crazy lady, look at what you’ve gone and done. You scared poor Sophie half to death … me as well, being a hero like you usually are, trying to save us all. Dad is here, and I got a message to Theo, but it’s going to take him some time to get home. We are here to support you, mum, so do your best to get yourself back on your feet, yea?”

“I told you as soon as they would let me, I would be back. And I’m not leaving, babe, not until you wake up and order me out! I know you’re tired, so you sleep and let your body heal. I’ll be right here, holding your hand, okay?” Tears began to fall again, the reality sinking in that Paula might have brain damage, but Sophie didn’t care. All she wanted was to be with her, and she would stay with her, no matter the outcome. Sophie began to sweep Paula’s hair gently from her brow, lightly, over and over, while telling her that she dropped the bomb on Sally and told her they were going to live together. Sophie laughed and mocked her mother, explaining everyone’s reaction. She also told her about Evelyn and Alexander, and that they had apprehended who she now understood was Charles Warren aka Richard.

A nurse popped her head into the room, “Sophie? There’s an officer here to see you. Can you take a moment?”

“I’ll stay with her. You go ahead,” said Isla.

Sophie didn’t want to leave Paula, but she knew the onslaught of police questioning would begin. She walked out into the hallway to find Kylie waiting for her.

“Hello Sophie. How is Paula?”

Sophie just stood there, mouth agape. “Uh, yea, she’s doing okay. They think she will be fine, but they are concerned about the blood loss and how it affected her brain. Why are you here?”

“I know you were in shock earlier, so I wanted to come explain, in case your memory was sketchy.”

“You called the ambulance,” Sophie stated, almost a question as she thought back.

“My name is Jordan Brewster, I am special agent with MI6 and I’ve been working undercover for nearly three years, trying to gather enough evidence to bring down the Zhenli cartel. I infiltrated the inner circle here in London, and Ian Walker placed me as Kylie Sharp to spy on Paula as she worked on the fraud case. He didn’t want her to get too close to the Zhenli operation, which you now know all about, I assume. Somewhere along the line, Paula figured out what was going on and began her
own investigation and, from what I gather from her threat to Lawrence, has enough incriminating
evidence to stop Zhenli?”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“Sophie, I apprehended Charles Warren. He’s in MI6 custody. Lawrence and Ian are no longer a
threat.”

“Why are they no longer a threat? Did you arrest them, too?”

“They’re dead. Charles shot them both in the head in the office earlier. You were in shock. You
don’t remember. Consider yourself lucky, Charles Warren is a certified marksman. He doesn’t miss.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. She would be dead if it weren’t for Paula. “Oh my god. So, what happens
now? Are they going to come after Paula?”

“Not if I can get to them first. If we take down the decision-makers Sophie, make them believe this
was Charles finally snapping, Paula’s name will vanish, and she will be safe. Word will get around
that Charles killed Lawrence and Ian, and if we can then ride the mountain of evidence into court,
we can apprehend all the players at Cooper who are involved in the everyday operation of money
laundering, buying of stocks, flagging the short selling, etc., and they will lead us to others within the
organization. With that information we can cripple their operation. It will take at least 10 years for
them to even try to reestablish this structure, likely longer without Lawrence at the helm. She was
ruthless. You have no idea. I was more than impressed with Paula’s stance against her. But, Sophie, I
need the evidence. Where is it?”

“I don’t have it. And I don’t know where it is, but I do know that it will give the federal authorities
enough to put them all away.”

“Can you think of a place where she might have put it?”

Sophie knew Mark Chapman had a copy, but she didn’t want his name brought into this. He needed
to remain anonymous. Paula had not had a chance to tell Sophie where the other flash drives were or
how they would be delivered to the authorities.

“I just don’t know. But when Paula wakes up I will ask her, and I will call you. Do you have a card
or something with your number on it?”

Jordan reached into her pocket and gave Sophie a card. And just to put the young woman’s mind at
ease, she pulled out her badge and held it out.

Sophie looked at her, then at the badge. MI6 Id #41179 Jordan Brewster. “Thank you for that.”

“I promise you Sophie, this is legit. I want this cartel to fall, for all their dirty drugs to shrivel up into
dust. My brother overdosed on heroine when he was 16 and I had just started my training, so I opted
to work in the drug enforcement unit and it’s been my focus to make a difference by doing what I
can to rid the world of this trash. I’ll do whatever I can to protect Paula, and you, from their tentacles.
My cover is blown now, so I will be working in the unit here in London moving forward. Please call
me if you remember anything or if Paula awakens and can tell me.”

“I will,” said Sophie. As Jordan turned to leave, Sophie stopped her. “Jordan?”

The agent turned around, “Yes.”

“Thank you. For saving Paula. If it hadn’t been for you, she probably would have died, so I am
forever grateful.”

“You’re welcome, but I was only doing my job. By the way, now that my cover is blown, you can share with Paula how much I think of her. She’s really brilliant, but I think you already know that.”

And with that, she turned and retreated down the hallway, leaving Sophie with a smile.

As Sophie returned to Paula’s room, a small part of her expected to see her partner awake and chatting with her daughter, but she was soon disappointed to see Isla sitting as she had left her, holding her mum’s hand, Paula still unconscious. She knew she had to be patient, that Paula would wake up soon and greet her with those gorgeous eyes.

“Is everything ok, Sophie?” Isla asked as she came back in.

“Uh, yea, just had to talk to the MI6 agent, the one who saved your mum’s life.”

“Jesus, what have you two been up to? This is surreal.”

“Tell me about it. It’s been a nightmare, really. Your mum is so strong and so smart … she amazes me every day,” said Sophie as she gazed lovingly at her partner. She began to cry again. “I just want her to wake up, Isla.”

“She will, Sophie. She will. Listen, I am going to go out and update everyone. I think you should probably go back to the flat and get some rest. It’s been a long day for you —”

“I’m not leaving, Isla. Don’t ask me to leave her, because I won’t.”

Isla could see that Sophie was serious. “Ok, I won’t ask you to. Can I give a message to your parents for you?”

“Tell them to go to the flat and grab me some clothes, please, oh, and my phone. They can all stay there tonight. You, too. But I am going nowhere! If Evelyn is still here, she can arrange for you to get a key and have access.”

Isla was impressed with how devoted Sophie was to her mum. It made her happy that Paula had found Sophie. They seemed very much in love.

As Isla left the room, Sophie resumed her place at Paula’s side, placing their hands together again. Paula’s hand was warm, but motionless. “I’m here, babe,” Sophie whispered. “You take your time and get all the rest you need, you hear me? I’ll be here when you wake up.”

A few minutes later, Sally entered the room. Sophie looked up at her mother, her hand still in Paula’s. Her daughter looked completely shattered. “Oh, Soph. You look awful. Are you sure you won’t come back with us and get some food and some rest?”

“There’s no food allowed in here, mum. I am not leaving her side, so until she wakes up, I will not eat or shower, so don’t ask me to.”

Sally had never seen her daughter so determined. She looked at her so small and tired and she
wanted to lift her into her arms and make everything okay, but she knew she couldn’t, and it made her heart ache for her. “Okay, then. Dad and I will be back later. Evelyn is going to take us over there and make sure we get into the flat and get a key.”

“Hold on mum.” Sophie went through Paula’s personal items the medical crew had removed from her person. She handed Sally Paula’s keys. “This is the flat key,” she said, holding it up for Sally. Just holding something of Paula’s brought the young brunette to tears. “This is our flat key.”

Sally pulled her daughter into her arms for a hug, “Everything is going to be fine, Soph. She just needs to rest, then she will come back to you, I promise. She’s made of tough stuff, you know that better than anyone!”

“I know. I’m just so scared, mum. She can’t die,” sobbed the young woman.

“She won’t, sweetheart. You need to have faith, Soph,” said her mum, reminding her to lean on God.

Sally was the second person to remind Sophie to have faith. Where had her trust in God gone? This was the hardest test she’d ever had to it, and she was failing.

“Okay then, I will be back soon, love,” and Sally kissed her daughter’s cheek, then left.

Sophie scooted the chair as close to the bed as she could, sat down and took Paula’s hand again, laying her upper torso and head on the side of the bed. She sat and listened to the beeping of Paula’s heart beat from the monitor that kept track of her vital signs. Over and over. Beep. Beep. Beep. She was alive. She would recover, physically. But would she be Paula, the smart, savvy, sexy woman who jumped in front of a bullet and took down an international drug cartel? Sophie rubbed her thumb back and forth across Paula’s hand, until the stress of the day caught up to her and pulled her into slumber.

Sophie awoke with a start, dreaming that Paula was grasping onto the edge of a cliff, but Sophie just couldn’t reach her in time. As her lover began to fall, Sophie’s conscious mind took over, bringing her back to the ICU, where she still lay on the side of Paula’s bed, their fingers intertwined.

Sophie’s heart was racing, sweat forming on her brow. She sat up and looked around to find Isla sitting in a chair next to her, sleeping. What time is it? She spotted the clock over the doorway, 9:26. Paula still lay unconscious where she had been since her return from surgery.

Just then a nurse came into the room and proceeded to check on Paula. She wrote the information on the chart – urine output, vital signs, drainage output, IV fluid check. The nurse noticed Sophie moving. “Sophie, you doing okay? You need anything? I can bring you something to drink, if you’d like,” inquired the middle-aged woman.

“No, I’m fine, thank you though.”

“All her indicators look good. Her body is functioning quite well. She’s doing great, Sophie,” offered the nurse.

“Are my parents back yet?” asked the young brunette.

“I’ll go check for you. Be right back.”

Isla opened her eyes and yawned. “Was that the nurse?” she asked.

“Yea, she said everything still looks good,” offered Sophie. “I just don’t understand why she’s not
awake yet.”

Isla just shrugged. “Did she say when the doctor would be in?”

“No. I assume not until morning.”

The nurse came back in. “Your mum and dad are in the waiting room, Sophie.”

Sophie was torn. She needed her things, but she didn’t want to leave, not even for a few minutes. But there could only be two visitors at a time. She was welded to her spot, not sure how to manage this.

“You stay here, I’ll go out for a break,” said Isla, knowing that Sophie was struggling.

Sophie was grateful Isla was so insightful.

A few minutes later, Kevin walked into the room and rubbed his daughter’s back after he put her bag down in the chair. “Got your phone and some clothes and a few toiletries for ya, love. Any change?”

“No. Same.”

“Soph, you know she’s gonna to be okay. It’s just gonna to take some time for her body to heal, that’s all. And you running yourself into the ground ain’t gonna help her do that. You need to keep your strength up for when she wakes up. There’s a sandwich in the bag for you. I know it’s not allowed in here, but one sandwich ain’t gonna hurt, now is it? Please eat something, if not for you, then do it for her.”

Sophie looked up at her dad, tears forming in her eyes. She knew he was right, so she would eat it later.

“Oh, Soph,” he said and gave her a hug. “This is a test for ya, sweetheart. I know the waiting is hard, but you’re tough and so is Paula. You’ll both come out of this stronger, you wait and see. Your old dad knows about these things. Now, me and your mum are going back to that posh flat to get some sleep, but we will be back in the morning. Paula will probably be awake by then, giving you one for worrying so much.”

“Thanks dad. For everything,” said Sophie as her dad retreated.

She looked up at the lover who had captured her heart and kissed her hand. “I love you, Paula Ann Martin, with every cell of my being, and I wanted to thank you for saving my life. You literally stopped a bullet for me, but before any of that, you rescued my heart from certain loneliness, awakening my soul to the possibilities of life, opening my eyes to what true love is, and I will never ever leave your side. You are my life, babe, and I am going to prove to you every day how incredibly in love with you I am and will always be. And no matter what life throws our way, we will handle it together, you hear me?”

“She’s a lucky woman,” came a voice from the doorway. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I just wanted to stick my head in and see for myself she’s okay,” offered Tim Cunliffe.

Sophie was startled and didn’t know exactly how to feel being in the room with Paula’s ex. “Sorry, please come in,” offered Sophie.

“I wasn’t prepared to like you, Sophie, so you’ll forgive me if I am not sure what to do with myself now that I see how devoted you are to her. I had myself convinced she was having a mid-life crisis dating someone so young, but I seriously doubt she’d ever stand between me and a bullet, so she
must really love you. She means a lot to me, Sophie, but not in the way you might assume. We brought children into the world together and we will be forever bonded because of that, but I want her to be happy, and I can see you do that for her. So, please don’t see me as some sort of threat. I’m nothing of the kind. I simply want the mother of my children to be alright, for their sakes.”

“Would you like to sit down for a bit?” asked Sophie. “Please.”

Tim sat down, looked at Paula and shook his head, “You’re still trying to manage the world, I see.” He grinned at her, then looked at Sophie. “You look like hell. Have you eaten anything?”

“My dad brought me a sandwich.”

“Nice guy, your dad. A bit protective of you, but I understand why. Dad’s are like that.”

Sophie and Tim sat and chatted for a bit, then he excused himself to let Isla come back in before she and Tim returned to the flat for the evening. Sophie would sleep in the chair, holding onto Paula, waiting for her wake up and yell at her for not leaving.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Sophie makes some important decisions as she faces reality and a visitor prompts a major change.

Chapter Notes

This one is a bit of a tear-jerker.

All the comments are just fantastic! Thank you all for reading and taking this journey with me. It’s become quite a labor of love, and I will keep writing until I find the end of the story.

Cheers!

Three days later Sophie was sat in that same chair, still waiting for Paula to open her eyes and talk to her. The young brunette was past frantic, and the doctors were no help in quashing her fears. No one had an explanation as to why Paula had not regained consciousness. The first day, the doctors told her to be patient. The second day, they began running tests and consulting with one another, even bringing in neurological specialists. Now, on the third day, no one could offer any reason the solicitor had not awakened, other than to say the brain is very complicated and modern science still had not caught up with its complexities. Sophie had prayed and prayed and prayed, for days, but still no result. She and Isla were losing hope, assuming the blood loss had resulted in the coma, and Paula may well never come out of it.

Kevin and Sally were terribly worried about their daughter’s state of mind. She wouldn’t eat, she barely slept. She categorically refused to leave Paula’s bedside, no matter how the doctors, nurses, family and friends tried to talk sense into her. She kept vigil, continuing to talk to her partner about any and everything she could think of to try to bring her partner out of the coma.

Alexander Cooper had visited every day, but would not burden Sophie, or anyone else, with the details of what was happening with the federal authorities and the press as the story continued to break onto the international news cycle. Evelyn Palmer, too, stayed for hours on end to be helpful, if she could. Cards and flowers poured in from colleagues, all wishing speedy recovery, especially from her staff and partners from her firm in Manchester. Alexander had made the call to them himself. Joe Tucker called Sophie, shocked at the news, offering his support, which only made Sophie cry harder.

Tim Cunliffe had returned to Manchester, reluctantly leaving his daughter to deal with the unknown status of her mother’s health. Theo Martin was still trapped in Brazil under a quarantine being enforced for anyone who had been in the jungle due to a fever outbreak, so Isla would remain on her own.

Paula had been moved to a regular room, much to Sophie’s dismay, because her need for the
specialty equipment in the ICU was unnecessary. But the move did afford more space in her room for visitor’s who could support Sophie.

It was mid afternoon when Alexander Cooper arrived to pay his daily visit, saddened to see there was no change. He sat next to Sophie, digging down to find some words to comfort the young woman, but coming up short. Instead, he decided to share a few stories about the first time he met Paula, making Sophie grin and nod her head in understanding of the spitfire personality her lover possessed. It was a welcomed reprieve from all the “hang in there’s” and “you need to get some rest’s”.

“Well, I will leave you to look after our girl, here,” said Alexander after about an hour. He patted Sophie’s free hand, “remember dear, I am but a phone call away. If you need anything, and I mean anything at all, you just call me. Please.”

Sophie eyed the kind man, knowing he was handling his own nightmare. “She told me you were a good man. She really did her best to protect you, ya know? And your company.”

“I don’t doubt it for a moment, Sophie. That’s why I wanted her on my team when the charges came down. I’ve never met such a principled barrister before. It’s nearly an oxymoron these days,” chuckled the older man. “I will truly do anything for her, Sophie. So, ask if there’s something on your mind.”

Sophie stopped for just a moment, then looked at him again, “Well, there is one thing I need your help with.”

Alexander Cooper sat back down and began to listen to Sophie’s request.

Mark Chapman stepped off the plane and onto the international terminal at Heathrow International Airport. It was just past 8pm local time, too late to go to the hospital to see if Paula had regained consciousness.

He had gone to work Monday morning as usual, to find that Cooper Securities was under a voluntary shutdown that was somehow associated with the fraud charges. He knew it must have something to do with Paula and all the evidence they’d gathered as she had sent him the email telling him to take that evidence to the SEC investigators if he did not hear from her after two days. Monday made two days, and she had not been in touch, but something told him to find out for himself what had happened, before turning over so much volatile information to the authorities.

Everyone in IT was speculating about what had happened. Rumors were flying around about people being shot by terrorists, even about a bomb being detonated in Alexander Cooper’s office as a warning from Chinese operatives.

Mike Mitchell had pulled Mark into his office and began questioning him about Paula Martin and what the two of them had discussed during their meetings. Per her direction, Mark played dumb and went through some of the simpler tasks the two had reviewed, all for her meeting with the SEC, which never took place. When Mark asked Mike Mitchell what had happened, he told him Steve Spencer confirmed that Paula had been shot, but did not have any details about why or by whom, but he was under strict orders to keep it to himself. Alexander Cooper was running the PR show, and the board had voted to voluntarily cease trading until they could minimize damage, and reassure their clients that all was secured.

When Mark returned to his desk, he began searching trauma hospitals in London, then one by one,
hacked into each of their admissions databases until he located Paula’s information and scanned through it – St. Bartholomew’s Hospital – GSW to upper left quadrant – severed subclavian artery – collapsed lung - unconscious - 47 minutes in ED – 4 hrs 22 minutes Theater #4 – ICU room 3 day 1 – Room 522 ongoing – Next of kin Sophie Webster, partner; Isla Martin, daughter. This saddened the young man because he thought so highly of his friend, who had left New York so frantic to reach her girlfriend, thinking she was in danger. It was likely the truth.

Mark settled into his hotel, not far from the hospital, and checked his email again, hoping to have a message from Paula. But there was nothing. It was late in London, but still early in New York, so he called Rachel to tell her he’d made it safely. Not able to lie to his girlfriend as to why he was leaving the country, he had told her much of what had happened and that he had to find out for himself Paula’s condition. Surprised by her reaction, she told him to go and do what he had to do. So, tomorrow morning, he would go to St. Bartholomew’s Hospital and pray he found a conscious Paula Martin, who could then tell him what to do with the flash drive now sitting deep in his pocket.

Day four, and still no movement from Paula. Her vital signs were perfectly normal, her breathing getting stronger by the day, but she was still in the coma.

Kevin and Sally were sitting with their daughter, trying to get her to take care of herself, but she continued to refuse anything other than sitting with Paula’s hand in her own.

“You two can give up, because you’re not going to convince me to go anywhere other than where I am, so stop doing my head in, yea?”

“Sophie, sweetheart, you’ve been sat there for days. Don’t you want to have a shower, freshen up? You only leave long enough to use the loo and you’ve hardly eaten a thing. This is not good for you, and I know Paula would agree with me! Tell her, Isla,” said Sally, turning to Paula’s daughter.

Isla sighed, “Sophie, your mum is right. You should go and at least have a shower. It won’t take but a few minutes and I promise you’ll feel a lot better for it.”

Sophie looked at them both, rolled her eyes and said, “I’ll take a shower later,” hoping it would get the pair off her back. Truth was, she wasn’t leaving, period.

A frustrated Sally threw her hands in the air. “Soph, you know dad and I have to get back home, but I just don’t want to leave you in this state. I would feel so much better if I knew you had eaten something. I will go get you whatever you want, sweetheart.”

“Okay, mum, go get me a sandwich, a cup of soup and a tablet of paper, please,” said Sophie. She had no buffer. She was irritable beyond belief and wished that everyone would just leave her the fuck alone.

Sally smiled, feeling like she’d made some progress. “I’ll be back in a jif!”

Sophie rolled her eyes at her mum.

Isla looked at Sophie, then said, “You know, you’re being a right cow to your mum. She’s only trying to take care of you, and you’re being awful to her.” Isla’s eyes started to well, “I know they can be annoying, but I would give anything …” she trailed off.

Sophie felt terrible for how she’d been acting. Isla was right, her parents had been nothing but supportive, traveling all the way down from Manchester and staying with her day and night. A tear found its way down her cheek and she almost burst into sobs. “You’re right. I’ve been awful. I can’t
stand this Isla! Why won’t she wake up? If she would just wake up and say something to me, everything would be okay.”

“I know, Sophie. I don’t understand this either, but you running yourself into the ground isn’t doing anyone any good. You need to eat and you need a shower,” said Isla, pinching her nose, then grinning.

Sophie burst out laughing. “Am I minging?”

“A little bit, yea,” smiled Isla.

“Okay, I will eat, and I will shower – but quickly! And if she wakes up, you come get me immediately!”

“Of course, I will.”

Sally returned with the food and Sophie stood up and gave her mum a big hug and apologized. “I’ll eat in a few minutes. I really smell, so I am going to have a quick shower,” she said, heading into the small room where the shower was.

Sally looked stunned. “What did you say to her, Isla?”

“Told her she was being a cow and you were only trying to do what any mother would do. If only mine were awake, she’d tell her the same. Oh, and that she stinks.”

“Well, thank you. I’ll feel better knowing she’s looking after herself. If we could stay, we would, but Kevin has to get back to the garage. You’ll call if anything changes, right?”

“Sure will, Sally. No worries.”

Kevin came into the room. “Where’s Sophie?”

“Isla finally convinced her to shower and she’s promised to eat the food,” offered Sally.

“Well, she’s seen the light! Thank you, Isla. Sal, we need to get on the road, I really need to get back. Tyrone has been handling everything on his own.”

“I know Kevin. Let’s just wait for Sophie to come back, then we can leave.”

“Yea, alright,” he said, sitting in an empty chair.

About 5 minutes later, Sophie came out of the shower room, hair up in a towel, clean clothes on.

“Wow, that was the best shower ever,” commented the young woman, an almost smile on her face. She looked at Paula and said, “Wow, babe, you must really be tired if my smell didn’t wake you.”

Everyone giggled, happy to see Sophie be a bit light-hearted. She took a few minutes to say goodbye to her parents before resuming her place at Paula’s bedside. She and Isla tucked into the food Sally had brought them, Sophie feeling much better after eating. She actually felt relaxed for the first time in days. She put Paula’s hand back into her own, and drifted off to sleep.

Mark Chapman made his way to the hospital, then up to the fifth floor, seeking out room 522. He hesitated outside the door, suddenly quite nervous about invading Paula’s privacy. He walked down the hall, trying to gather the courage to enter. He realized it had been just one week since he had seen Paula back in New York and marveled at how much had changed in such a short period of time. I’ve
come all this way, so I have to go in. Time to man up, Mark. He knocked lightly on the door, then opened it slightly. He popped his head in and heard all the monitors beeping, but other than that, it was quiet. He walked in slowly, not wanting to get confronted by anyone. When he had gone in far enough, he saw Paula laying so still in the bed, so pale and frail, quite the contrast to the woman he had said good-bye to in New York a week ago. And sitting next to her was Sophie, eyes closed, sleeping. And in the other chair, was another sleeping young woman. This must be her daughter, Isla. He could see the resemblance.

He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want to disturb any of them. He couldn’t tell if Paula had come out of the coma and was just resting. He had no right to check with the nurses as he wasn’t family. He decided he would go and get some coffee and come back. As he turned, his foot caught the trash can and it made a noise, waking Sophie. She sat up with a start and almost screamed at the stranger standing in the room.

Mark put up his hands, and began to back away. “I’m Mark, Sophie,” he said. “Mark from New York.”

By now, Isla was also awake.

“Mark?” asked a confused Sophie.

Hopefully, Paula had told Sophie about him.

“Mark Chapman. I worked with Paula at Cooper last week. I helped her get all the documents from the Cooper databases and all the other information.”

“What … what are you doing here?” asked Sophie, believing he was who he said he was, because no one else but the three of them knew he had anything to do with all this chaos.

“I came to see Paula. I wanted to check on her … and you. Has she woke up yet?” his southern drawl coming out thickly.

“No, she’s in a coma. How did you …”

He looked at her sheepishly, “My hacking skills serve me well when I need information.”

Isla just looked on as Sophie seemed to know who this lad was.

“I really wasn’t trying to pry, I swear, I just needed to know she was okay,” offered Mark.

“And you flew all the way here just to check on her?” asked Sophie, a little skeptical.

“Mostly to see if she was okay, but also because she sent an email Saturday, telling me if I didn’t hear from her in 2 days to take the information to the SEC investigators. Then I went to work Monday and found out that the London office was in chaos. Rumors were flying about a bombing, then the head of my department told me she’d been shot, but I wasn’t sure if it was real or not, so I checked email and there was nothing from her. I emailed several times, even called her, though she told me not to ever do that, but she didn’t respond, so I thought I should go to the SEC. I started to go over there, but something told me not to, call it intuition, but I had a feeling I should come here, and she would tell me what to do, so I got on a plane.” He thought it best to leave out the fact that he had snooped into the hospital database.

Sophie was processing what the man was saying, nodding her head as he explained. So, the evidence hadn’t yet been given to the authorities. “Well, as you can see, she won’t be able to tell you anything.” Sophie looked at her partner.
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude. I –“

“You’re not intruding, Mark. She really has a lot of respect for you, told me all about how smart you are and how she could never have gotten all the evidence if it weren’t for you. She’d be chuffed you’re here,” said Sophie, “if she were awake.”

Sophie realized she had not even explained to Isla who this chap was, “I’m sorry, Mark this is Paula’s daughter –“

“Isla,” finished Mark. “It’s nice to meet you. Mark Chapman,” said the young man, offering his hand.

“Wow, you really don’t miss a thing, do you?” responded Sophie. “If you hadn’t quite caught on, Mark helped your mum last week with the computer stuff while she was in New York.”

Isla nodded in acknowledgement, “Where are you from Mark? I love your accent!” she asked.

“Savannah, Georgia. I mean, I live in New York City now, but I was raised in Savannah. I told Paula she should visit Savannah someday. It’s a really beautiful city. Very historic.” Then he began to chuckle at himself, “Well, not quite as historic as England I guess.”

Sophie had gone quiet while Mark and Isla were talking, thinking about what she should do about the evidence. Should she call Jordan Brewster and have her come meet Mark? That wouldn’t work. Paula wanted Mark to remain completely anonymous. Sophie could just get the flash drive from Mark, if he had it, and give it to her. Or, better yet …

“Mark, did you bring the flash drive with you?”

“Yes, I did. It’s right here,” he said, pulling it from his pocket. “I thought it best to keep it on me.”

“Well, I’ve figured out what you’re going to do. Alexander will be coming by soon. You’re going to give it to him.”

“Alexander?” inquired Mark.

“Cooper. He comes every day, and what better way to bring the evidence to light than to have him do it himself. That takes you out of the equation and makes him look a lot better to the authorities,” offered Sophie.

“You mean, THE Alexander Cooper? The man who OWNS Cooper Securities?” asked Mark, not quite believing what she was saying.

“That’s exactly who I mean. It’s perfect. This is exactly what Paula would tell you to do,” said Sophie. “Have a seat, Mark. We are going to wait until he gets here,” directed Sophie, “unless you have something better to do?”

“Are you sure? I can sit in the waiting room,” he said, not wanting to overstep.

“Of course, I’m sure. Paula needs some different stimulation. It might help her to hear your voice,” said Sophie.

Mark took a seat and stretched out his long legs. “You know, I can see why she loves you so much,” he said, looking at Sophie’s hand in Paula’s. “She talked about you a lot, you know? I caught her texting you a couple of times and she looked so happy just to be talking to you. She hated being away from you. Then, the night she left, she had gone to dinner with that guy, and when she got
back she was so panicked that something had happened to you. All she wanted was to get home to you,” said the young man. “You see couples all the time and they just don’t make sense, you know, and you wonder why and what brought them together. But when Paula talked about you, I could tell right off that you two were the real deal, just meant to be, ya know? She’d get this look in her eye, like she could see years ahead, and she’d smile and take a deep breath, like she was letting her feelings settle over her …”

He looked up to see both Isla and Sophie with tears in their eyes.

“Oh, my god, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to make you cry, either of you!”

“Don’t worry, Mark, these are happy tears. It’s just a girl thing,” said Isla, reassuring him that they were both okay. “Are all men like you in Georgia?”

“Whataya mean?” he asked.

“Like proper polite and kind and caring? Most the blokes I know are obsessed with football and pints at the pub! They wouldn’t notice a feeling if it bit them in ass,” said Isla.

“Well, my mama raised me to take other people’s feelings into consideration, try to walk in their shoes so to speak, not make things always about me, ya know? And to always respect women! She’d take a switch to me if I was rude to a lady,” he grinned. “But to answer your question, no, not all guys have manners in Georgia. They’re much like you described – obsessed with football, American football, that is, not soccer, hunting, beer and … well, you know,” said the young man, blushing.

“Well, your girlfriend is a lucky lass,” offered Sophie. “And I’m quite sure your mum is proud of the man you’ve become. I get why Paula liked you so much.”

The three of them sat and chatted for over an hour, Sophie continuing to hold Paula’s hand, never letting it go, and including her partner in the conversation as if she were awake. Sophie checked her phone for the time, confused as to why Alexander had not materialized. Finally, Isla suggested she and Mark go grab a sandwich for lunch.

“C’mon, Mark, let’s go,” motioned Isla. “The cafeteria here has good soup.”

“Sophie, do you –“

“Don’t ask her to come! She’ll bite your head off at the mere suggestion,” said Isla, looking at Sophie with a smirk on her face.

Sophie just rolled her eyes and shooed the pair out the door. She wanted some alone time with her partner anyway. As soon as the door closed, Sophie leaned over to place a sweet kiss on Paula’s still lips, then rubbed their noses together. “I love you, Paula Martin. They don’t understand, do they? I am right where I am supposed to be, and I’m going nowhere until we can go together.”

Sophie started her daily ritual of rubbing lotion on Paula’s arm and legs, per the nurse’s suggestion. She took her time, massaging each limb with care and strength, making sure her circulation was stimulated, being careful of the area from which they removed the artery. Sophie reveled in the feel of her lover’s skin, remembering in detail what it was like to touch her in other areas, hoping they would once again be able to make love like they used to. Methodically, she used her fingers to rub the muscles, up and down, watching them pink up with each stroke. She had even painted Paula’s toenails the day before, talking to her about the latest celebrity gossip from the magazines Isla had brought in. She tried anything to bring Paula out of her sleep and back to her.
Just as she had placed the covers back over Paula’s legs, Alexander came into the room, Evelyn following quickly behind.

“Alexander, I’m so glad you’re here! I have something very important to discuss.”

“As do I,” said the older man, patting his front breast pocket.

Sophie’s eyes widened, and a huge grin pulled across her face, forgetting everything else. “You have it?”

“That’s why we are late. Ev and I have been busy,” he said, pulling a small box from his coat. He handed it to Sophie, saying, “Now, if it’s not what you’re looking for, just say the word and we will go back to the drawing board!”

Sophie’s hands were shaking, and her stomach flipped in anticipation. As she opened the top, her eyes were treated to the sparkling engagement ring sitting inside. It was platinum with a three-carat princess cut white diamond flanked by two sapphires, representing Paula’s children. “Oh my god, it’s gorgeous,” said a stunned Sophie. “It’s perfect!”

“If you want something bigger, I can –“

“No! This is just what I want, Alexander. Thank you, for making this happen. I know I am going to owe you for ages, but I needed to get something special for her, and on my wages ...”

“Sophie, you owe me absolutely nothing! I owe both you and Paula so much more than I can put into words,” said Alexander, patting her hand. “So, just consider this a small token of my appreciation. And if you change your mind before you pop the question, just let me know and we can certainly get something else, though, I must say, I think this one suits her to a T.”

Sophie was at a loss for words. “I can’t let you do that, Alexander. I am going to pay you back. And like I said, I know it will take me some time, but –“

“Well, how much are you planning to pay me, because you have no idea what it costs,” said the man facetiously.

“You’ll give me the receipt and then I will keep track of my payments and –“

“Evelyn, grab me that pad of paper,” he said, pointing to the table. Evelyn passed him the paper and he pulled a fountain pen out of his coat that was probably more expensive than her dad’s car. He scribbled out a crude receipt and handed it to her. “There! Now, I don’t want to hear another word about this, do I make myself clear, young lady?”

Sophie looked at the paper in her hand. It read, “Ring – paid in full for services rendered.”

“I wouldn’t argue with him, Sophie. He’s nearly as stubborn as you,” said Evelyn giggling.

Sophie looked at the man, then wrapped her arms around him, giving him a huge hug. “You’re ever bit as wonderful as Paula said.”

“Yes, well, I ...”

“OH! I nearly forgot,” said Sophie. “I think I have figured out a way for you to handle this mess Charles Warren made.”

Alexander’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean?”
“Well, there’s someone here that you need to meet. He should be back any minute now. And I think he has something that will help.”

Almost as if on cue, the door opened, and Isla came in, Mark following. Sophie pocketed the ring quickly, not wanting anyone to know what she was planning, at least not until after Paula knew.

“Come here, Mark,” motioned Sophie. She put her hands on his shoulders, turning him around, “Mark Chapman, meet Alexander Cooper.”

The young man held out his hand, “It’s an honor to meet you, sir.”

Sophie went on to explain who Mark was and how he had helped Paula, and that he had all the evidence they had gathered.

“Listen, Alexander, I’ve thought this through, and Paula was adamant that Mark’s name stay out of this, to keep him safe. But the evidence needs to surface so that the authorities can take down all the people involved, not just those within the Cooper Securities ranks. I thought about giving the flash drive directly to Jordan Brewster, but I might have to expose Mark in doing so,” explained Sophie.

“Then I thought, the best thing would be for you to take it and give it to them. It shows them you have nothing to hide and are cooperating with them, and it keeps Mark completely out of it. And if you turn the evidence in, it says to your honest clients that you believe in truth, not greed. Plus, it will take Paula’s name out of the mix and, perhaps she and I will not have to look over our shoulders for the rest of our lives.”

Alexander took in what Sophie was saying, then began to shake his head. “Paula told me how special you were, but I had no idea you were this smart!” he said. Then he turned to Mark Chapman. “Mr. Chapman, you work for me in New York, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir, that’s correct,” said the young man.

“Well, not anymore!” said Alexander, with quite a fire in his belly.

Everyone in the room, especially Mark, was taken aback by Alexander’s response. Sophie started to say something, when Alexander continued.

“I need people like you, Mark. I’d like for you to come work for me here in London, as head of my IT operations for the company. It’s obvious all the other idiots were in Ian’s pocket, which mean they had little integrity, and I need someone honest, reliable and loyal to me and the board. Now, it would mean a move, obviously, and a substantial pay rise. Are you up for the challenge, lad?”

Mark’s eyes widened considerably. He didn’t know what to say. “Well, it’s quite an offer, sir. But, can I take a day to think it over and discuss it with my girlfriend, Rachel. You see, she’s an actress and New York is the only place for her to pursue her dream of being on Broadway.”

Alexander nodded his head. He liked this chap. “Of course, Mark. Take your time. But, may I just say that London’s West End is no slouch when it comes to theatre, and I happen to sit on a few of the theatre trusts, so getting her connected would only take a phone call, with her permission, of course.”

“It looks like you two have lots to talk about, yea?” said Sophie, smiling a full smile for the first time in days.

“Yes, Mark, why don’t we go talk business elsewhere, let the ladies have some peace,” Alexander motioned toward the door. As he walked out, he looked back and mouthed thank you to Sophie, who could only grin.
The young brunette turned back to the bed, where Paula was laying and resumed her position at her side. “Babe, did you hear all that? It was fantastic! That Mark is something else … you were so right about him.” She smiled at the outcome of both Mark’s maybe new job, and the box in her pocket.

Isla and Evelyn were chatting in the corner, used to letting Sophie have her time with Paula. Sophie settled into her chair and joined the conversation, which happened to be about what would happen once Mark took Alexander through all the information and how it all connected. Evelyn knew Alexander was in for a surprise regarding how many of his employees were really working for Ian Walker. Once the evidence was handed to the authorities, Jordan would be able to oversee the arrest of key players in the Zhenli cartel and dismantle their operation, at least for a while.

About a thirty minutes later, Dr. Waxman came in for evening rounds to check on Paula.

“Good evening ladies,” she said as she walked in and picked up Paula’s chart. “How’s our girl doing, then? Everything seems to be going well – good vitals, her breathing has improved a lot. Let me listen.”

She placed the stethoscope up to Paula’s left side, listening intently, nodding her head. “Yea, that lung sounds great. No lasting harm, I would suspect. Dr. Wagner really is such a good lung guy.” Then she took a peek at the wound and the drain tube. “Everything looks terrific, here. Now, if we could just get you to wake up, Paula!” She gave her a quick neuro exam of all her reflexes. “All good,” she offered. “What is going on in there, Paula?” asked the doctor, more to herself than anyone else.

“Anything new to report?” asked a hopeful Sophie.

“I’m afraid not. All her tests came back indicating normal brain function, no aneurisms, no stenosis. We just don’t know enough about the brain yet. It’s definitely in a healing state, otherwise her reflex functions would diminish, so we just have to keep waiting, I’m afraid. I know this is tough on all of you, but the truth is all signs point to recovery,” said the doctor. “I’ll be back in the morning, but if anything changes, anything at all, let the nurses know and they will page me.”

“Thanks doc. See you tomorrow,” said Isla.

After the doctor left, Evelyn could see that Sophie was a little disappointed and thought perhaps she could use some alone time with Paula. “Isla, would you care to join me for dinner, somewhere other than the bloody cafeteria? My treat, dear.”

“That sounds good, actually. I’d like to get out of here for a bit. Sophie, can I bring you back something?” asked Isla.

“No, I’m fine, but thanks.”

“Not even a piece of ooey gooey triple layer chocolate cake?” offered Evelyn.

Sophie smiled but still declined.

“Alright then love, I’m going to say my good-byes for the evening. I will see you sometime tomorrow and likely with some news on how Alexander is getting along with the feds!”

“Goodnight, Ev. Thanks for everything today,” said Sophie. Evelyn knew and gave her a wink.

Then the pair left, and she was alone again with her love. Sophie brushed the hair from Paula’s brow, taking in her lovely features. “Why won’t you come back to me?” She stared at her lover, intently, willing her to open her eyes and smile at her. But nothing came. “Listen to me, I have a very
important question to ask you, babe, but I kind of need you to be conscious for it, so do your best to
wake up, yea? Because this is the big question and if you think you’re going to avoid it by being in a
coma, you’re wrong! I’ll never give up and I’ll wait here forever if I have to.”

She sighed and sat back down, exhausted. She didn’t understand how nothing she did made any
difference in Paula’s condition. She talked to her, held her hand, massaged her limbs, prayed over
and over, and still no change. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. Paula was supposed to wake
up when her princess charming placed the magical kiss on her lips. She’d been poisoned by fairy
tales, always expecting things to be okay in the end, but real life never worked that way.

Sophie started to get angry, beginning a rant in her head at God for not listening. Then she saw the
notepad Alexander had written on earlier and got an idea. This had worked for her once before in
dire circumstances, perhaps it was time for some reality.

She grabbed the pad and a pen and began,

Dear Paula,

It’s been four days since I last heard your voice and I miss it. I miss its silky sexy quality, the way you
can incite arousal in me just by asking me to make you a coffee or take the rubbish out. It’s not fair,
really, how you can control me just by speaking, but the truth isn’t always fair, is it? I wish you
would say something now, anything, letting me know that you’re okay inside your sleep and that
you’ll come out when you’re rested and ready to face the world again. It would help me sleep if I
could hear you whisper my name, the way you do when you want to taste me. I sit and look at you
for hours on end, running my fingers up and down your arm, holding your hand, kissing your lips
softly, thinking that some combination of these movements will be the sequence that will unlock your
silence. I haven’t gotten it right just yet. You stay closed off to me, your touch out of reach, your
voice hidden away, and, frankly, Paula, it’s driving me mad. If this is some sort of test for me, I fear
I’m failing miserably. The truth is I feel incredibly guilty that I am sitting here unharmed and you are
fighting for your life with a wound that was supposed to be mine. You loved me so much you jumped
in front of a bullet for me, and I love you so much I wish you hadn’t.

I don’t really know where to go from here, how to change the circumstances under which I am
living. I can’t leave your side, I am just unable to do it, unable to move about the world in a free
manner, because I am not free. I cannot walk to the cafeteria without feeling a panic inside my gut,
fear that you will wake, and I will have failed you again by not being here. I cannot walk outside,
breathe fresh air into my functioning lungs, because you are here, your lung limping along as it
repairs itself. I cannot read a book or watch TV, my brain refusing to think as it normally would
because yours might be struggling to process like lightning as it did before.

The imbalance of good and evil in the world has reared its ugly head once more in my life, dread
and fear gripping me each time hope springs, as it’s been my experience that evil will always win. I
let myself go and fell completely in love with you and I dug down deep to find the courage to let that
love infiltrate the darkest places in my heart, illuminating it with possibility, encouraging me to step
off into thin air. I became the brave warrior, unafraid of loving, unafraid of letting go, unafraid of
taking a chance on happiness. You are that happiness, and it felt unmistakably miraculous, like any
curse I had been living under had been removed and purified by your love. I walked through life
feeling hopeful. Then this happened, and I am again living in a darkened world where answers are
out of reach and almost ridiculous.

But, I have plans for us, Paula. Big plans. Plans that require your presence, plans that will make
you laugh, bring you joy, fill your soul with the love I have inside me. Trouble is, I can’t make any of
it happen without you. Am I destined to go it alone, one half of a whole that was severed too soon? I
need you to dig down deep and fight your way back to me, so I can feel guilty to your face and you can tell me to stop being silly, that it wasn’t my fault. I need you to use that voice, the voice that soothes my soul, to tell me everything is going to be okay and that it was all just a blip in our story, a charm for your bracelet amongst the many I will place on it.

But I am faced with a possibility I dare not consider, for it cuts me straight to the bone. Maybe you want to come back, but just can’t. Maybe God is saying it’s your time to come home, away from a world where greedy drug dealers run the show and mentally ill blokes only need one shot to shatter people’s lives. And here I am, desperate, begging you to open your eyes and be with me, when maybe what your eyes see is paradise awaiting you. How can I ask you to give that up?

I guess the question I really must ask myself is this: am I brave enough to let you go? That would be the truest test of my love for you. Do I love you enough to let you peacefully and guiltlessly move from this world into the next? I know you want to stay and protect me, but I have found out over the last few days that I am stronger than I thought. Though without you, I will never be completely fulfilled, I will never smile a whole smile again, I will never really stop crying inside from the pain of the loss of my true soulmate, but I will go on. I will live my life. I will get jobs and I will have children, and I might even be lucky enough to fall in love again. So, babe, I give you my blessing to leave. It’s okay if you’re not strong enough to overcome your injuries. It’s okay if you’re too tired to make it back to me. You go, if you must. Go and enjoy being with God, but leave here knowing that you are loved beyond the realms of space and time, and I will, one day, join you again.

Your devoted and loving partner,

Sophie

Sophie took the letter, folded it up, and placed it between her hand and Paula’s, holding it between their palms, fingers intertwined. Then Sophie placed her head against her lover’s arm and wept until she finally fell asleep.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Tragedy strikes and Sophie lets go, only to find her life change drastically in a matter of minutes.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for all the awesome comments. It's wonderful to connect with others who love Saula, too. More to come, soon! Cheers!

Sophie woke to the shrill sound of a loud, long beep. She sat up, a bit disoriented. What is that sound? She looked up to the monitor and saw the flat line where Paula’s heartbeat used to be.

Oh God, she’s leaving me.

A slew of medical staff came flying into the room, one nurse started CPR and yelled for a crash cart. The doctor on call came rushing in.

“What’s happening?” cried Sophie.

“She’s flatlined, love,” said one of the nurses. “We need to move that arm away,” she said to the doctor on the other side of the bed.

They moved Paula into position and pulled out the defibrillator.


God, I can’t believe you’re doing this to me again. WHAT have I ever done to deserve this kind of pain? WHAT? I’m done with believing you’re a kind and loving GOD. YOU must really hate me for some reason and I’ll never forgive You for this!!

Sophie collapsed into the chair and was crying into her hands. She couldn’t bare watching her lover leave her. She wanted to scream out loud at God for taking her away. She wanted to scream at Paula to stay, to fight harder. She knew she would never again love like she loved this woman, the woman who gave her life to save Sophie’s. Her heart broke into a million pieces.

“Charge to 200. Clear!” Shock. “We have rhythm!”

Beep, beep, beep.

Sophie looked up at the monitor, confused by the sound. Paula’s heart was beating. She was still alive, still with her. The young woman couldn’t wrap her head what was happening.

The doctor listened to Paula’s heart for some time and seemed satisfied that everything was back to
“What happened?” asked a frightened Sophie through her tears.

“I’m not sure. We will run some tests in the morning, see if there was any damage to the heart muscle. Sometimes these things just happen.”

“Will it happen again? Is she okay?”

“We will keep a close eye on her, don’t worry,” said the doctor as he was charting the incident. “Dr. Waxman will be in early for morning rounds. She’ll give her a thorough check.”

Sophie looked at the clock – 1:34 am. She had been asleep for hours, her head next to Paula’s arm. She noticed the letter she’d written was laying on the floor. It must have slipped out of their hands. Sophie picked it up and placed it under her partner’s pillow.

She sat back down and began to weep again. “Oh God, I can’t do this. I can’t let her go. She means too much to me. I need her here with me. Please don’t take her away from me.” Sophie placed her head down on the side of the bed and continued to cry. “I can’t live without you, babe. Please don’t leave me!”

Sophie’s head was pounding from the tears and she felt like she was going to vomit, the fear gripping her. She sighed over and over, almost hyperventilating as she tried to regulate her breathing through all the tears. Then, she felt fingers in her hair and for a minute she thought Isla had come back and was trying to soothe her. The fingers continued to stroke her hair softly, then she heard a whisper of a sound.

“Sophie?”

Her head shot up off the bed to find Paula looking at her with those gorgeous eyes.

“Paula?! Babe, can you hear me?” cried Sophie, bolting to her feet.

Paula nodded her head, just slightly, but it was there.

“Oh my god, Paula! You’re awake! Babe, you’re awake!!” she nearly screamed. “Can you understand me?”

Paula nodded her head again and furrowed her brow, confused by why Sophie was asking her that.

“What happened?” asked Paula, her voice a bit stronger.

Sophie was beside herself. She was crying so hard she had snot coming out of her nose, but she was nearly laughing. “Do you remember anything? Oh, my god, Paula, you came back to me! I love you so much. I thought you were going to leave me …” Then she leaned over and kissed her hard on the lips, snot and all.

“Never,” rasped Paula, then she winced at the pain coming from her left side.

“Hold on. We need to call the doctor in!” Sophie pushed the call button, but decided that wouldn’t be fast enough. She got up, ran to the door, flung it open, then yelled down toward the nurse’s station, “She’s awake! Somebody come NOW! She’s awake!”

She returned to Paula and pulled her hand into her own as she had done a million times in the last
five days. She kissed it over and over, truly stunned at the turn of events. Sophie’s world had gone from complete despair to utter bliss in a manner of minutes.

Paula just smiled at her lover, happy to have brought her so much joy.

“Oh my god, I have to call Isla!” said Sophie, grabbing for her phone. As she was dialing the door opened and the doctor came rushing in, along with two nurses.

“Well, well, look who decided to join us! Can you tell me your name?” he asked Paula as he listened to her heart.

“Paula Martin.”

“And do you know who this lovely young lady is?” motioning his head toward Sophie.

Paula smiled, “Sophie Webster, my partner.”

“And what year is it, Paula?”

“2019.”

“And month?”

“April.”

“And what day is it?”

“Uhm, Saturday, I think.”

“What do you do for a living?” he asked.

“I’m a lawyer.”

“And how old are you?”

“51.”

“What year were you born?”

“1967.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

She thought for a minute, then said, “Yu Yan at the North Star Tea Room.”

He looked at Sophie for some idea if this was recent.

Sophie shrugged and shook her head to indicate she didn’t know.

“Who is this Yu Yan?” asked the doctor.

“She told me about mogwai and how dangerous it is. I had to get to Sophie,” she said as she began to recall more detail. Her eyes widened as the memories returned. “Charles Warren kidnapped you,” she said, looking at Sophie. “He had you and he wanted that stupid dragon back, so I went to Chinatown to find out more about it. That’s where I met Yu Yan and she told me about mogwai.”

“Keep going. Do you remember more?” asked the doctor, continuing to get confirmation from
Sophie.

“I went to my office and Charles was there. I talked him into taking me to Sophie once I gave him the dragon,” she said to the doctor. She shifted her focus, “and he did, he took me to Ian’s office and you were asleep on the sofa. And Kylie was there with you.” Then she stopped and shook her head.

“Babe, do you remember meeting Lawrence?”

Paula looked at her a bit confused and shook her head. Had she met Lawrence?

“Do you remember the shooting? Who shot you?” asked Sophie.

“I was shot?” asked Paula.

“Yes, in the shoulder,” confirmed the doctor. “Paula, today is Thursday. You had surgery for your wounds on Saturday, but you were in a coma for nearly five days.”

Paula then understood why Sophie was so emotional. “Five days?”

“You have good recall and it doesn’t appear that your brain function has been compromised.”

“Why would it have been compromised, I don’t understand,” said the solicitor.

“You lost a lot of blood as the bullet severed a major artery, slowing blood flow to your brain. When you wouldn’t wake after surgery, we weren’t sure if you’d experienced a severe lack of oxygen due to diminished blood volume, which might have caused damage.”

Paula was doing her best to take in all the information, answering questions, asking some as well. The doctor performed a few physical tests and was satisfied with the results. The nurse rechecked the wound and the dressing, making sure it was intact after the emergency earlier.

“Your full memory will likely return without a problem. The most recent events are often the ones that come back the slowest. But, from what I can see, you’re going to be just fine! Dr. Waxman will be in to give you a thorough exam in a few hours and there will likely be some neuro specialists who want to do some tests as well, so try to relax and allow yourself to reacclimate. Don’t force memories to come, they will arrive when they’re ready,” directed the doctor.

“Thank you, doctor,” said Sophie, not taking her eyes off Paula.

The medical staff retreated, leaving the lover’s alone.

“Wow! You’ve been through it, haven’t you baby? You look terrible. Have you eaten?” asked Paula, taking in the sight of her worn out lover, cupping Sophie’s gaunt face with her right hand, rubbing the pad of her thumb across the dark circle under her left eye.

Sophie just laughed, tears still streaming down her cheeks. She couldn’t quite take it all in. Paula was going to be fine. How in the world had it all changed so suddenly?

“What’s so funny? You really do look awful, sweetheart. Have you looked in a mirror lately?”

“It’s kind of turned into a joke, really …”

“What do you mean, a joke? You shouldn’t be laughing about not eating or taking care of yourself! Please tell me you’ve not been sitting here for five days?!”

“She certainly has!” came the answer from the doorway. “And I thought you were stubborn!” said
Isla as she walked into the room to greet her mother.

“Hello, my baby girl,” smiled Paula. Isla gave her mum a huge hug, letting out a long cleansing breath.

“You scared the shit out of us all, mum! Please, next time you decide to dismantle an international drug cartel, don’t!” requested her daughter.

“Dismantle?” asked Paula. “Will someone please tell me what’s happened? I can’t remember.”

“You heard what the doctor said, you’re supposed to let your memories return naturally,” reminded Sophie.

“Oh, whatever! Well, can you give me something, anything?” asked the solicitor, impatient for someone to fill in the blanks.

“All in good time! Right now, you just need to concentrate on getting better, do you hear me?” demanded Sophie. “Your body has been through a terrible trauma, so you can’t just expect to get up and pick up right where you left off!”

“Are you going to be like a mother hen, not letting me do anything?” teased Paula.

“If that’s what it takes, then yes I will!” exclaimed her young partner.

The three ladies talked for a bit, Sophie not allowing any talk of the events of the past week, until Isla began yawning. It was very early morning, around three, when Isla announced she was going to go back to the flat to get some sleep.

“Mum, I’ll be back later. Right now, I need a few good hours of solid sleep, not unlike someone else I know,” Isla said motioning her head in Sophie’s direction.

“Isla! Let’s not get into this now,” moaned Sophie, knowing Paula was going to give her another earful.

“Bye. See you later.” And they were alone again.

“Sophie, you really should go with her and sleep for more than an hour hunched over in this bloody chair!” said Paula.

“There is no flaming way I am going anywhere, so just stop. When I am sure everything is going to be okay, I will go home and sleep. I promise!” said Sophie, giving her love a smirk. “But, until then, I will be right here where I am supposed to be.”

Paula just looked at her lover, taking in the complete exhaustion on her face. “Baby, I just think –“

“I know a way to shut you up,” said Sophie, leaning across and putting her lips to Paula’s. This was a feeling she thought she’d lost forever, so she took her time, taking in the sensation of the warmth and response of her lover’s mouth. It wasn’t a passionate kiss, that could wait for later. It was a kiss of complete surrender, of praise and promise, a flash of what their future held. And though it only lasted a few seconds, it said everything. “Dear god how I have missed you,” said Sophie, tears forming in her eyes.

“Don’t start crying, love. I’m okay. I’m here. I’m so sorry you were so scared. You must know that I would never leave you,” offered Paula, her good hand on Sophie’s cheek. She looked into her lover’s eyes and said, “I love you, baby, so very much.” Then she kissed Sophie once again, letting
her know she would not leave her again. “Now, you need to try to get some sleep! I’m feeling a bit tired, so I am going to rest.”

Sophie nodded her head, “Fine! I will sleep.” She plopped down in the chair and tried to get into a comfortable spot. She pulled her little blanket up over her torso and closed her eyes. Then she shifted. Then she shifted again.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” said Paula. “You’ve not had proper sleep in a week!” She knew she wouldn’t be able to convince her lover to go home just yet, but she had an idea. She did her best to shuffle herself over to the left, careful not to strain herself, making room for Sophie to lie next to her. “Come here, love,” said Paula, patting the space next to her.

“I don’t think that’s –“

“Sophie Webster, get your ass up on this bed right now! I will be fine. There is plenty of room, so no arguments!”

Her Paula was back. She loved to hear that commanding voice, that in-charge attitude.

“Okay, okay, keep your hair on!” smirked Sophie, climbing gingerly into the bed to lay down beside Paula. Sophie shifted her body into a comfortable place, making sure not to compromise wires or tubes, then grabbed Paula’s hand. She knew she wouldn’t sleep unless she could feel her.

“How’s that, then? Better?” asked Paula.

“Much,” grinned Sophie, loving the feeling of once again being able to lay next to Paula.

“Now, sleep! And that’s an order!” commanded Paula.

Sophie drifted off to sleep in only seconds, her body so weary from all the worry and stress.

Paula felt her lover’s hand completely relax into hers and could hear her breathing change, so she knew she was asleep. She was saddened by the ordeal Sophie had been through, wishing she had been spared all the worry, but she would find some way to make it up to her. Perhaps a nice long holiday, where they would have loads of time to relax and reconnect. Paula wasn’t sure how long it would take for her shoulder to fully recover, but she knew it wasn’t going to stop her from properly loving her partner.

Paula settled into a relaxed state, not quite asleep, not quite awake. She listened to Sophie breathe, a rhythm of in and out, her body tranquil, her limbs flaccid. She was so peaceful and so beautiful, despite the unkept hair and dark circles under her eyes. She would always be beautiful to Paula, no matter how she changed physically. She lay there, thinking about her own mortality and how she had come so close to death, how she had almost been cheated out of an amazing life with her partner. The love she had for the woman at her side had to have pulled her back, made her fight to live. She had no memory of it, no struggle to return, no dreaded decision to make. She just woke up.

As Paula was trying to remember more details, recall the shooting, Sophie suddenly began to whimper, and her body began to jerk ever so slightly. Initially, Paula thought she might be having a seizure, then Sophie began to cry and mumble, tears leaking from her closed lids. She was having a nightmare. Paula hoped she might settle, but the motions worsened, and the mumbling turned into pleas – ‘take my hand! You’re slipping, and I can’t save you. Babe, please don’t leave me. Oh my god, noooooooooooooooo’

Paula tried to wake her, “Sophie, baby, wake up!” She nudged her with her good shoulder and grabbed her arm and shook her. “Sophie, you’re just dreaming. Wake up. I’m right here and I’m
Sophie sat straight up, and looked around startled and sweating, her breathing heavy and uneven. “Paula?!”

“I’m here, love! I’m okay. You were having a bad dream, baby. It’s okay.” Paula rubbed her back to soothe her and motioned for her to lay back down and lean into her. “C’mere, sweetheart. It was just a bad dream. It’s okay,” she cooed.

“Oh god, I couldn’t reach you and you were slipping off this cliff, falling, and …”

“Shhhhh, try to forget it, honey. Your mind is still in panic mode,” said Paula, cuddling Sophie closer to her, not letting her lover know that her wound was throbbing with pain. Sophie was much more important than the little bit of pain she felt. Sophie had been in agony for nearly a week, and Paula had to help her put a stop to it. After a few minutes, the young brunette, once again, drifted off, quickly going limp next to her.

Healing was going to take a lot of time, for them both.

Xxxxxx

Paula was awakened as she felt a sharp pain in her shoulder. She opened her eyes to see the nurse pulling at the drain tube. “Sorry, I know this is a bit tender. It’s nice to see you awake, Ms. Martin. I’m Mallory, one of your nurses. I saw in your notes that you woke up last night?”

Paula nodded her head and tried to stretch a bit, wincing at the pain.

“How’s your pain level, love? Do you need some pain meds?”

“No, it’s not too bad. I’m just stiff,” she said, pulling her arm out from under Sophie’s head with some help from the nurse.

“Well, it doesn’t help that you’ve been laying still for so long. We will have a PT person come in and do some work with you, get those muscles moving again.”

“How long will I have that tube in?” asked Paula referring to the drain. “And this catheter is really not at all comfortable.”

“I know dear, but they won’t come out until the doctor orders it. You’re healing up nicely, though, so hopefully it won’t be too long. The quicker we get you up, the better,” declared the nurse. Changing the subject, she motioned her head to the young woman laying in Paula’s bed, “I see she finally found some peace? Poor thing was bone weary, but never once left your side. She’s a good’un, that one.”

“Yes, she is,” said Paula, looking at her partner sleeping peacefully next to her. “When will the doctor be in?”

Mallory looked at the clock. “Dr. Waxman must have gotten held up. She’s usually done her morning rounds by now. She should be in soon, love,” she said, finishing up her charting. “Now, is
there anything you need? Anything I can get you?’”

“I’d kill for a good coffee. Any chance of that?”

“Afraid not, love. No caffeine just yet. How about a nice decaffeinated herbal tea? Or some water?”

“Yes, herbal tea sounds fine, thanks,” said Paula, pulling a face, really wanting a good strong coffee.

Sophie shifted a bit and turned onto her side, placing her arm over Paula’s middle, then settling down again into slumber. Paula was happy to see her sleeping soundly, though it restricted where Paula could move. She just chuckled to herself and laid back to enjoy the feeling of her lover next to her.

When the nurse came back with Paula’s tea, she noticed her patient was a bit trapped, so helped try to situate her into a better position. “Here, let me get you some extra pillows. We can prop you up and let Sophie sleep flat.” Mallory returned with a couple of thick pillows and made her way around to help Paula sit up, then moved things around so that she was positioned at a better angle. She noticed a folded paper drop to the ground, so picked it up and handed it to Paula. “Here, this dropped on the floor.”

Paula took it and eyeballed it, not knowing what it was and sat it in her lap. She took the tea from the nurse who then pulled around the mobile tray table for Paula to use.

“There. How’s that, then?”

“Great, thank you.” She sipped at the hot liquid, closing her eyes at how good it felt on her throat. Mmmm, that’s good. She began to look at the paper, then Dr. Waxman walked in.

“Well, well, well, Ms. Paula Martin, it’s excellent to see you awake! I’m Dr. Waxman, I’ve been handling your care since your surgery.”

“Hello, doctor,” said Paula.

“I’ve read over the chart notes from last night and I have a few questions, but first let’s take a good look.”

The doctor proceeded to check Paula over, testing all her reflexes, listening to her heart and her breathing, checking the wound. She then asked her some questions about her memory, testing long-term and short-term function. “Well, everything looks great,” she said, as she jotted notes in the chart, “but I am none too pleased with your cardiac event last night, so we are going to keep you in –“

“Wait, what cardiac event?”

“Did Dr. Hampton not tell you?”

“No.”

“Paula, you flatlined at 1:34 am. It took the team a few minutes to resuscitate you. They had to shock your heart three times. Now, there’s no indication of any lasting effect, but we don’t know why your heart stopped, so I am going to order some tests, see if we can figure that out.”

“And Sophie was here when that happened?”

“I imagine she was. She’s not left this room all week. It’s nice to see her sleeping for once.”

Paula’s heart broke, thinking of how much Sophie had been through, waiting for her to wake up, watching as she almost died. Dear God.
“Ok, well, I am going to order those tests, so you just relax and try to rest. I know you’ve been through a lot, but you’re doing great and everything points to a full recovery.”

“Can we take this damned catheter out? It’s quite uncomfortable.”

“Yes, I will have a nurse come in and take care of that. We need to get you up out of that bed and moving around. Sophie rubbed your arm and legs every day, so that will have helped, but I imagine you’re feeling quite stiff. I’ll order PT in and they can help you get back on your feet.” She handed her tea back to her.

“Okay, sounds good. Thanks Dr. Waxman,” said Paula, still taking in what Sophie had been through.

“Alright then, glad to have you back,” she said, patting her leg. “The nurse will be in soon.”

Paula watched the doctor leave, then took a drink of her tea. She couldn’t shake the horrible feeling sitting in her gut at the trauma Sophie suffered. She knew there had to be more, she just couldn’t remember. She finished her tea and sat back against her pillows, noticing the paper the doctor had put on the tray when she examined her. Paula reached over to try to get that paper, but it was out of her reach. Damnit. She looked around for something she could use to get to it, but had nothing.

Then the nurse came in. “Good news, dear. We are going to take out that catheter!”

Paula knew this was not going to feel good, but would be glad to be somewhat mobile once it was removed. The nurse positioned her at the best angle, then slowly pulled the tube out. Paula winced and gritted her teeth, then felt relief.

“That will be a bit sore for a few hours, then you should be fine. If you feel any burning, let us know, ok? And if you need the loo, press the call button. Someone needs to assist you.”

“Will do. Thanks for that. OH, can you move that tray back over, please?”

Mallory shuffled the tray back over. “I’ll bring you some fresh water, love, and Dr. Waxman has ordered some bloodwork, so the phlebotomist will be in shortly.” Then she was gone, and Paula grabbed the folded paper, opened it up, and began to read.

As she read, she began to cry, feeling only a fraction of the excruciating pain Sophie must have been suffering all week. She couldn’t stand that her partner was feeling guilty or that she had somehow failed her, and she would indeed tell her it wasn’t her fault, over and over again, until she believed it. So, Charles Warren had pulled the trigger on the gun that shot her, and she gathered that she took the bullet while protecting Sophie, something that made her very happy. She couldn’t remember doing it, but she’d do it again a million times to keep Sophie safe. Paula was astounded at the strength her young lover had, balling up the courage to metaphorically release Paula from her earthly bonds, though it would destroy her inside.

Paula knew she could never have been so brave, a trait Sophie seemed to have in spades, whereas Paula, for all her apparent brute strength, was lacking in so many ways. The woman she loved so dearly was extraordinary and Paula knew she was an angel on earth. Her angel. And she would love her with everything she had for as long as they were allowed.

Sophie stirred again, but soon settled. Paula wanted her to sleep for as long as she possibly could. Her body must be completely depleted of all its energy, as she’d likely been running on fumes for days. A nice long holiday was certainly on the cards. She’d swoop her lover away to somewhere nice and warm with beautiful scenery and only the best wine. She’d pamper her back to health if it
was the last thing she did.

“Well, it’s about flaming time, Paula Martin!!” exclaimed Evelyn Palmer, standing in the doorway, a huge smile on her face. “Isla called me a bit ago and gave me the news. How are you feeling, love?”

“I feel perfectly fine, though apparently I have no right to. I swear this bird is tougher than old boots,” she responded to her friend who moved in and sat in Sophie’s usual seat. “And look at this one here,” said the solicitor, shaking her head. “She nearly ran herself into the ground, Ev. Couldn’t anyone get her to leave and get some bloody rest?”

“Have you met that girl?” asked Evelyn, incredulously. “I thought you were stubborn, but she took it to a new level. I swear to you, love, we all tried to move her from this very spot for days! She absolutely refused! Would not leave your side. I think she had a shower once, and for all of five minutes. Likely ate the equivalent of maybe one whole meal the whole time you were asleep. That sweet, sweet girl loves you more than children love Christmas.”

“I feel just awful about what she’s been through. I was meant to protect her from it all, and here I am just sleeping it all away, while she’s here having to handle all the worry and fear. It’s not fair.”

“Paula, love, you took a bullet for her. You saved her life. You have nothing to feel bad about. It’s that Charles Warren who should be shouldering the guilt for this whole mess, though I doubt he’d know guilt if it slapped him in the face.”

“I still can’t recall what happened, and Sophie refuses to tell me because the doctor said not to force the memories. But, it’s driving me mad. What happened, Ev? How did Charles wind up with a gun?”

“Well, obviously I wasn’t there, Paula, but from what Sophie said, you had it out with Nico – Lawrence, still getting used to that – told her to let you and Sophie go peacefully and you’d keep the evidence from the authorities, and she agreed when she realized you had her. When Charles heard this he flipped out, called her weak, then pulled the gun out and pointed it right at Sophie! Then he-“

“Pulled the trigger, but the safety was still on. I remember. I jumped in front of Sophie to protect. I remember feeling a burning in my shoulder and I couldn’t breathe.” It was all flooding back. Sophie screaming and crying. The pain. The blood on Sophie’s hands. “Oh, god, the things I put her through. It’s awful.”

“Paula, none of this is your fault. YOU didn’t put her through anything, but you have no idea what the poor lass has dealt with. She experienced a series of awful events, but not because you planned it. She watched you get shot, had your blood all over her from where she kept pressure on the wound. Then she had to wait through your surgery, then was told you might have brain damage, then you were in a coma. I’m amazed at her resilience, Paula. Most anyone else would have collapsed. But not her, she stood strong by your side, not once faltering.”

“You missed one.”

“Hmmmm?” asked Evelyn, confused.

“Awful event. You missed one,” said Paula. “Last night my heart stopped beating and they had to restart it. They had to shock me three times, and Sophie saw it all happen.”

“Oh dear! She must have thought she’d lost you. Poor lamb.”

“I hope she can recover from this, Ev. She’s suffered so much emotional trauma,” she said as she ran her fingers through her hair.
“Yes, she’s been put through the ringer – she helped save you, you know? That agent showed her how to put pressure on your wound, and she did that until the paramedics arrived.”

“Agent?”

“Yes, the MI6 lass, Jordan something.”

“Jordan!?” exclaimed Paula. “What the hell?”

“Oh, a lot has happened this week, my friend. Has anyone told you about Ian or Lawrence?”

“No! I told you, Sophie is shielding me from all this stuff. Tell me!”

“They’re dead, Paula. They were both shot in the head the same time you were shot. Apparently, Charles Warren is some kind of savant marksman who never misses a target. If you hadn’t jumped in front of Sophie, she’d likely have been killed.”

“Holy shit! What’s happening at Cooper Securities? Oh my god, did the authorities get the evidence? I had it set up to have it delivered if I …”

“Oh, that’s another doozy. Your friend Mark Chapman?”

Paula’s eyes widened considerably. “How do you know that name?”

Evelyn chuckled, “Oh, he and I are old friends now. Someone in the New York office told him you’d been shot, and instead of turning over the flash drive to the SEC, he came here!”

“He DID WHAT? Oh, my god, I’ve got to get up. I need to –“

“Calm down, love. Mr. Chapman is just fine, thanks to that gal of yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s a smart cookie, that girl. She knew you wanted to keep Mark’s identity safe, and when he showed up here, he was looking for you to give him some kind of direction.”

“I told him what to do!”

“Well, dear, he just didn’t feel it was the right thing to do. He knew you couldn’t tell him NOT to turn over the evidence because you were unconscious, so he wanted to make sure he was doing the right thing. But, when he got here and found you, well, incapacitated, Sophie took over. That girl took that flash drive and gave it to Alexander, so HE could turn it over to MI6 himself.”

“So, Alexander has it and now … oh my god, Ev, that’s brilliant! Mark will never be exposed, and it makes Alexander look great in the eyes of the law.” She looked down at Sophie in disbelief. “She’s a flipping genius!”

“Mmmm hmmm,” agreed Evelyn. “She’s extraordinary, Paula. There’s only one other person I know with as much about her and that’s you.”

“You know, we nearly broke up because I was handling her with kid gloves and she called me on it. I knew she was strong, Ev, but I had no idea she was this strong.”

“You just don’t know what you’re made of until you’re pushed to the limit, and that girl has got the right stuff.”
Paula’s thoughts shifted back to Alexander and Mark. “Where is Mark, now? Did he go back to New York?”

“No, he’s not left yet. Said he wanted to come see you before he flew back. But, there’s another part of the story here. Alexander was so impressed with him, he offered him a job here, running IT for Cooper Securities.”

“So, let me get this straight, Ian and Lawrence are dead, Alexander has turned the flash drive over to MI6, Mark is moving to London? Man, I sure picked the wrong time to take a nap!”

Evelyn laughed at her friend. “It’s been an eventful few days.”

“What about Charles? Is he still out there?”

“The agent apprehended him after the shooting, so he is in custody.”

“This agent, Jordan? Is this the same Jordan who was working with Charles?”

“Yes, dear. She had apparently been undercover with the cartel for years, but blew that cover when the shooting occurred.”

“I never saw her, Ev. I kept hearing she was there, but I never saw her. Lawrence and Ian arrived alone. There was only Charles and Ky -” She stopped mid-sentence. “Don’t tell me Kylie is Jordan?”

“Yes, babe, she is,” said a now awake Sophie. “And she saved your life.”

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry. Did we wake you?” asked Paula, not even registering what Sophie said.

“It’s fine,” said Sophie sitting up and yawning. “I’ve been asleep for ages.”

“You’ve been asleep for barely 7 hours, that’s hardly ages. Do you feel better?”

Sophie stretched a good stretch, then kissed Paula sweetly. “Yes, I do feel better, but I think I really, really need a shower!” said the young brunette. She shifted her focus to her right, “I see you over there smirking,” said Sophie, talking to Evelyn.

Evelyn just chuckled and shook her head. “I told you she would be fine, didn’t I?”

“Yes, oh magic 8-ball, you did, but I had to see it for myself, didn’t I?” she said, looking at Paula, holding her hand. Then she got a bit stroppy with them both, “And what do you think you’re doing talking about the shooting? The doctor told you not to force things!”

“Well, mother,” Paula said sarcastically, “it was driving me mad not knowing what happened, so I –“

“You just thought you’d force things! Babe, you really need to ease back in, don’t you think?”

“You mean, because it’s wise due to my recent trauma?” Sophie was nodding her head. “Hmmm, perhaps like someone needing to eat and sleep and take care of herself instead of sitting in a chair for five days! This can go two ways, you know?”

The lover’s squared off, eye to eye.

“Well, you might have a small point, but –“ started Sophie.
“Oh, there are no buts! Now go get a shower and then you’re going to go out of this room and have a proper meal with Evelyn,” Paula commanded, getting confirmation from her friend that she would see to it.

“But, I don’t want to leave –“

“I will be just fine sitting here with my IV bag and my drain tubes to keep me company! But, I would like my phone, so hand that to me, would you?”

“You’re NOT going to start working, Paula Ann Martin, so get that crazy thought right out of your head!”

Evelyn started belly laughing, putting a halt to their banter. The pair just looked at her, brows knitting together. “You two are so well suited, it’s scary! My goodness, this relationship was created in the heavens.”

They both just looked at each other, then smiled. No one had ever been more right. Sophie couldn’t help herself, and she pulled Paula to her for a real kiss, not the sweet kisses they’d shared since Paula woke, but a full-on snog, tongue and all.

“Well, I see things are getting back to normal rather quickly,” said Evelyn as she focused her eyes on the magazine in her lap. “Don’t mind me,” she said facetiously, “I’ll just enjoy my magazine.”

“Sorry, Ev, I just couldn’t help myself,” said Sophie as she removed herself from Paula’s face. “Right, whooo, now that I’ve gotten myself all fired up, I am off for a nice cool shower. You two have fun talking about me.”

Paula just shook her head at her lover as she retreated to the shower room for a good scrub. “Oh, Ev, how on earth did I get so bloody lucky? She is, phew,” said Paula fanning herself with her good hand.

“You’re both very lucky, love. And you’ll have a happy and wonderful life together, as long as you give yourself time to recover! Don’t rush things, Paula, no matter how much you want to.”

Paula blushed, knowing exactly what her friend was saying to her. “Oh, alright. I’ll be a good girl,” she agreed, reluctance in her voice.

“You’ll have plenty of time for that, but later!”

“Whatever. Ugh, you’re a party pooper, you know that? At least I know all the equipment still works,” she grinned. “I swear it only takes a look from her sometimes …”

“You’re a grown woman, so I expect you can control yourself?”

“Yes, of course, I can, and I will, but I can’t say that I will enjoy it,” Paula sneered jokingly.

“Good girl! Now, do you need me get anything for you while Sophie and I are out? Anything from your flat or something to read, perhaps?”

“Could you sneak my laptop in, maybe?”

“Are you kidding me? Sophie would string me up!”

“I can’t just lay here and do nothing, now can I?”

“You’re not doing nothing, love. Your body is healing, and you must rest so you heal properly.
Please don’t put Sophie through more by arguing about this. That girl has worried herself sick, so do her a favor and listen to the doctors and do what you’re supposed to, so she has peace of mind, alright?”

Paula felt horrible. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m being so selfish, aren’t I? I need to focus on Sophie now, so I will be a model citizen, I promise.”

A few minutes later, Sophie emerged from her shower, a smile on her face and a bounce in her step. She began packing up her small bag with the clothes her mum had brought her earlier in the week. She would take them home to wash and gather clean clothes with which to return. “Babe, do you want me to grab anything for you from the flat, and before you even open your gob, do NOT ask for your laptop!”

Paula and Evelyn both smiled at how well Sophie knew her. “Just some clothes to come home in, love. I’m not sure how long the doctors will want to keep me, but it will be good to have them already here when I need them.”

“Alright, babe, clean clothes for my sweetheart. Now, I am going to trust you with this,” Sophie said, handing her phone to her, “but promise me, no email!”

“I promise. You go and have a nice meal. Now, give your old bird a kiss and get out and get some fresh air.”

Sophie happily put her lips to Paula’s, lingering for a few moments, still ecstatic to be feeling this exquisite sensation again. She pulled back, smiled, then turned to follow Evelyn out of the room. She turned back briefly, looking at her lover sitting there, alive, and said “I love you,” then she walked out of that room for the first time in days.

*I know you do.*
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Paula's recovers and Sophie makes plans for their future.

It was late morning and Paula had been poked and prodded by a slew of doctors, running test after test, removing what felt like a gallon of blood. She had a CT and an MRI to check her brain, and a rather surly young fellow had given her a sonogram on her heart, being a bit too rough around her very sore shoulder. She was frustrated by the process and just wanted to get out of the bloody hospital and back home to her own bed and her very own bed warmer. She had been out of the bed once, to use the loo, with the assistance of the nurse. She was still a bit stiff, but her legs worked well enough. She’d only been asleep for a few days, so there was no atrophy to worry with. Once she got her strength back, she would begin walking the treadmill. The doctor did agree to remove the drain tube, so her body was now down to just one invasive tube instead of three.

Sophie and Evelyn had been gone for hours, and Paula was secretly hoping Sophie had somehow fallen asleep in their bed and would stay there until morning. She needed that much rest. But, she knew her lover well, and knew she would be back soon to resume her position in that dreaded chair.

Paula was flipping through the same magazine for the third time, keeping her promise not to check email on her phone, when a visitor came through the door. Paula’s usual reception to this person was always an eye roll and disdain, but this time was different. It was thanks and reverie and gratitude.

“Hello, Paula. Mind if I come in?” said Jordan Brewster.

“By all means,” said the solicitor, motioning for the agent to sit. “I understand I owe you quite a note of thanks.”

“Not at all. I was only doing my job,” said the blonde.

“Well, nonetheless, thank you for doing it well, then. Sophie said you were fantastic, and without you I likely would not have lived. It’s an odd feeling, this,” said Paula.

“What, seeing me not as Kylie, the bitch of an assistant who couldn’t care less?” smiled the agent.

“Yes, if I’m honest. You are a very good actress. Or is that your usual disposition?”

“No, that was an act. Ian moved me into the position to keep tabs on what you were doing. He didn’t want you figuring out what he was up to, but you did anyway. I’m curious, what tipped you off that he was shady? He was usually quite good at keeping up the façade that he was respectable.”

“Honestly? It was Sophie. She saw right through him the moment they met. She wanted nothing to do with him. I thought she was just being silly, until I overheard him talking to someone on the phone, incensed that she had called him a name.”

“How did that indicate anything?”

“Well, it was a very specific thing that she said about him only once, and she said it in the flat office, and I couldn’t figure out how he’d heard her call him that unless he was listening in. I set a quick trap
and he walked right into it. Then I knew he was watching me. At that point, I began trying to think steps ahead until I started to figure things out. I knew some things but kept hitting a wall while I was piecing things together, but had no idea the depth of his operation within Cooper Securities until Charles spilled it under the influence of some pretty strong Sangria while we were at dinner in New York.”

“But how did you access all the information Alexander turned over?”

“I’m no slouch with a computer, though I feigned complete stupidity. I had an IT guy show me a couple of things while I was in New York, then, with the information I gathered from Charles, I started to dig until I got what I needed. It all come flooding in.”

“Well, my hat’s off to you. I was undercover for nearly three years trying to gather enough information to bring the cartel down, and you did it in a matter of weeks.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Jordan. I had high-clearance access to the Cooper databases initially, and as I figured out what they were doing, I was able to get the rest. I’m a trained lawyer and I know how to think like a crook. Fraud is my specialty.”

“Well, it’s impressive. I hated being such a bitch to you,” the blonde laughed. “I really have a lot of respect for you. And I’m glad that I was in the right place at the right time. You know, I may have called for assistance quickly, but it was really Sophie who stepped up. She was terrified of losing you, but she kept her head about her enough to listen and do what I showed her to do. That’s what really saved your life.”

“She’s undoubtedly saved me in more ways than one, that’s for certain. But, you deserve a lot of credit as well, so thank you, Jordan.”

“You’re truly welcome.”

The two sat and talked a bit more about Paula’s investigative skills and she never once compromised Mark Chapman’s involvement. She owed the lad a lot and would not see him dragged into this mess. Jordan confirmed MI6 was building a very in-depth and intricate case against the Zhenli cartel that should bring those at its core to their knees with a mass of indictments. Paula expressed her concern about her exposure, wondering if she should be concerned about retaliation. But Jordan just shook her head, substantiating the fact that Charles Warren’s actions had, ironically, taken her out of the frame for any blame of the implosion of the cartel. Since Alexander offered up the evidence, her name vanished from their radar.

Jordan still had connections to undercover agents within the Zhenli operation who had verified Charles was their target for execution. He had been placed in protective custody indefinitely for his own safety. And that was that.

“Well, I’m afraid I’ve taken up too much of your time already. I wish you a healthy and speedy recovery, Paula,” offered Jordan. “And if, in the future, I can be of any service to you, please you only need to reach out. Though I could never tell you, it was a real pleasure to work with you.”

“You’re quite a woman, Jordan. Thank you again, for everything.”

And she left Paula to her empty room and her magazine.
Paula was resting, eyes closed, when Sophie returned. She walked into the room and nearly panicked at seeing her lover not awake and moving around. But, those emotions were short-lived when Paula opened her eyes and smiled at the sight of her partner.

“Hello, baby! Did you have nice time out in the world, away from this dreaded place?” asked Paula, holding out her arm for a hug.

Sophie placed a hello kiss on Paula’s lips. “Yes, it was good to see the blue sky, but I still missed being here with you. It’s the place I’m happiest.”

“What, the hospital?” said Paula with a smirk.

“Oh, who’s a comedian, then?” smiled Sophie. “You know full well what I mean.”

“I’m just trying to get a laugh. It’s soooooo boring around here! I’m going out of my skull, because my partner forbade me from getting on my email, which, by the way, I did NOT do, thank you very much. But I am telling you now, dearest, I am going to lose my mind if I have stay here for too much longer!”

“Well, that’s where I come in. I am going to entertain you!”

“Really?” said Paula waggling her eyebrows up and down, grabbing at Sophie’s backside with her hand.

“Paula Martin, get those dirty thoughts out of your head! We will have none of that for a while yet. YOU have to fully recover and that arm of yours is going to be out of commission for some time.”

“What does that have to do with anything? I thought you were going to, you know, give me a show …”

“Paula Martin, you perv!”

“Hey, it’s not perving if the object of desire is my very sexy girlfriend, that’s just called being attentive!”

“Yea, nice try, Pervy-McPervison. I thought more along the lines of Scrabble?” said Sophie, pulling the game from the bag, holding it up enthusiastically.

The look on Paula’s face made Sophie burst out laughing. “Oh, come on, babe! It’s a great game. It’s educational and cerebral and –”

“Boring as hell!” offered Paula. “Please won’t you just come here and give me one little kiss?”

“Well, I can see nothing has compromised your sex drive!”

Paula remembered what Evelyn had said to her earlier, and though she always wanted Sophie sexually, she knew she had to honor her healing process. “I’m mostly joking around, Sophie. I know I must heal properly. I will be a good girl and behave myself. But I would like another kiss.”

Sophie very willingly obliged her lover’s request and leaned in for a good juicy snog, but pulled away before it got too heated. “We will have plenty of time for that once you’re back on your feet.”

Paula reached to pull Sophie back to her, but tweaked her left shoulder the wrong way and winced in pain. “Urgh, I hate this!” said a very frustrated brunette. “Motherfucker that hurt.”

“Language! Do I need to get you some pain meds, babe?”
“No, sweetheart. I’m okay. I just always want to run before I get my feet.”

Then, through the door came Alexander, a quick smile on his face when his eyes met his friends’. “I have never been happier to see a lawyer in all my life!” said the man.

“Alexander, you old fool, get over here!” said Paula. As she was hugging her friend, she noticed Mark standing in the back of the room. “Mark! Oh, my goodness, you had better get yourself over here, too!”

“Hey, Paula. I am so happy to see you,” said Mark with his southern twang. “You sure did give everyone a good scare.” He hugged her and sat in the last empty chair, next to Alexander and Sophie.

“Yes, well, this whole thing has been a crazy rollercoaster ride! But I would never have been able to hold on without you, Mark. And, I for one, am delighted to hear that this one is as shrewd as he is and has offered you a job! If he hadn’t have done so, I would be talking to you about working for me! Though, being head of IT at a global company versus a small law firm is a tad more appealing.”

“It’s an amazing opportunity and one I am grateful to have. Alexander has been very generous.”

“Well? Have you spoken to Rachel about this? Please tell me you’re going to take the job,” said Paula, afraid the tone in his voice meant differently.

“I may be from the south, but I am not slow, Paula. Of course, I’m taking it! Rachel thought it was a great idea, so she’s fully on board. She’s actually mid-flight right now, on her way over to check things out for herself. She’ll be here in a few hours. I will definitely bring her by to meet you, if that’s okay?”

“You’d better! I want to meet this very smart lass.”

Alexander noticed Paula was no longer connected to so many tubes. “So, looks like they’ve already removed some of the tubes. That’s a good sign. What are the doctors saying?”

“It’s really quite strange, but they say I will fully recover with no residual effects from the blood loss or the coma. It’s inexplicable, really.”

“It makes perfect sense to me,” said Alexander. “You had an angel on your shoulder, with you all week!”

Paula knew exactly what he meant. “You’re right. I did indeed,” she said, pulling Sophie’s hand up to kiss.

“Oh, will you all please stop with that. All I did was stay here where I needed to be, for my own sake,” said Sophie. “Speaking of which, will you two be here for a bit? There’s something I need to do.”

“Yes, we will be here,” said Alexander. “Go do what you need to.”

Sophie stood and gave Paula a kiss. “Be right back, babe. Don’t go anywhere without me!” she said, smiling at her lover as she left the room.

“Hmmm, wonder where she’s off to?” mused Paula, then turned her attention back to her visitors. “So, tell me all about MI6 and the flash drive!”

xxx
Sophie walked slowly into the small quiet room and sat on one of the benches. There was no one else there, just her, some flickering candles and a cross at the end of the aisle. She sat there for a moment, gathering her thoughts, then she began to speak in a reverent tone.

“God, I know I have not been much of a faithful servant to you this past week. And I really have some nerve coming to you now that you’ve saved Paula’s life like I begged you to over and over. I’m sorry I got so angry with you last night when I thought you were taking her away from me. I know it’s your will I need to be supportive of, no matter how it personally affects me, but I also know that you forgive weakness and you forgive anger. God, I love that woman more than I love anyone or anything, and the thought of losing her was just, well, you know. But I put her before you last night, because I was being selfish and needy. So, I come here now, asking your forgiveness, but also to thank you for choosing to allow her to stay here with me.

Everyone is acting like I’m some kind of angel because I wouldn’t leave her side, but the truth is, I did it mostly for myself, because I couldn’t bear the thought of the pain I would feel at losing her. I know that loving someone as deeply as I love Paula comes with responsibility. You chose to send her back to me, so I am promising you now that I will honor that choice by being a loving and committed partner to her.

God, I want to marry her, to make her my wife, to cherish that bond forever. And I need your blessing. I have this ring here and I want you let me know, somehow, that you sent her back so we could be together, forever. She’s the most important person in my life, my soulmate, my forever partner, and I want to honor her in marriage, but only with your holy blessing, Father. I will keep my eyes and ears open to receive your approval. And thank you, Lord, for the life you’ve given me, for the blessings you bestow on me every day, and for my heart that is pure for you.

Sophie got to her knees and said the Lord’s Prayer and kissed the diamond engagement ring she had in her palm. As soon as she felt she had God’s approval, she would propose to her love. When that would be, she didn’t know. She just hoped it would be soon.

xxx

Sophie returned to Paula’s room to find Isla there sitting with Mark and Alexander. They were all chatting away, laughing and enjoying stories Mark was telling of his childhood.

“Well, mum, I really need to be going. I’m catching the last train back – it leaves at 4:13 - and dad is meeting me at the station,” announced Isla. She had to return to her life and her job now that her mum was on the road to recovery. “I will be back in a couple of weeks to check on you both!”

It struck Sophie as an odd time for a train to depart. She hugged Isla tight and thanked her for all the support. “I’ll let you know if anything at all changes, yea?”

“Thanks, Sophie. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Isla.”

Paula looked on, very pleased that her partner and her daughter had bonded so well. It certainly made her heart warm at the sight.
“I’m afraid I, too, must take my leave. I have a board meeting this evening and I have to go over the 134 pages of the report.”

“Why on earth are there so many pages?” asked Paula, stunned at the number.

“Oh, it has full financial, all the Federal charges for each country, all the information provided to MI6, etc. It’s a blessing to not have been more than that!”

“Sounds perfectly dreadful!” offered the solicitor. “Glad all I have to worry with is getting my ass kicked in a game of Scrabble later.”

“No rest for the wicked, or so they say. Mark, my dear man, will you be picking up Rachel from Heathrow?”

“Yes, sir. Her flight is due in at 7:20p I believe.” He pulled out his phone and pulled up the itinerary. “Yep, here it is, Flight 1304 from JFK due in at 720pm.”

“Mark, why don’t you take my car to the airport? Joseph will drive you in style, show Rachel what’s in store for her,” offered Alexander. “I’ll be at the board meeting then at the office late. Just come by when you’ve retrieved Rachel and pick me up.”

“Thank you, sir. That’s quite generous of you.”

The men said their goodbye’s, leaving Paula and Sophie on their own.

“They are adorable! Looks like Alexander has a protégé to groom!” said Paula, smiling at Sophie, who seemed to be elsewhere. “Sweetheart, you okay?”

The question brought Sophie back, “Yea, babe, I’m fine.”

“Where did you go earlier?” asked Paula, a little concerned.

“Oh, just to visit my other lover down the hall. We met earlier in the week and I owed her some time,” said Sophie laughing.

“Oh, really? Well, call for a wheelchair please. I have a fight to get to,” teased the solicitor.

“I went to the chapel,” offered the young brunette.

“Oh.”

Sophie smiled a small, almost sad smile.

“Are you okay?” asked Paula, wondering if it was a good visit.

“Yea, I just needed to talk to God for a minute. Don’t worry, I’m fine, babe. I just needed to ask for forgiveness.”

“For what???”

Sophie sighed, and tears began to well in her eyes. “Last night, when you …”

“When my heart stopped?”

“Yes. Well, let’s just say that I had a few choice words that were not at all what a true Christian should ever use when talking to God. I should have relied on scripture! I know better, but I didn’t
think. One of my favorite verses is Philippians chapter 4, verse 13 – I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Where was my faith last night?”

“Sophie, baby, you were not in your right mind. You were distraught and exhausted. You can’t hold yourself responsible.”

“Of course, I can, and should! But, that’s what’s so great about God’s love, He always forgives, if you ask. So, I had to go ask. I nearly fell apart last night and instead of having faith and leaning on Him, I got angry and turned on Him.” Tears were falling freely, staining her cheeks.

“Come here, love,” said Paula, holding out her arm. Sophie tucked up next to her, crying her shame out. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m sure God forgives you and understands what you were going through. I can’t imagine I wouldn’t have a host of horrible things to spew into the cosmos if the situation were reversed. I wouldn’t have survived it, Sophie. The thought of watching that happen to you makes my gut clench. I honestly do not know how you are so resilient.”

“I love you so much, Paula,” whispered Sophie, barely audible. “I was so scared, and I didn’t know what to do. I thought He was going to take you because I told you it was okay to leave me. I gave up.” She was sobbing now, feeling horribly guilty. “I didn’t have enough faith.”

“Sophie Webster, you listen to me! You have more faith and love in you than anyone I know. You did not lose faith, darling. You were selfless and giving and brave. You put me first, let me go to make my own choice, no matter the pain it would cause you, but I chose you. I chose you and our love. And I came back to be here with you, always.”

As Sophie listened, she realized Paula must have found the letter.

“You read the letter.” It was more a statement than a question.

“I did. And it was the most beautiful thing I think I’ve ever read. You are so strong and so worthy, darling. So much stronger than I would have been, and I have so much more life experience than you. You have no idea what an extraordinary person you are, but I do. And I listened, and I came back to you because you deserve to be loved so fully and so wholly, the way I plan to love you for the rest of our lives. Please forgive me for ever making you think I might leave you,” begged Paula. She put her lips softly to Sophie’s. “Please, forgive yourself,” she said against Sophie’s mouth, kissing her through the hurt.

Sophie continued to cry for a while, letting go of all the stress that had built up in her system over the past few days. Paula held her close, kissing her temple and reassuring her everything was okay.

“Well, Isla’s train is about to leave,” she said, trying to lighten the heaviness in the room. “It’s 4:13. Such an odd time for a train to leave, don’t you think?”

The door to the room opened and the nurse stepped in to bring Paula her pain medication. “How are you feeling, Paula? What’s your pain level?”

“Mmmm, not too bad, maybe about a 4. I can forego the pain meds. I’ll call if it gets any worse. I just don’t want to rely on them if I don’t have to,” offered the solicitor, knowing opioids were wonderfully dangerous for addiction.

The nurse took her pulse from her left arm. “Your pulse is nice and strong, so the blood flow to your arm is great. You’re just a textbook case of recovery, you are! Ok, well, Dr. Waxman should be coming in around 5 with all your test results from today. Do either of you need anything?”

“No, we are fine, Mallory, thank you.”
“Oh, look at the time! I have 13 more patients to see before Dr. Waxman is due. I better get a shake on!”

“Is it just me, or are there a lot of 4’s and 13’s in the air?” asked Sophie.

“Well, now you mention it. Yes, it seems there are,” said Paula.

Sophie sat up. “What’s today?” she said, looking at Paula. “I mean, the date, what’s the date?”

Paula had to think. She pulled up the calendar on her phone. “13 April, why?”

*God’s giving me my sign!*

“And how many pages were in that report of Alexander’s?”

“134.”

*And Rachel’s flight number 1304. What’s the significance?*

“What do the numbers 4 and 13 mean?” she asked her number genius.

“Haven’t we already had this conversation?”

“Oh my god, we have! When we were talking about how many people we’ve each slept with – I’m your 13th and you are my 4th. Remember?”

“Why are you getting excited about these numbers? It’s a bit of a fluke, yes, but you’re kind of freaking me out a little, baby.”

*God has given his blessing. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me! 4:13*

Now, it was up to Sophie. But did she want to ask this important question in a hospital room with Paula in a gown? She had to think about this a little bit.

xxx

Right on schedule, Dr. Waxman arrived around 5pm to find Paula and Sophie cuddled up together on the bed.

“If you two aren’t the picture of love, I don’t know what is,” said the doctor, standing there admiring the couple’s devotion to one another.

“Hello, doc!” said Sophie, sitting up and removing herself from the bed.

“Don’t move on my account.”

“I need the toilet. Be right back.”

“So, how are you feeling, Paula?”

“Physically, I feel fine, except for a bit of pain in the shoulder, but I expect that’s normal.”

“Yep, that’s normal. Let me take a look,” said the doctor, pulling the dressing away.

Sophie returned to join them and listen to the progress report.
“It’s healing amazingly well. There’s no sign of infection. Is the pain a soreness or a sharpness?”

“It’s mostly sore, but if I move too quickly it’s sharper.”

“That will happen. You have to remember this whole area was torn to shreds by the bullet, so it’s just going to take time to heal. It should be fine in about 6 weeks. You will have to start physical therapy to get use of that arm, and I’m not going to lie to you, it’s a painful process, but with time you should have a full recovery,” confirmed the doctor.

“Well, that’s good news. I hate not having the use of the arm, but considering it all, I’d say I’ve been quite lucky.”

“Don’t worry, babe, I will take care of you,” said Sophie.

“Well, I have all your test results here, and I want to go over them with you. Both the CT and MRI show no damage to the brain whatsoever. Everything was clear. We have no idea what caused the coma, which, for a doctor, is quite frustrating. But there is no evidence to show you even had a reason to be unconscious in the first place. The brain is still a mystery to us in so many ways, really. It may have just been that you were emotionally spent and needed to sleep. We just don’t know. And the cardiac sonogram was the same – no signs of weakness or compromise. Your bloodwork all came back normal, no cardiac enzymes, which means there is no damage to the heart muscle. You are the spitting image of health, bar the shoulder, which will heal, so, all in all, I’d say you are one lucky lady.”

“Nothing? The tests show no damage whatsoever?” asked an incredulous Paula.

“Nada! It’s as if nothing happened, other than the GSW,” said the doctor. “You’re all the talk in the doctor’s lounge, believe me. The miracle patient.”

Paula just sat there, stunned at the news.

Sophie was smiling from ear to ear, knowing full well that God’s hand was at play here. For the first time in weeks, Sophie felt completely at peace. She knew her life was blessed and it was now time to take the next step. She had a few things to line up, then she would be ready to take the biggest step of her life.

“Thank you so much, Dr. Waxman. That is the greatest news we could have hoped for,” beamed Sophie, holding Paula’s hand. “Uhm, when do you think she can go home?”

“Honestly, after this report, I think you can go home today. There’s no reason to keep you here and you know how the NHS is, without a reason, it’s sayonara baby. You’ve had a completely steady heart rhythm since your arrest, and with no enzymes in your blood, there is no cause for worry. It was an anomaly. Now, you’ll have to book in to see your GP for weekly checks for the next 6 weeks, and we will schedule your physical therapy. OH, and the most important part – absolutely NO work for at least 3 more weeks, okay? You really have to take this seriously and give your body and mind time to completely heal. Do I make myself clear?”

“I’ve never not worked for that amount of time. I won’t know what to do with myself!” argued the solicitor.

“Paula, this is crucial. You could compromise your health if you don’t listen to me. You were unconscious for nearly five days and that’s nothing to dismiss, despite the report I just gave you. Your recovery is my responsibility, so don’t disappoint me by not taking this seriously.”

“I’ll make sure she behaves, doc,” said Sophie, giving Paula a very serious look.
“Grrrr, oh alright, I will behave, and I will rest, and I will heal … but I can’t say I am going to like it!”

“Just think of it babe, we can watch lots of daytime telly and catch up on our Netflix shows. It’ll be fun.”

“What about sex?” Paula asked the doctor.

“Paula!” screeched Sophie.

“It’s a valid question, honey. And an important one,” said Paula, looking at the doctor, not at all embarrassed.

“Well, I’d say be careful of the shoulder, but as far as the ticker is concerned, you’re good to go!” said Dr. Waxman, grinning as Sophie blushed. “Just take it easy and all should be fine. There’s no reason you can’t resume a normal and healthy sex life, as long as the shoulder cooperates.”

Paula was now the one grinning from ear to ear, quite pleased to get the green light from the doctor. She was planning to relieve some of Sophie’s stress later on tonight, at home, in their bed. What a glorious thought.

“All right then, I will go organize your release papers and send you both on your way!”

“Perfect!” said Paula, still smiling.

Dr. Waxman left to arrange things, and Paula thought Sophie was going to smack her from the look on her face.

“Baby, don’t be cross with me. I thought it was important –”

“I’m not angry, babe, just a bit embarrassed. You know talking about sex in front of people makes me blush. I feel like my face is on fire.”

“What, you think doctors don’t have sex?”

“I know they do – urgh, can we not have this conversation? Let’s just focus on the fact that everything is wonderful, and we get to go home and sleep in our own bed tonight.”

“Yea, let’s focus on that. C’mere, you, and give me a kiss, please,” said Paula.

Sophie moved over and kissed her lover sweetly. “I’m quite happy with that report too, you know?” said Sophie, “but promise me you will take it easy, in all respects!”

“I promise,” whispered Paula, pulling Sophie’s mouth back to hers for a much deeper kiss.

A moan escaped Sophie’s throat, but she pulled away before her brain fogged over with arousal. “That will have to wait until later, babe. Someone could walk in! Plus, you still have that IV in and all the beeping … it’s just not very romantic, is it?”

“I suppose you’ve got a point,” agreed Paula, knowing she should be patient.

Sophie began to gather all their stray belongings that had collected in the room over the past week, including locating their phones and Paula’s keys to the flat, which Sally had returned to Sophie before she left. It felt like ages ago, but had only been a couple of days. Funny how life changes so quickly.
The nurse arrived and removed the IV from Paula’s hand, then wrapped her left arm and put it in a sling. She explained to them both how to care for and wrap the shoulder for the best results. Paula signed all the release paperwork, changed into real clothes, then they headed for the cab Sophie had called for.

Paula was delighted to see daylight and feel the sun on her face. She was still quite pale, but Sophie would soon fill her with good nutritious food and nurse her love back to health. The young brunette could not wait to get back home to their flat. Sophie had talked to Jordan Brewster, who had sent a team to the flat remove all the bugs, so they were no longer under threat of surveillance.

When the cab pulled up, Sophie noticed quickly that there was a new doorman. She supposed Thomas and Edward both had been removed from their post. The new bloke, Phillip, was waiting at the curb when the cab pulled up and took their things while Sophie helped Paula.

Once inside their flat, Sophie made Paula sit on the sofa and put her feet up.

“I’ll get you some water and your pain meds. I’ll run to the pharmacy later to get your full prescription because you’re probably going to need them eventually.”

“I don’t want you to fuss over me, sweetheart. I want you to come sit here with me and rest. You’ve been through just as much as I have,” ordered Paula. “Besides, I’m lonely over here without you.”

Sophie obliged, sitting down next to Paula, taking the cup of water from her hand once she’d swallowed her pill.

“God, it feels good to be home,” said Paula, her legs propped up on the coffee table in front of her. She laid her head back against the soft cushion and pulled Sophie to her right side, snuggling her close. “I can’t believe how tired the trip home from the hospital has made me. I think I might just take a little nap, if that’s okay with you,” she said, already nodding off.

“You sleep. I am going to go out and grab some groceries. We have nothing in the flat. I will be back shortly,” said Sophie, kissing Paula’s forehead. Her love was already asleep, so Sophie jotted down a note for her in case she woke up before Sophie returned.

She had a mission but didn’t have a lot of time.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Sophie pops the question and the pair finally reconnect, despite a few challenges.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for continued comments. So hoping you're still enjoying the story. I have a few fun ideas in store for upcoming chapters. Cheers!

Sophie returned to the flat with provisions for her proposal, including sparkling apple cider, candles, bee lights, pre-made gourmet meals, and a decadent dessert – best she could do with the time she had. It wouldn’t be the ideal setting for a proposal, but nothing they ever did was conventional.

Paula was still asleep, so Sophie woke her up. “Babe,” she said, gently shaking Paula. “Babe, why don’t we get a shower. You need a good scrub and I got the stuff the nurse told me to get to protect that wound.”

Paula nodded her head, and with Sophie’s help, got up from the sofa and walked to their bedroom.

“Here, let me help you get out of your clothes. Sit on the bed, babe.” Sophie pulled Paula’s jeans off, then gingerly moved her shirt over her head, exposing her bound up arm and sling which were underneath the shirt. “Now, where is that waterproof thing the nurse gave me?”

It took Sophie a few minutes to get Paula ready for the shower, but managed it in the end. She turned on the shower to warm up, then stripped her own clothes off to follow Paula into the spray.

They both moaned with pleasure at the feeling of the hot water as it coated their bodies. Sophie wet her own hair fully, then moved to help Paula wet hers. “Just let me do it, babe. It’ll be easier,” said Sophie. Paula’s hair had not been washed in week, so it took two good rounds of shampoo to get it clean. Paula enjoyed Sophie’s scalp massage immensely, moaning out her approval with every squeeze of Sophie’s fingers. Then the young brunette squirted out the body wash and lathered Paula’s skin, moving her hands slowly over her body, trying not to let her arousal spike. Having her hands on Paula’s body made her want her fiercely, but that would all have to wait.

“You need to speed that up and let’s get this done, because I am not going to be responsible for my actions in about 30 seconds,” said Paula.

“We will both behave! But, I think it better if you wash your own crotch because if I do it, there will be trouble!” Sophie laughed.

“Agrreed!”

Sophie shampooed her own hair and washed her body, then made sure Paula’s body was fully rinsed before the pair stepped out and dried off.
“This is going to suck to epic proportions,” said the solicitor, referring to not being able to do things for herself, relying on her partner for so much help.

“It won’t be for too long, babe. And I don’t mind.”

“That’s not the point,” whined the older brunette. “I want to touch you so badly right now,” she said staring at Sophie’s erect nipples.

“I’ll fix that.” Sophie got dressed quickly, throwing on an old t-shirt and some underwear, her nipples now poking at the material.

“Do you think that helps any?” Paula said, biting her bottom lip.

“Well, I am suffering over here, too, ya know? You think it’s easy for me to run my hands all over your body and do nowt? It’s driving me crazy! BUT, we need to have some dinner and act like adults.”

“Yea, whatever,” sulked Paula, as she let Sophie dress her in some loose pajama shorts and top.

Sophie brushed Paula’s hair out, then her own.

“Why don’t you lay down until dinner is ready. I have a bit of a surprise, so you stay in here and I’ll come get you when it’s time to eat.”

Paula did as Sophie requested, and slowly laid down on the bed, her head and back propped up with pillows Sophie had placed there for her.

“Back in a few minutes, sexy!” She leaned down and kissed Paula, swatting her wandering hand away, grinning at her lover.

Sophie rushed into the kitchen and put the meals in the oven to warm. She grabbed some tape and did her best to string the bee lights up in the dining room, giving a romantic ambiance, then enhanced it with some soft low music and candles on the sideboard. She put two candles on the table and lit them, along with the others. She went back into the kitchen and plated one slice of triple chocolate cake, to share of course, and put it back in the fridge. Then she grabbed two champagne flutes and the chilled sparkling juice that she had in the champagne bucket. She put it on ice and placed it all on the table. She looked at the room, satisfied with the feel, and went to check on the food. It smelled delicious. Then, she opened the drawer where she had put the ring and placed it in the chair next to where Sophie was planning to sit. Why didn’t I put some shorts or something with pockets on earlier?? She would do that when she went back into the bedroom, then casually put it in her pocket when Paula wasn’t looking.

This will work, I guess.

Sophie wanted to plan something decadent and uber-romantic, a night Paula would never forget, but she just didn’t have the patience to wait. She had to do it tonight to honor God’s sign to her – 13/4 or 4:13 or 134 or 1304 – however she looked at it, it had made itself evident today after she returned from the chapel. She thought she might be reaching a little with the number thing, but it felt right to her, so she wasn’t going to waste anymore time waiting.

*Ok, Sophie. It’s time.*

She walked back into the bedroom and quietly slipped on a pair of loose shorts with a pocket! They were Paula’s and she loved that. Anything she wore of Paula’s made her feel close to her. Paula was resting quietly.
Sophie sat on the edge of the bed and Paula opened her eyes to gaze at her. “Babe, are you ready for some dinner?”

“Yes, I am a bit hungry. What did you throw together so quickly?”

“I can’t take credit for it really, I just got some ready-made meals earlier from that little gourmet shop round the corner. I got you that Salmon you like.”

“Oooh, with the garlic and capers? That sounds heavenly!”

“Well, let’s eat, then!”

Paula struggled a little getting herself out of the bed without a railing to hold onto, but she insisted on doing it herself. They walked together into the dining room.

“What have you done here?” asked Paula. “This looks amazing, sweetheart, and very romantic. If I weren’t half starved and anticipating that salmon, you would be the main course,” smiled Paula.

“Behave yourself, Martin,” said Sophie, pulling out Paula’s chair at the end of the table. She positioned her so that her right hand and Sophie’s left would meet at the corner. “Be right back with the food.”

Sophie returned a few minutes later with both plates. “Here you go, babe. Something much better than lime Jello and tasteless mashed potatoes. Oh, sorry, I forgot to pour our sparkling apple cider, non-alcoholic, of course!”

“You’ve gone to a lot of trouble, darling. I’d have been fine sitting on the sofa watching a bit of telly.”

“Not tonight. It’s our first night home together after the worst week of my life and I wanted it to be special,” said Sophie, pouring the cider. “Now, eat!”

Paula dug in to her food, verbally enjoying it with sounds of pleasure. Sophie was so nervous, she had a hard time eating at all. They sat together in silence for a few minutes, Paula consuming her cuisine slowly, but surely.

“Sophie, baby, why aren’t you eating?” asked a curious Paula, thinking maybe she was too tired.

“Oh God, give me the words!”

Sophie visibly swallowed, gearing up to begin her speech, then she chickened out. “Uhm, I’m just not very hungry I guess. My eyes were bigger than my appetite.” My goodness, how to men do this?

“Well, eat as much as you can, love. You really need to rebuild your strength as well.”

“Yea,” said Sophie, her voice quivering a bit. She took a sip of her cider, wishing like hell it was whiskey.

Paula talked a bit about Mark and wondered if Rachel’s flight had landed okay, hoping they would come by soon. Then the conversation turned to Alexander and the case, but Sophie put a quick stop to anything that had to do with work. They finally spoke of Ian and Lawrence, and the tragedy that struck them both in the form of Charles Warren. Paula had only talked a little bit about the kidnapping, she didn’t want to add more to Sophie’s plate by discussing something traumatic, though it was ironic that Sophie slept through her ordeal the way Paula had slept through her own. She was grateful Sophie did not ever feel the terror of being abducted by that maniac.
“Love, are you okay? You are very quiet,” observed the solicitor. “If you’re tired love, then let’s just finish up and get in bed.”

*C’mon Sophie, you can do this.*

“Well, there is something really important I want to talk to you about.”

Paula stopped and looked at her lover. “Okay,” she said, putting her fork down. “I’m listening.”

*Breathe Sophie.*

“Uhm, well, I …” the words were not coming.

“Whatever it is Sophie, just say it. It’s okay,” said Paula, reassuring her.

Sophie nodded her head and took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Sophie, you’ve been acting weird all day. Is something wrong? Are you having second thoughts about moving in? Because, if you are, that’s okay, I understand if you –“

“NO! Of course I want to still move in with you. I want nothing more! I can’t believe you said that after the week I’ve just had.” Sophie’s nerves were getting the better of her.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t quite figure out this mood you’re in. Have I done something to upset you?”

*Do IT NOW Sophie!*

Sophie gathered her thoughts and looked at Paula.

“Paula, I love you and I’ve realized that being with you is the most important thing to me, and when I thought I had lost you, I was full of regret for not doing the things that I should have done before. But, now you’re here and I … well, I …”

“Sophie, love, what are you –“

Sophie pulled Paula’s hand into hers and kissed her knuckles.

“What I’m trying to say, and not very well, is life is short, and happiness is fleeting, and I don’t want to waste one more flaming second not living my life to the fullest. Most people think that means an adrenaline rush, something that makes you feel alive, like to run with the bulls, skydive, see the Grand Canyon, or hike Mount Everest. But for me it means spending my life with you and our maybe children and our maybe dog in our maybe house, doing silly everyday things like having a picnic in the park, painting the nursery, growing flowers in our garden or having a glass of wine as I admire your smile. It’s rubbing your feet after a long day at work or laughing at your silly jokes or making love on a Wednesday night because I just can’t keep my hands off you. It’s holding your hand at the cinema and giving you the last scrap of popcorn because I love you that much. It’s loving you into old age, no matter how gray we get, how many teeth we lose, or how many wrinkles find their way to our faces. Paula, I may not have riches to offer you, much of anything material really, but I give you my heart, all of it, for always. Babe, I fell in love with you the moment I kissed you the first time and I will be in love with you well past the last time our lips meet in this life. You mean more to me than any single person in the whole bloody universe. I don’t care how many rows we have, how many doors are slammed, how many times we don’t agree, but you are the only person I ever want to touch me, to kiss me, to make love to me ever again. I want everyone to know you’re mine by the way I look at you across a crowded room, because you’re looking at me the same way. I want to go to bed holding you every night and wake up to your sweet scent, the smell of your hair
and the taste of your mouth on mine, every morning, even though we both have horrid breath. I want you, now and forever.”

Paula was stunned, her eyes fixed to Sophie’s, tears welling behind them at the depth of love coming from the woman in front of her.

“Babe, I see something I like, so I’m going for it!” Sophie pulled the ring from her pocket and held it out in the candlelight. “Paula, will you marry me?”

If she hadn’t already been sitting down, she would have fallen on the floor. Paula Martin, hard core solicitor, even-tempered mother, always-in-charge woman, was speechless. She blinked at Sophie, then looked at the ring in Sophie’s hand, then back up to meet her lover’s gaze. She wasn’t sure how long she sat there, nothing coming from her vocal chords, but she knew if she didn’t say something soon, Sophie would get the wrong idea.

Paula swallowed hard, then began, “There are not many times in my life I have been completely lost for words, but this is one of them.” Then she smiled hugely, and said, “As if there were but one answer to that question. Yes, of course, I’ll marry you. I’d love nothing more in the world than to be your wife, be by your side always.”

“You will?? You really will?” asked an almost unbelieving Sophie.

“Sophie, I thought I knew what love was, I mean I got married and had kids, but I really didn’t think a love this deep and rich and rewarding existed. You astound me every day, Sophie Webster, in big ways, in little ways, by teaching me new things, by showing me with your actions, not your words, that you love me to your depths. I really don’t deserve you, but I am going to take this ring, and your promise to love me forever, and I am going to run with it. Now, come over here and kiss me, please!”

Sophie nearly leapt off the chair she was so eager to kiss her fiancé. But before she did, she looked at Paula, deep into her eyes, and said, “I will love you until the end of time.” Then kissed her slow and deep.

Paula pulled back, smiling. “You are a sneaky little shit, you know that? I mean, how did –”

“Before you ask me how I afforded a ring like this, let me just say I had a little help from a friend.”

“Alexander. I told you he was a good man.”

“Babe, I could not propose with some rinky-dink little ring with diamond dust for stones. You deserve something spectacular, so I asked for his help. Do you like it?”

“Well, let me put it on and see how it looks!”

“No, let ME put it on you and see how it looks.”

“Put it on my right hand so I can see it every day. We can shift it to the left one when I get better use of it.”

Sophie slipped the ring on Paula’s finger and smiled like a thousand-watt bulb.

Paula smiled wide, “You are the most incredible woman I have ever known, and I don’t know what I have done to deserve you. Are you sure you want to do this? Hitch yourself to this old bird for the rest of your life?”
“More than anything! You’re the one, Paula Martin. The only one, for me.”

Paula held out her hand and admired the ring. “This ring is exquisite, just like you,” claimed Paula.

“The sapphires represent your kids, because I’m kind of marrying them, too, aren’t I, because they’re part of you.”

Paula just shook her head at how incredible this woman was. “Can I have another kiss, please?”

“Just a small one. We have chocolate cake to eat, still,” said a cautious Sophie, knowing it wouldn’t take much for arousal to spark in them both.

“Chocolate cake, hmm? Can I smear it on your body and eat it off you in the bedroom?” asked Paula, a sexy glint in her eye.

“You know we have to go easy, babe. You promised you would behave! You’ve not been out of hospital but a few hours.”

“If you think I’m getting engaged and then not have some mind-blowing sex, messed up shoulder or not, you’re crazy! I’m getting lucky with my fiancé if I have to carry you into the bedroom kicking and screaming, which, I’d rather not do because it will likely hurt like holy hell. So, just make it easy on me and get your gorgeous sexy ass into that bedroom now so I can have my way with you. Though, you might have to do most of the work,” grinned Paula.

Sophie stood up, blew out all the candles, then ran into the bedroom, Paula right behind her.

“Now, listen to me, we really have to take this slow, right, so let’s just see how it goes, and if at any time you need to stop or are feeling pain, promise me you will stop,” said Sophie.

“Mmmm hmmm,” nodded Paula, already pulling Sophie close to her, her good hand running down to Sophie’s ass. “I want you,” breathed Paula into Sophie’s ear, reminding the young brunette of her thoughts from the letter. Shivers ran down her spine as Paula’s mouth met the skin of her neck for the first time in nearly a week, her tongue so soft and warm. Sophie’s nipples went immediately erect and she felt Paula smile against her neck.

“Seems you still have quite an effect on my nipples, Martin. I think they need some attention,” said Sophie, pulling her top off to give Paula access. Her lover leaned down and ran her tongue around one nipple, then sucked it into her mouth, feeling it get tighter under her tongue. “Oh god, that feels so good,” moaned Sophie, her legs becoming weak. “Babe, we should get on the bed before my legs give out.”

“Okay, I’m not sure how best to do this,” said Paula. “Why don’t you take my clothes off me first, and pull the duvet back, then I am going to have to lay flat on my back or on my right side only,” Paula said.

“I will gladly strip those clothes off you,” uttered Sophie, running her hands sensually up under Paula’s top, rubbing her thumb roughly against a nipple as she pulled her shirt over her head, discarding it on the floor somewhere. Then slowly ran her palms gently down Paula’s bare back, licking her collar bone, then she pushed her shorts and underwear down her legs and into a pile. She inhaled Paula’s scent deep into her nostrils, and her mouth watered. “I have missed everything about you,” said the young brunette, kissing Paula’s abdomen, her hands cupping the flesh of her bum.

Paula gently sat on the bed then scooted into the middle slowly and laid back, craving her lover’s touch. “Get over here, please baby, I need to touch you.”
Sophie removed her remaining clothes and crawled in to join Paula, their lips meeting immediately. Sophie was tentative at first, not sure where to put her hands as she was hovering over Paula. She leaned back onto her knees, then lay down beside her. She felt awkward and clunky. She kissed Paula again, trying to shed the clumsy feeling, but it wasn’t working. Paula was having a hard time reaching her with her good arm because she was laying on her right side and Sophie was terrified she was going to hurt her lover by bumping her shoulder.

She tried to reposition herself again, straddling Paula’s hips so she could lean down over her. She captured her lips again, while Paula palmed Sophie’s breast, rubbing her thumb over her taut nipple and squeezing the flesh. Paula then moved her hand around to Sophie’s back to pull her down toward her body and Sophie’s elbow made contact with the injury and Paula jerked in pain.

“Fuuuuuck,” said Sophie, pulling away. “This just isn’t working. I don’t know how to do this, where to put my hands … I’m afraid I’m really going to hurt you.” Sophie’s anxiety was getting the best of her.

Paula realized she had put too much pressure on her young lover and it was affecting her tremendously.

“Hey,” Paula soothed, “this is new for both of us, sweetheart. We will get a new rhythm between us as we learn how to maneuver. Listen, I want you, I always want you, but we don’t have to do this now. We can wait until you’re feeling more comfortable, love. It should just come naturally, and if it’s not, then we stop and try again another time. Okay?”

“You really mean that?” said Sophie.

“Of course, I do. Your comfort level is not where it needs to be just yet. And that’s okay, love. I am happy just to be with you, next to you, holding you. The other stuff will come along when we are both ready,” said Paula.

“I’m sorry, babe. I feel like such a failure.”

“Why?” laughed Paula. “You’ve not failed at anything. Listen to me, YOU have made me probably the happiest I’ve ever been in my life, bar the birth of my children. I am ecstatic to be engaged to a fabulously gorgeous woman, who worships me, and cares for me, and loves me no matter what. There is absolutely nothing for you to feel bad about, Webster. My libido will be just fine, so don’t think another thing about it, yea?”

Sophie reluctantly nodded. “Are you sure?”

“Does this look like the face of an unhappy woman?” she said as she smiled wide.

“Guess not.”

“So, why don’t you come snuggle up next to me and we can just be happy being together, how does that sound?”

Sophie nodded her head and laid down to Paula’s right side, placing her head on the good shoulder. “Is this okay? I don’t want to hurt your shoulder.”

“It’s wonderful to hold you close, sweetheart,” said Paula, kissing Sophie’s temple.

In this position, Paula could rub Sophie’s arm and side and the young brunette began to relax. She breathed nice and deep and evenly for some time until her body felt serene.
“Now, that feels better, yea? I can tell you’re relaxing, love,” said Paula. She looked at the ring now firmly placed on her right hand, and admired it. It was so beautiful. It made Paula’s stomach flip thinking about being married to Sophie, being connected to her forever. They would certainly move back into Paula’s house or maybe they would sell it and buy a new one, one that was theirs together. And maybe they would have children, that’s something they needed to talk about.

But, first things first. “So, fiancé of mine, what kind of wedding did you have in mind?” asked Paula.

Sophie moved her head to look at Paula. “Hadn’t really thought about it all that much to be honest. What do you want? A big do, a little do or just you and me off in some exotic place?”

“You mean to tell me you haven’t fantasized about your wedding day since you were a little girl?”

“Might have done when I thought I was going to marry Prince Charming and we’d ride off in an oversized pumpkin, but things have changed a bit in my mind since then,” Sophie laughed.

“Do you want a big wedding, with all the bells and whistles, the white dress and the bridesmaids and the cake?”

Sophie thought for a minute and shook her head. “No, I really don’t think I do. Sian and I had sort of a big thing, we had the dresses and such, but, I guess after that blew up in my face I thought next time, if there was a next time, I’d do it differently.”

“Differently how?”

“Well, I want it to be in a church, but small and intimate, you know? I don’t need the big splash. I wasted so much of mum and dad’s money last time,” said Sophie, sadness in her voice.

“I didn’t mean to make you sad, baby,” said Paula, noticing Sophie’s melancholy. “Do you miss, her? Sian.”

“Sometimes I miss things about her, but I know we would never have made it long term. We were just too young and stupid. You think I make daft mistakes now, you should have seen me back then! Ugh, it was an awful time, really. Maybe I clung so hard to Sian because I was scared to be alone with my life falling apart. It was a disaster.”

Paula just kept rubbing Sophie’s arm and listened to her. She was jealous of Sian, for being Sophie’s first love, but she didn’t let it show.

“What was she like,” asked Paula, not sure she really wanted to know.

“She was beautiful, and kind and she made me laugh a lot. You know we were besties before we fell in love with each other. We did everything together and we were really happy for a bit, even ran away to be together because we thought people would try to split us up if they found out we were a couple … silly now I think about. We were just kids.” Sophie trailed off.

“What happened?”

Sophie chuckled, “We realized we were going to starve, so I called Rosie and she brought us home. We thought we could live on love until we had nowhere to kip and living rough did not appeal. God, we were so daft.” Sophie sighed.

Paula’s heart ached a bit, thinking about Sophie so young and head over heels in love, with someone else. “Do you wish you hadn’t broken up?”
“For a long time, I did. I thought I’d never feel about anyone the way I felt about her, but I grew up and realized Sian was missing something crucial to my happiness.”

“What’s that?” asked Paula.

Sophie placed a kiss on her fiance’s lips. “She’s not you.”

“You’re a smooth talker, Sophie Webster. That’s one of the million reasons I am so in love with you and will be until the day I draw my last breath.” Paula squeezed Sophie to her, kissing her temple again.

They both went quiet for a few minutes, then Sophie quietly asked, “What was your wedding like?”

Paula sighed and thought back, it was so long ago. “Well, I was 25 and full of ambition and fire. Tim and I had been together for just over a year with no real plans to marry, but then I fell pregnant it rather forced things a bit. I didn’t want to have a child with a man I wasn’t married to, things were a bit different socially back then, so we thought it best to tie the knot. Not the best reason to do it, in hindsight. The wedding was small and sweet with me 4 months gone, just family and close friends.”

“Why didn’t you take his name? And how on earth did you convince him that the kids should have your name?”

“I am a lawyer, darling!” grinned Paula. “I knew how to get my way, and, well, Cunliffe just didn’t sound right. I liked Martin much better and when we argued about it, I reminded him that we were living in an era where women had choices and I was not going to be a victim of the patriarchy, nor was my child! And if he didn’t like it, he could take me to court. He decided it wasn’t worth the fight, plus he knew I would win!”

“Do you regret getting married?” asked a cautious Sophie.

“No, not really. I enjoyed being married for the first 10 years or so. It helps being married when you have children, though, things have changed, and it’s not so taboo these days, but back then you got judged and treated differently if you weren’t married. Tim and I had a decent go of it, but we were just so young and so much changes as you grow older. We just grew in different directions, I suppose. He lost sight of what was important to me, and I did the same. So, after twenty years you wake up one day and look at the person in bed with you and realize you’re strangers.”

“What if that happens to us, though,” said a solemn Sophie.

“It won’t.”

“How do you know that? You can’t be –“

“I know because I never loved Tim like I love you. I know we are going to have our challenges, sweetheart, but I can honestly say what you want is more important to me than what I want, and that’s how I know we will make it. When Tim and I got together, I was quite selfish and ambitious, and what I wanted came first. Now, you come first.”

“I feel the same way, babe. I only want what makes you happy.”

“What makes me happy is you, Sophie. Simply you. Tim never meant half of what you mean to me,” she said, leaning over to give her fiancé a sensual kiss. She felt a tingle in her belly as Sophie’s tongue massaged hers. Cool your jets, Paula.

“He seems like a nice enough guy,” said Sophie as she pulled out of the kiss.
Paula just looked at her and crunched up her eyebrows. “Wha –“

“Oh, I’m full of surprises, babe. Tim came down with Isla when you, well, you know, and we wound up alone at one point. It felt a bit awkward at first. I have to admit I am really quite jealous of him because of how important he was, is, in your life.”

“Not anymore –“

“BUT, we had a chance to talk and I think we understand each other better now. He knows you’ve moved on and he says he’s happy for you, and I honestly believe him. I don’t think he has any plan to try to win you back.”

“I should hope not. He hated me, quite spectacularly, for some time. He made my life a living hell, Sophie. Tried to turn the kids against me, but he didn’t succeed, thank goodness.” Paula’s voice trailed off. “Anyway, none of that has any bearing on our life. Even if he did want me back, I only want you, so…”

“Well, it’s a good thing, because I don’t think I could take him in a fight. Well, not a physical fight, anyway,” Sophie grinned, “he’s quite tall.”

“Meh, I prefer my lover’s a bit shorter, a bit softer,” Paula kissed her neck, her arousal ramping up significantly, “a bit more female <kiss> a whole lot more <kiss> like you.” Paula looked directly at Sophie, her pupils overtaking her irises as her want for Sophie spiked, her breathing getting heavy. She was trying to keep her lust at bay, but she was failing.

Sophie looked at Paula, her own arousal had just rocketed into the stratosphere. She pulled Paula’s mouth to hers for a much deeper kiss and she laid on her back, pulling Paula with her. She ran her hands into her lover’s hair, as Paula’s mouth moved down to Sophie’s neck again, licking at the sensitive skin, scraping her teeth roughly against the flesh, delighting in the taste of her.

“Is this okay?” asked Paula, wanting to make sure Sophie was comfortable. She felt Sophie nod her head, so she continued, sucking her earlobe sensually. “I love you so much, Sophie,” breathed Paula heavily.

She continued her way down to Sophie’s shoulder and chest, making her way to her breasts, licking and sucking at the erect nubs, squeezing the flesh gently. Sophie moaned deeply, keeping her hands in Paula’s hair, relishing the feeling of her warm tongue against her sensitive nipples. “Mmmm, babe, yes,” groaned Sophie, her hips beginning to gyrate. Paula continued to suck at her nipples, moving from left to right, and back again, blowing on the wetness to watch them pucker at the coolness of the air, then replaced her mouth with her fingers, pinching the nipples as she moved her mouth lower on Sophie’s body.

Not being able to use but one hand, Paula got creative with her tongue and teeth, inciting pleasure with little bites down Sophie’s stomach, moving slowly, taking direction from the sounds her lover was making. She continued working her way toward Sophie’s center with her mouth, every moan Sophie made pushed her closer, until she reached her target. She used her fingers to open Sophie’s folds, exposing her engorged clit, her center wet with anticipation. Paula didn’t have the patience to prolong things, so she ran her tongue deep into Sophie’s fold, lapping at the wetness, then began sucking at Sophie’s clit, licking and circling it with her tongue, then pulling her labia into her mouth for manipulation.

“That feels, uhhhhmazing,” moaned Sophie, her hands still in Paula’s hair, pushing her head closer into her for more contact.
Sophie’s hips were bucking, her vagina needing penetration. Paula did her best to maneuver herself, so she could enter her lover. She sat up and straddled Sophie’s right thigh, her pussy making contact with Sophie’s leg, so she could rock back and forth for stimulation. Paula’s thigh was between Sophie’s legs, providing the leverage she needed so she could enter her. She thrust three fingers deep into Sophie, wetness covering her hand, enabling her to slide easily in and out of her lover, over and over, at first slowly, then more quickly. Paula could feel her walls gripping at her fingers as she drove her hand deeper into her lover.

“Oh god, mmmm, uhhhh, fuck … that feels … so good,” said Sophie, trapping her bottom lip between her teeth, her head arched back into the pillow. Her body was on fire, writhing with a building pleasure as she moved her hips against Paula’s hand, the friction assisting with the delivery of her building orgasm.

Paula continued moving her own hips, her center wet against Sophie’s leg. She was grunting with pleasure as she rocked back and forth on the tight muscle. She was grateful Sophie was a runner and had perfectly muscular thighs. Sophie was able to pull herself from her own impending release to realize Paula needed contact as well. So, she reached between her lover’s legs and entered Paula with her fingers, eliciting extreme satisfaction.

“Oh, Sophie, baby, mmhmmm … that’s it, baby, right there … ”

The pair found a perfect rhythm together, as hips rocked, and fingers pushed, and thighs thrust. The feeling of Sophie inside her caused Paula to speed up her motions against Sophie’s fingers and she nearly cried out, so close to coming, but she held on as best she could.

Sophie’s body was undulating against Paula’s hand, harder and harder, trying to achieve release, grunting with every push. She held on tight to the sheet at her left side, then she moved that hand to her own nipple and pinched it hard, thrusting her hips harder until finally she screamed, the orgasm ripping through her, and she came hard on Paula’s hand. Sophie let out a long moan as she rode out the pleasure her body was feeling.

Paula felt Sophie come and let herself go, her walls squeezing hard at Sophie’s fingers, bliss filling her body as she felt the full effects of her own orgasm course through her. She didn’t have the energy to stay upright so she rolled off Sophie and laid back on the bed, sweat covering her. “Oh my god that was amazing,” she said. “You are 100% fucking incredible.”

Sophie was still floating back down, but she began to giggle. “THAT felt great! I’d almost forgotten how good you are at getting me off. I have missed this so much, and let me tell you, I am so grateful I still get to feel this way. Holy shit, that was brilliant.”

“Well, I guess we solved that problem, didn’t we?” offered the older brunette.

“You didn’t hurt yourself, did you, babe? You were moving around pretty well, I must say. And you figured out how to get in just the right place, didn’t you?”

“It just takes a little creative thought, is all,” said Paula, as her breathing steadied. “Whoa, that felt so good. No one has ever made me cum like you. Whoooo. Now, you come here and lay with me and go to sleep. You ought to sleep like a baby after that!”

Sophie sidled up to Paula and relaxed into her. “I love you, my wife-to-be. You make me feel so loved, like I can do anything.”

Paula captured the lips in front of her, caressing her lover’s tongue with her own, tasting the lusciousness of Sophie’s mouth. “My god, you’re such a good kisser. I could do this forever and
never stop,” uttered the older brunette. “But, you my darling, need sleep, so snuggle up to me and don’t let go. I’ll see you in the morning, okay? Good night, baby.”

It didn’t take long before Sophie was breathing deeply and steadily. Paula had experienced quite a lot in the last 24 hours, but she was more than determined to make their life together extraordinary. God had given her a second chance and she wasn’t going to squander it. She looked again at the ring on her finger and decided she would do a little ring shopping of her own tomorrow. Sophie deserved something worthy of the love and commitment she’d shown Paula, and she was going to make sure she got it.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

The lover's reconnect and try to get their lives back to a normal place. Paula makes secret plans and a surprise awaits them both they weren't expecting.

Chapter Notes

I'd like to thank everyone for all the comments and kudos over the course of the story, and for continuing to read as it's evolved. We get Saula back this week, so looking forward to seeing them back on our screens again.

Cheers!

Sophie was sleeping soundly when Paula woke. She tried to stretch and found herself in a bit of pain, but she didn’t want to wake her fiancé, so she managed her way out of bed and into the ensuite where her tablets were. With those down, she moved on to try to get herself dressed. She got underwear and shorts on without too much trouble, then pulled a shirt over her head. She would just go braless for the foreseeable, besides, it gave Sophie easy access to her breasts, which they both liked.

Paula made herself some coffee and sat down on the sofa, put her feet up, careful of the incision on her calf, and turned her laptop on for the first time since she left New York. She had promised Sophie she wouldn’t work, so she dare not open her email. Instead, she started looking for rings. She wanted to see different shapes and styles, looking for one that she thought suited her lover, then she would have Evelyn help her. She loved her ring and thought maybe she would get a matching one for Sophie, but wanted to browse the internet first.

The solicitor spent a couple of hours just scrolling through page after page of diamond rings, but nothing really jumped out at her. It was a bit frustrating as nothing was beautiful enough. She was about to pack it in when she heard the door to the bedroom open and Sophie called out for her, “Babe? Where are you?”

“I’m in here, sweetheart.” Paula nearly panicked. She didn’t want Sophie to see what she was doing, so she tried her best to move the laptop into hiding, but she didn’t quite make it in time.

“What are you doing?” asked Sophie with an accusatory tone? “I can’t trust you for one day? I can’t believe you, Paula!”

Realizing Sophie thought she was working, Paula held her one hand up, “I am NOT working, love. I promise!”

“Well, what are you doing then?”

“I was, uhm, well, I was –“ stuttered the solicitor.
“Working???”

“NO, I wasn’t. I already told you that.”

“Then let me see your laptop,” said Sophie, grabbing for it.

“NO! You can’t do that!” Paula pulled it away.

“And why not? Because you’re working!!!”

“Sophie, listen to me. I told you I wasn’t working. I was just looking at something, but I can’t tell you what. Not yet.”

Sophie narrowed her eyes at Paula. “You promise it wasn’t work?”

“I promise on my lovely engagement ring, it was NOT work.”

“So, why can’t I see, then?”

“Mmmm, I can’t tell you that either. You’re just going to have to trust me!”

Sophie was not happy about it, but she decided to let it go. If Paula was working, she’d catch her eventually, then there would be hell to pay.

“Now, come here and give me a good morning kiss!” said Paula, holding her arm open.

Sophie kissed her, lightly running her lips over Paula’s. “How did you get yourself dressed, babe? You should have woken me up,” said Sophie.

“I am going to have to do things for myself eventually, so might as well start. Besides, you needed to sleep.” Paula looked at the clock. “And it looks like you did! It’s almost noon.”

“Someone wore me out last night! Did you eat something, babe? Let me make you an omelet or a sandwich seeing as it’s lunch time.”

“I made some toast, but had a devil of a time buttering it,” laughed the older brunette. “And I had some coffee.”

“You’re not supposed to have caffeine, Paula, and you know it!”

“Just one cup! I was gagging, love. Forgive me?” Paula said, poking out her bottom lip.

“I guess this one time I can overlook it,” said Sophie, leaning down to kiss her love, this time she lingered a bit longer.

“Mmmm, I want some more of that,” said Paula, pulling Sophie down onto the couch for another snog, this one deeper and a bit more frantic. Tongues were working against each other when Sophie ran her hand under Paula’s loose shirt to her nipple. “Someone’s happy to see me,” said Sophie, smiling as she massaged the taut nub between her fingers.

“Oh, yes, that’s good, right there, mmmmmm,” moaned the solicitor, her head leaning back onto the sofa cushion. Sophie lifted her shirt and sucked the hard flesh into her mouth, placing her hand between Paula’s legs. She could feel the heat coming from her.

Their lovemaking the night before flipped a switch in Sophie, and she now realized Paula wouldn’t break when they got physical, so she had regained her full desire to resume their physical
relationship. The door had opened, and Sophie just couldn’t close it.

“Lean back some more, babe. I want to feel you,” breathed the young brunette against Paula’s sensitive breast. She moved her mouth over to the left nipple, gingerly moving her bound arm over so she could reach it.

Paula did as she was told, extending her body further. Sophie ran her hand into Paula’s underwear to meet molten wetness and she began to massage her clit. Paula opened her legs to give her lover better access. “I like that a lot, uhn yes,” said Paula, moving her hips against Sophie’s digits, her hand in Sophie’s hair as she continued to suck her nipple.

“What the hell, Sophie? You can’t just stop –” Paula sat up slightly, but Sophie was no longer there. “SOPHIE?” Paula had no idea what had just happened.

Sophie returned quickly, a rather salacious grin on her face, with Big Ben in hand. “I want to watch you scream, babe” said the young brunette, placing her mouth back to Paula’s center. She picked up where she left off, licking Paula back into a frenzy, sucking and using her tongue in fabulous ways. She could feel a hand in her hair and Paula was bucking her hips so hard Sophie thought she might fall off the couch. It was time to take things up a notch. She grabbed Big Ben and pushed it into her lover and watched her arch her back deep into the couch. “Oh, dear god, yeeeessssssssssss, yes, yes,” she screamed. Sophie kept thrusting in and out of her, still pinching at her nipples, her mouth sucking her clit, flicking the nub with her tongue until she could tell Paula was moments away. She pulled her head up to watch as Paula fell over the edge, her hand gripping the throw pillow next to her.

“Fuuuuuuuuucckkkkk!”

Sophie continued to kiss at her skin softly as she came down and melted into the couch.

Was that alright?” asked a sarcastic Sophie.
“What the fuck do you think?” muttered Paula, barely coherent. “My god, if you make love to me like that for the rest of my life I might be deemed the fucking luckiest woman alive.”

Sophie squinted up one eye, “Meh, I don’t think that was exactly making love, do you?”

“Oh, alright, if you fuck me like that for the rest of my life –“

Sophie stopped her mid-sentence with a tongue in the mouth. Sophie had rested fully, and her libido had taken off like a rocket. She wanted to consume her fiancé, feel every inch of her, take her to heights unknown. “Mmmmm, I want you! On the dining room table,” breathed Sophie.

“Sophie, what has gotten into you today? I don’t think I can stand yet!”

“Get your ass up off that couch, woman! You’re going to cum again, then you can sit down.” Sophie pulled Paula up off the couch with intentions of moving her over to the table. The fabric of the couch had given her chin burn, so she thought the table would work well. But they didn’t quite make it that far, Sophie needing to have her immediately, so she used the wall as support, then attacked her mouth with her own, both hands busy at work, one on her breast and one already into her folds.

“My god, you feel so good,” moaned Sophie, her motions frantic and fervent.

Paula pulled Sophie’s mouth to her roughly, teeth clashing, “Oh baby, fuck me, fuck me harder” she yelped, her nipples hard, her clit throbbing again. Sophie’s fingers were inside her, feeling her, then she took a nipple into her mouth and bit it just hard enough to get a scream of pleasure as her fingers fucked her lover against the wall, pushing in and out until she came all over her hand, wetness running down her fingers.

“Oh, dear god, you’re so fucking good at that, baby, keep fucking me until I tell you to stop,” breathed Paula raggedly, gasping as her body jerked through the orgasm.

Sophie would usually stop after Paula came, but she did as she was told and continued to thrust in and out of her lover. Paula began to moan again, holding onto Sophie’s back hard with her hand, digging her nails into Sophie’s back, thrusting her hips along with her fingers. Sophie took Big Ben from her waistband where she had placed it, and again, thrust it up hard into Paula, and was rewarded with a primal moan that came from deep in her throat. “I’m coming again, baby, ughnnnnnn, yeeeeeeeee,” she screamed as she held onto Sophie, so she wouldn’t hit the floor.

They both slid down the wall until they were resting in a heap on the carpet, both covered in sweat and sex, spent and unable to move. They lay there for a few minutes just trying to get the breath back into them.

“I probably shouldn’t have done that to you, but I had to have you,” said Sophie, kissing Paula’s arm as it lay next to her.

“Mmmmm, no, that was … no one has ever fucked me like that, Sophie. My god. I never. Oh, geez, I needed that, baby. I needed that so much. My shoulder hurts like hell, but I couldn’t care less. That was inspired!”

“Babe! You should have said something. Oh, my god, I can’t believe I lost control like that and hurt you.” Sophie was feeling guilty for putting her own needs ahead of Paula’s.

“Are you kidding me? You just gave me three intense orgasms in the span of 20 minutes. The pain I’m feeling is nothing compared to the pleasure flooding my body! I’ll take that any day of the week.”
“Are you sure, babe? You know what the doctor said.”

“Yes, she said we could resume a healthy sex life. And that’s what we’re doing!” grinned the solicitor, quite satisfied to be laying mostly naked on the carpet after having been fucked quite adeptly against the wall.

Paula’s phone began to ring, and Sophie got up to retrieve it from the coffee table. “It’s Evelyn, babe,” she said, handing it to her.

“Hello,” said Paula, answering the call. “Yes, I’m actually doing great, Ev! <> We both got some good sleep and have been enjoying being together today, nothing too strenuous,” lied the solicitor. “Uhhh, let me check with Sophie – baby, are you up for a visit from Evelyn?” Sophie nodded. “We’d love to see you, Ev. <> Mmmm hmmm <> Ok, about 30 minutes then, great. See you then.”

“Thirty minutes? Shit, we need a shower, babe! And I need to light some scented candles or something, the place smells like sex! You know she’ll get onto us both about it if she suspects you’ve not been taking it slow!” panicked Sophie.

“It’ll be okay, love. Light some candles now and let’s go have a shower,” she said with lustful look in her eye.

“You are a bad, bad girl,” said Sophie as she helped her lover up from the floor.

About 25 minutes and some heavy petting in the shower later, the couple emerged from their bedroom freshly dressed and ready for their visitor. The doorbell rang, and Sophie greeted Evelyn with a big hug and a suggestive smile.

“Well?” asked Evelyn quietly before coming in the door.

Sophie just nodded, a big fat grin on her face.

Evelyn walked in and over to Paula for a hug, trying to be discrete. “Hello my dear friend. Glad to see all is well. How are you getting on?”

“Cut the crap, Ev. I can tell by the look on your face you were in on the whole thing!” laughed the solicitor.

“Let me see the ring on your hand!” she directed.

Paula offered her hand up and Evelyn just oohed and aahed. “Well, I couldn’t be happier for you two!” she said, sitting on the sofa right where they’d had sex less than an hour ago. Both Paula and Sophie were quiet as they exchanged a look between them. “What’s that look about?” asked Evelyn.

“Hmmmm?” responded Paula, trying to play dumb. “What look?”

“Are you kidding me? You’re at it already?” laughed the older woman, shaking her head. “Sophie, I thought you would have her under control.”

Rumbled.

“I can’t help myself when I’m around her, Ev. It’s not my fault! She grilled the doctor about it yesterday –“

“I did NOT grill the doctor!” said an incensed Paula. “I simply asked the question and she gave us the okay. And as I recall, you were the crazed fiend earlier!” she exclaimed, pointing the finger at
Sophie.

“I was NOT a fiend, okay, so maybe I was a little bit, but you weren’t a reluctant participant, last night or earlier, OR in the shower!”

Evelyn’s laughter got louder, “Oh, I just love being around the two of you. So much in love you can’t keep your hands off each other … good for you! Can you imagine, if more couples were like this we’d have a lot less anger in the world.” She shifted the conversation. “So, has Mark been by yet?”

“No, haven’t heard from him. Did Rachel make it in okay?” asked Paula.

“Alexander didn’t say. He was busy this morning with all sorts, so I expect she arrived without issue. I’m sure they are busy running around London today. I truly like that lad. He’s such a nice young man.”

“Yes, he is,” said Sophie. “Ev, are you going to be here with Paula for a while? I really need to get a shop in. We only have a slice of cake and a few bits and bobs in the fridge. Would you mind keeping my fiancé company while I run out for an hour or so?”

“Well, dear, I’d be delighted to keep this one company for as long as you like. I took the afternoon off!”

“I don’t need a babysitter!” said an incredulous Paula.

“I know you don’t, babe, but I will feel better if I know you’re being looked after, at least for a few more days, so humor me, will ya? Now, you two have a good visit and I will be back soon,” she said as she kissed Paula good bye. “And Ev, do NOT give her a coffee! She’s off the caffeine for a bit. She will try to talk you into it, and don’t I know how persuasive she can be. Don’t cave. There are some herbal tea bags in the kitchen I brought from the hospital.”

“UGH, herbal tea is rubbish!” said Paula.

“Don’t worry, Sophie, I will handle the grump! You go and do your shop,” said Evelyn, shaking her head at her friend’s demeanor.

“Thank you, Ev! Now, you behave yourself, yea?” Sophie said to her fiancé as she headed for the door. “I love you. See you in a bit.”

“Love you, too, baby!” said Paula, waiting for the door to close. “Ev, I need your help!” said the solicitor, grabbing her laptop then sitting next to her friend. “I am going to get Sophie a ring, but I can’t find the right one. I looked online all morning to no avail. And I can’t exactly go out right now.”

“You’ve come to the right place, my friend! Alexander and I found that rock sitting on your finger, so I imagine I can find another one just as lovely for that wonderful girl of yours. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I want the same size and shape of diamond, so we match, but I want more diamonds cascading down the sides, not too many, maybe two on each side, a clean setting, nothing gaudy. I’ll show you a few I liked, but they weren’t quite right.” She opened the laptop and logged in. “She caught me this morning and thought I was working, nearly didn’t believe me when I told her I wasn’t. But I couldn’t tell her what I was doing either, so it looked rather shifty.”

“Close call, huh?”
“Here, this was what I’m thinking.” She showed her the pictures she’d saved. “See these are good, but there’s too much going on down the sides. I want it cleaner.”

“Email that one, and that one, and that one to me. I will get on it tomorrow. What’s her ring size?”

“It’s a 7, like mine.”

“Ok, consider it done. I will call you when I have a few for you to choose from and we will find that young lady the ring of her dreams.”

“Thank you for helping me with this. I want to give her something as amazing as she is. I almost fell out of my chair when she proposed, Ev. I was not expecting it.”

“That girl loves the bones off you and would literally do anything for you. Hmm, it’s the way one should feel about the person they marry. If only everyone were like that.”

“I feel the same about her. She’s just something special, something rare, and I cannot for the life of me figure out how someone has not come along and swooped her up. How was I the lucky one?”

“It was just meant to be, Paula. So, make sure you treat her with love all the time. Cherish her, and you’ll be fine.”

“I hope we never lose that,” Paula said, seemingly in her own world. “She asked me about my marriage to Tim last night, and I think I might have scared her a bit.”

“How so?”

“I told her after twenty years we grew into strangers, which is true, but I think she expects the same to happen to us over time. I feel so differently about her than I did Tim, though. God, Evelyn, we’ve been together for nearly 8 months and things just keep getting better. We are becoming more in tune, not less. Our sex life is, well, incredible. Just when I think it couldn’t possibly be better, we find new ways of connecting it’s absolutely mind-blowing. I just don’t know how to make her understand how much I love her.”

“Listen, she put a ring on your finger, so she’s not afraid to go after what she wants, Paula. She’s not some wilting flower you need to coddle. That girl is strong as steel. I think you’re overthinking things. Just love her, Paula, love her every day and treat her well, and you’ll both be fine. Go and get married and be happy. That’s all anyone could hope for in this life.”

“You’re right. It’s really quite simple, isn’t it?”

“So, what kind of wedding are you going to have?” asked Evelyn.

Paula sighed. “I can’t get a good read on what she wants. You know, she almost got married to her first love, but things happened, and Sian left Sophie practically at the altar. Did a number on her, I think. I’m actually surprised she wants to get married.”

“Oh, my goodness! How old was she??”

Paula quirked her eye at her friend, “Seventeen!”

“Seventeen? Really?” asked an incredulous Evelyn. “She was just a baby.”

“She says she knows it wouldn’t have lasted because they were so young, but that first love never really loses its grip, does it?” sighed Paula.
“Paula Martin, do I see a hint of insecurity behind those eyes?”

The solicitor looked at her friend and nodded just slightly. “What if she realizes someday that she made a mistake, that I’m too old and she wants someone younger?”

“What if you change your mind?”

Paula stared at her, a look of confusion playing across her features. “Well, that won’t happen, Ev. She is my –“

“And don’t you think Sophie would say the same thing? Don’t let all that subterfuge creep in and start nibbling away at the foundation of your relationship, Paula. Anyone with eyes can see how much that girl loves you, so just run with it and be happy. Don’t question it.”

Paula took in what her friend was telling her and nodded in agreement. She sat with the thought that there were no guarantees in life, and being married was work, no matter how much love was involved. She and Sophie would just have to do the work, but the pieces seemed to fit together perfectly for them, making for an easier road than some people traveled.

xxx

“Honey, I’m hoooommme,” announced Sophie as she wheeled in the groceries, Phillip right behind her with more bags. “Just put them in the kitchen Phillip, thank you.” She headed over to find the ladies practically in the same place she left them a couple hours earlier. “Well, I see you two have been active, huh?” She leaned down and gave Paula a rather juicy kiss. “Mmmmm, I missed you,” she said pulling back.

“Did you buy out the store?” asked Paula.

“We had nothing in the flat, babe! How did you live like this? I did get you some coffee, BUT, I am going to hide it until next week when you’re allowed to have it! And I got some fresh veg and fruit. I have to get something other than stale coffee and Danish in you. I got some fresh shrimp for dinner. Ev, you staying for your tea?”

“No darling, I have things to get done,” she said, winking at Paula. “But, thank you for the invitation. This one here has been well behaved, but I don’t think my company is going to satisfy her for too much longer.”

“Don’t be daft,” said the solicitor. “I was about to break out Scrabble!”

“I’ll leave you two in peace. Have a nice evening, loves,” she said as she gathered her things and retreated.

“I’ll help you unload the groceries, sweetheart,” said Paula, getting up off the couch.

“Babe, I can do it. You rest.”

“If I sit on that couch any longer my backside is going to be as wide as the M6. I’ve done nothing but rest all afternoon. The doctor told me I need to move about, so I don’t get too stiff.”

“Alright then, at least this way I can reintroduce you to what a vegetable looks like!”
“Come here you cheeky little miss,” said Paula, pulling Sophie close to her. “You’ve only been gone for a few hours and I couldn’t wait for you to get back, so I could do this.” Paula placed her mouth to Sophie’s, not wasting time to taste her lover.

Sophie put an arm over Paula’s right shoulder and her left hand around her waist, sharing the deep snog with a moan. Sophie pulled back, eyes closed and rested her forehead to Paula’s. “What was that for?”

“Just because,” offered the solicitor, thick emotion hovering just below the surface.

“If we didn’t have food to put away I would push you up against that wall again,” whispered the young brunette, “but, we can’t let our lives go to hell because we can’t control ourselves.” She moved out of Paula’s embrace and headed to the kitchen.

“I suppose you have a point,” said Paula, following Sophie who was already removing items from the bags. “Ooooh, you got wine?”

“NOT until we get the doctor’s approval. Speaking of, did you get your follow up appointment made with the GP?”

“Not yet, but I will. I need to register somewhere. I’ve not needed one since I moved here.”

“Do you want me do it for you?”

“I think I can handle it, love.”

“Alright, I’ll stop hovering,” said Sophie, shifting her focus to dinner. “What time do you want dinner, babe?”

“I’m actually a bit hungry now. Do you mind cooking since I can’t?”

“Of course not. I’ll have it ready in a jif. You go find yourself a GP and make that call, yea?”

“Yes, dear. Am I allowed to get on the laptop or will you accuse me of working?”

Sophie stopped, and her face got serious. “Listen, I only want what’s best for you and you are notorious for working too much. I don’t want to argue with you about this, but I AM going to make sure you do what you’re supposed to, Paula, and I won’t apologize or be made to feel bad about doing what’s best for you, because you certainly won’t!”

Paula knew she had hit a nerve. “Sorry. That was uncalled for.” She gave Sophie a sweet kiss and headed to the living room to find a doctor. Her phone began to ring, and Paula answered, “Hello, Paula Martin,” old habits. “Hello, Mark! Did Rachel make it in ok? <> Oh, well come on up!”

Sophie was standing in the doorway, listening, “I assume Mark is here?”

“Yes, he and Rachel are coming up. We can hold dinner until later, right?”

“Sure, babe. No worries.”

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang, and Sophie opened the door to find Mark and Rachel in the hallway. “Hey Mark, come in. You must be Rachel? I’m Sophie and Paula’s in there,” motioning them into the living room.

Paula called out “Hey you two, come in, come in –” Then she stopped mid-sentence and stared at the brunette that had just entered the flat with Mark.
“Paula this is Rachel. Rachel, Paula,” said Mark.

Rachel and Paula stood staring at one another, eyes wide with recognition.

“What—how on earth?” stumbled Paula.

“Babe? What’s going on?” asked Sophie, looking at Paula for an answer as to why she was stood there, mouth agape.

Rachel didn’t know how a coincidence this big could possibly happen. “This is just too weird,” said the young woman.

“Do you two know each other?” said a slightly jealous Sophie, all sorts of images going through her mind. Was she somehow Isla’s friend or had Paula had a one night stand with this woman …

Paula spoke again, “This is unbelievable.”

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” said Mark, completely at a loss.

Paula started, “Well, remember the bartender I told you about, the one who helped me out with Richard and the sangria at the restaurant that night?” Paula tilted her head toward Rachel.

Sophie and Mark both nodded their heads, then the penny dropped for them both.

“You’re kidding!” said Sophie.

Mark was stunned! He looked at Rachel, “You mean the woman who gave you the $200 tip was Paula?”

Rachel nodded her head. “One and the same. Wicked small world sometimes, huh?”

“I can’t believe this,” said Paula. “You two, come in and sit down. Would you like a drink? We have wine, or I can make you a real drink? Or, better yet, maybe Rachel could make us all a drink, but no sangria!”

“I’m happy to make anyone a drink!” said Rachel.

“I could use a drink,” said Paula, then looked at Sophie, “but I am not allowed just yet. Fizzy water with a twist for me. Sophie?”

“Vodka rocks for me, please. I’ll go get some ice,” offered Sophie, walking into the kitchen.

“Scotch, neat, for me,” said Mark.

“Since when do you drink scotch, Mark?” asked his girlfriend, standing at the wet bar.

“Oh, I see Alexander’s influence at play here,” offered Paula. “Be careful, Mark, he likes the expensive stuff and once you drink that you won’t be able to stomach the cheap stuff again, and I’m afraid my bar over there will not satisfy that taste.”

“How about a Sex on the Beach, honey? You like those,” asked Rachel. Paula and Sophie nearly bursting out with laughter.

“Ha, ha, ya’ll think you’re funny, but I am quite secure in my manhood. Yes, I like those, so mix
away, dear.”

“Oh Mark, you’re such a dear soul. I liked you the minute I met you sitting there in Starbucks like a child that had been caught playing hooky.”

“I wasn’t that bad, was I?” he asked, taking his drink from Rachel.

“Only when you found out I worked on the 40th floor.”

“Well, only the big executives work up there, so I was a bit intimidated, plus you have a foreboding presence Paula. You kind of scared me a bit.”

“I don’t have a foreboding presence,” protested the solicitor.

“Oh, babe, yes you do!” said Sophie. “Everyone is afraid of you … well, except me. I’ve always been able to wrap you around my little finger,” grinned Sophie facetiously, leaning over to kiss Paula sweetly. “You should see her staff at her law firm. She says jump …”

“I’m not that bad, am I?”

“I’m just kidding, babe. Your staff love you.”

“They’d better! I’m a great boss!”

“She has such a low opinion of herself,” said Sophie, everyone laughing.

Paula still couldn’t believe the coincidence and looked at Rachel intently. She still thought she looked a lot like Sophie, so she observed her features – same color hair, same shaped face, eyes, mouth – they really could be sisters. But when her gaze adjusted onto her lover, her heart flipped. Sophie had a specific quality that drew Paula to her, much like gravity, a force she had no control over. This is what made Sophie different from everyone else, and what made Paula completely defenseless against her charms.

“Paula, Mark told me about what happened. I’m so sorry you were hurt, but I am happy to see you’re okay,” said Rachel, pulling Paula out of her thoughts.

“Thank you, Rachel. You really have no idea how much you helped me out that night, especially by handling Charles after I left. Funny though, that I left the restaurant where you were,” she motioned to Rachel, “to go back to my suite, where you were,” she motioned to Mark. “And none of us knew! And to think of the thousands of restaurants in the city and I wind up at yours.”

Sophie was quiet, remembering how Paula had said how much the bartender looked like her, and how she had helped Paula pull off keeping herself sober. She was grateful a person like Rachel was there, but she felt a pang of jealousy at how Paula kept looking at her. Stop being paranoid, Sophie! “So, what have you two been up to today?” asked Sophie as she sat down on the couch after making herself another drink, the Vodka relaxing her body.

“We just kind of did a few touristy things and tried to get a feel for the city. We go back to New York Monday to start getting ready for the move. We will probably be here in a few weeks. Alexander has said I can use one of the corporate apartments here until we can find one of our own. It’s all a bit of a whirlwind, really,” said Mark.

“You’ll love London, Mark, and it will do wonders for your career, not that you will ever need to leave Cooper. Alexander has earmarked you for success, I can tell. And Rachel, what do you plan to do?” asked Paula.
“Well, since this guy is going to be making the big bucks, I am going to pursue the theater full time. We both had to work in New York, but I will be able to act now, so I am happy,” said Rachel. “Sophie, what do you do?”

“Well, I manage a restaurant in Manchester, but as we are getting married, I’m going to be –“

“Y’all are getting married??” asked Mark, an excited look on his face.

Paula smiled a big smile and held out her hand, “Sophie popped the question last night.”

“Oh my god that ring is awesome!” offered Rachel. “Wow, that’s great news! When’s the wedding?”

“We haven’t set a date just yet, but the sooner the better if you ask me,” smiled Sophie. “We need to get this one healed up first though.”

“You mean you don’t want this thing in all our photos?” asked Paula, pointing to the lump under her shirt. She was thankful that Sophie had put a bra on her earlier now that they had visitors. “Bloody pain in the ass …”

“Patience is not her strong suit,” said Sophie to the others.

“Well, congratulations to you both. It’s terrific news,” said Mark.

“So, you’re moving to London, too,” said Rachel. “I’m glad I’ll have at least one friend here. Mark’s probably going to be working a lot, so …”

“Yea, this one too,” said Sophie, obviously talking about Paula. “So, I am going to have to figure out what to do with my life, I guess.”

“There are a lot of great restaurants here, love,” offered Paula.

“Meh, it’s not that I love the restaurant business per se. Speed Daal is just really convenient. I’ve been thinking about what I want to do, and I have a few ideas, but …”

Feeling Sophie stiffen up, Paula said, “Well, there’s no rush. We can talk about it later, baby. Right now, it’s all about resting up and taking care of yourself.”

“Yea, I suppose,” said a pensive Sophie.

“Hey, why don’t we all go out for dinner, unless you two already have plans?” asked Paula.

“We don’t have specific plans. What do you think, Mark?” asked Rachel.

“Yea, sounds good to me. Maybe a real English pub? I’d love a beer!” he said, eyeballing the girlie drink in his hand.

“You can take the boy out of Georgia, but you can’t take Georgia out of the boy! How many times have I rolled him home after tailgating at a football game?”

“What is tailgating?” asked Sophie.

“It’s where you set up outside the stadium with grills and tents and you make food, eat and drink lots of beer and you root for your team. Rach and I both went to the University of Georgia, so we are Georgia Bulldogs – that’s the college football team. Down south, college football is king!” exclaimed Mark. “We will have to take you to a game someday. It’s quite an experience.”
“Well, everywhere else in the world, football is really football, where players use their feet, not their hands and a weirdly shaped ball,” said Sophie. “My dad is a maniac for footie.”

“Yea, I know, we kind of do things our own way in the US, don’t we?” said Mark, almost laughing at American culture. “Well, I suppose we will have to catch some footie now, huh, Rach?”

“Alright, well, is everyone hungry? Sophie and I know a great pub not far from here. The Fox and Hound. Good beer and all the right pub food for you to try!” said Paula, getting up off the sofa. “Sophie, will you help me change into some jeans? I don’t want to wear my pajamas out in public.”

“Sure, babe. We’ll be out in just a minute,” Sophie said, following Paula into their bedroom.

Paula stood at the edge of the bed while Sophie grabbed some street clothes for her lover. “Here, will these be okay?” asked Sophie, holding up the jeans and a shirt she thought would be fine to wear over the sling.

“Works for me!” offered Paula.

Sophie worked Paula’s pajama pants down her legs, then helped her step into the jeans, pulling them up and over her bum. Sophie stopped for a moment to squeeze at the supple flesh of Paula’s backside, still feeling very horny. “Mmmm, you feel delicious,” said the young brunette, placing a kiss on her lover’s mouth.

Paula pulled back slightly, “Sophie, we can’t. We have guests waiting for us.”

Sophie whined, “but you’re so hot, babe, I just want to fuck you.”

“How many drinks have you had?” asked Paula, knowing that liquor always made Sophie ultra-horny.

“Only two, but –“

“No buts, we have to go. C’mon. You can rip my clothes off me later. Right now, we have fish and chips and mushy peas awaiting us.”

“But I want you so bad,” slurred Sophie slightly, moving her hand up to Paula’s breast.

Paula smiled at her tipsy lover, “no more alcohol for you!” She kissed her, chastely, and began to move toward the door.

Sophie gently pulled her back to her, “One more kiss, then we’ll go. I promise.”

Paula put her arm over Sophie’s shoulder and pulled her head to her own, placing her lips to Sophie’s. “Later, I will do this to your pussy,” she said against Sophie’s mouth, then she inserted her tongue, sensually caressing and tasting her lover’s mouth.

Sophie’s head began to swim with desire and she pulled Paula closer to her, the kiss as deep as it could go. The younger woman moaned loudly, then stood there in a daze when Paula pulled away.

Paula slipped her shoes on and smiled at her lover, then gave her a quick wink. “C’mon sweetheart.”

“That was NOT nice, Paula Martin. Now my nips are standing at attention and I’m super aroused. I am going to get you back for this,” promised Sophie. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“What are you doing, Sophie? We need to go!”
“I can’t very well walk out there like this, can I?” she said pointing to her stiff nipples. “Plus, I need a new pair of underwear, ya tease.”

“Don’t be looooong,” Paula sang as she opened the door and walked out to meet Mark and Rachel.

Xxx

The couples had been enjoying themselves at the pub for well over an hour, Mark loving the beer and the atmosphere, Rachel showing off her acting skills by imitating the accents of the people she could hear around her, mimicking their particular way of speaking. Sophie had not stopped drinking, having two more vodka’s. And Paula sat there, sober, but still having a laugh with everyone. She was having a time keeping Sophie’s hand from wandering up her thigh as the alcohol had kicked her sex drive into a higher gear than it had been. She knew she wouldn’t be able to keep her lover at bay for much longer.

Paula feigned a yawn. Then another. “Excuse me. My apologies. I’m just rather knackered. Would you two mind terribly if Sophie and I called it a night?”

“Not at all. Thanks for coming out with us. It’s been a lot of fun,” said Rachel. “Go get some rest, Paula.”

“Thank you. We will see you soon, then, yea?” said the solicitor, who had already paid the bill. “C’mon, you, let’s get home so you can put me to bed.”

Paula didn’t know if the others had picked up on Sophie’s inebriated state, but she did her best to get her lover into a cab without too much incident. As soon as the door closed, Sophie was all over Paula, pawing at her, trying to kiss her.

“Sophie, stop! You’re drunk,” said Paula in a terse voice.

“But babe you said you would –“

“Let’s just wait until we get home, okay?”

Thankfully, the ride wasn’t long, and Paula had Joel, the new night doorman, help her get Sophie out of the cab and up to their flat. She was slurring her words and could barely walk.

“Joel, would you mind putting her on our bed? I can’t manage with my shoulder.”

“Certainly, Ms. Martin.” Joel tried to get his arm around Sophie’s waist, but she was like rubber, so he looked at Paula, shrugged, and flung Sophie up like a ragdoll, over his shoulder. “I hope you don’t mind. It’s just easier this way.”

Joel placed Sophie gently onto the bed, then departed. “If you need any more help, Ms. Martin, please just call.”

“Thank you, Joel. I think I can manage from here.”

Paula knew that Sophie was just trying to let her hair down a little bit after such a harrowing week, so she did her best to not be annoyed with her. And she knew Sophie would likely be vomiting soon enough, so she went to get a trash can and some provisions for cleaning her up, plus a large glass of
water and some tablets for the certain hangover she would have in the morning.

Paula did her best to strip Sophie’s clothes off her, then her own. It took all her energy to maneuver Sophie under the duvet, so she turned out the lights and crawled in beside her. Sophie smelled of stale vodka, so she didn’t snuggle into her like she usually did. Paula stayed on her side of the bed and closed her eyes. She could hear Sophie lightly snoring, a sound she found endearing. She giggled at her lover. This beautiful woman had exhausted herself to the point of collapse staying at Paula’s bedside, out of love, out of devotion, out of selfless care. How could she be cross with her for trying to let off some steam? She pushed the fringe from Sophie’s brow and placed a sweet kiss to her cheek, then sighed.

*I really wanted to make love to you tonight, baby. I bet we would have had some fun. Good night.*

**Xxx**

Sophie woke with a dry mouth and a banging headache, but no memory of getting home. She was in bed, she was naked but for her panties, but there was no Paula in sight.

“Babe?” she croaked out. No response.

*Oh God, what have I done? I am supposed to be taking care of her and what do I do but go and get drunk?*

She sat up and grabbed her head and wanted to vomit from the pain. She saw the glass of water and the tablets, so she took them, then got in the shower. It would help, she hoped. And she just couldn’t face Paula yet. She was so ashamed of herself for letting her down.

The hot shower did make her feel some better, but she was still afraid to go out into the living room where she was sure Paula would be waiting, disappointed. The pang of apprehension hit her in the gut as she opened the door and walked out to face the music.

“Hey baby!” chirped her lover. “How are you feeling, love? I left you some paracetamol on the table, did you find them? C’mere and give me a kiss, yea?”

“You mean, you’re not angry with me?” asked Sophie, pleasantly shocked at Paula’s demeanor.

“Come sit, honey,” said the solicitor, patting the space beside her.

Sophie sat down and put her head in her hands, partially to hide her face, and partially because her head hurt.

“Listen, you have had a horribly stressful week, far more stressful than mine, so I know you were just trying to let loose and have a bit of fun. You just went a tad overboard is all. Bet you’re paying for it now, aren’t ya?”

She nodded her head and placed it on Paula’s shoulder.

“How bad was I?” asked Sophie, afraid to hear the answer.

Paula thought she’d have a little fun. “You mean, you don’t remember?”

Sophie shook her head. Her face full of fear. “Oh god, what did I do?”
“Well, let’s just say that you accidentally mistook Rachel for me and gave her quite a surprise,” Paula said, trying to contain her smile at Sophie’s face.

“Oh, no, no, no … did I grab her somewhere inappropriate?” Sophie asked, her hands at her temples.

“Sort of, but more of a tongue in the mouth and a big fat juicy snog!”

“Oh my god, they’re never going to speak to me again! Why did you let me do that???”

“I went to the toilet, but caught the show as I was coming back. I guess you saw dark hair and thought it was me.”

“I can’t even … I’m so sorry, Paula. I should never have had so much to drink! I let you down and I molested Rachel. How am I going to live this down?”

Paula now felt bad for putting Sophie into such a state. She started laughing.

“This isn’t FUNNY, Paula! I’ve made a spectacle of myself and you’re laughing –“

“I was joking! You didn’t stick your tongue down Rachels throat. You did try it on with me in the cab on the way home though, before you passed out and Joel had to carry you into our bedroom.”

Sophie slapped Paula’s good shoulder. “HOW could you let me believe that? That’s not funny, Paula.”

“I think it’s funny. I’m just getting you back for passing out on me and depriving me of getting to make love to you last night. I was serious when I kissed you before we went to dinner. I was looking forward to what I promised you. But, I couldn’t very well take advantage of you all passed out and smelling like stale vodka, could I?”

“Well, no, but –“

“But nothing! I am trying to recover from a horrendous trauma and the best way to do that is have lots of orgasms, but you decide to get tanked and deny me my recovery!” Paula was totally joking and started laughing again. “I love you, you silly mare. It’s all good. I’m not angry with you at all. Just don’t make a habit of it, otherwise I will have to start paying Joel to put you to bed.”

“You’re really not mad?” asked Sophie, scrunching up her face.

“No, baby, I’m not. How can I be mad at such a lovely, sexy, beautiful woman like you?”

“You are the most incredible woman in the world, you know that? I didn’t think it was possible to love you more than I did a few minutes ago, but now, phew, you just blew me away. Thank you for being you,” said Sophie softly, moving over to straddle her lover, leaning in to capture Paula’s soft lips with her own.

“Mmmmm, you smell so good, like strawberries and mint,” said Paula, taking in the smell of Sophie’s shampoo and the minty mouthwash in her lover’s very clean mouth.

“What do we have on the agenda today?” breathed Sophie, moving her mouth to the soft skin of her lover’s neck, her tongue massaging her pulse point.

Paula’s body began to hum with desire as Sophie roved over her skin with her lips and tongue gently. “Uhm, well, I don’t believe we have any concrete plans,” muttered the solicitor, quickly losing her ability to string words together.
“I believe you promised me something last night that I am going to hold you to,” said the young woman now gyrating against Paula’s hips.

“And what might that be?” queried Paula.

“Mmmmm something to do with your tongue and my –“

DING DONG

“Are you fucking kidding me??” spat Sophie, pulling her head away from Paula’s neck. “Who is that?”

“Only one way to find out, I guess,” said Paula, wondering herself who could possibly be at the door without being announced. How had they gotten past the doorman?

Sophie reluctantly moved herself off Paula’s lap and padded over to the door, looking through the peephole.

NO FUCKING WAY!

Paula saw Sophie stop and react. “Sophie, who is it?”

“Oh, babe, you love me, right? And nothing that happens is going to affect that?” asked a frantic Sophie, obviously not wanting to open the door.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK

“Sophie, who is at the door?”

DING DONG, DING DONG, DING DONG

“Believe me when I tell you, I had no idea! And I’m so sorry ahead of time.”

“Just open the door!” said Paula, having walked over to the foyer.

Oh, God, please help me! Sophie prayed as Paula opened the door.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Their visitor proves to be a challenge for them both.

The high-pitched squeal coming from the blonde standing in the doorway nearly split Paula’s eardrums and her eyes widened considerably as the woman stepped over to Sophie and pulled her into a huge hug.

The look on Sophie’s face said a million words as she embraced her sister. “Rosie, what are you doing here?!”

“OMG, did mum not tell you I was coming? I just couldn’t sit by and have you here alone and suffering with your, well, you know, in hospital and all subconscious. So, I thought, I am going to go take care of my baby sister until everything gets better or, be here to comfort you if the other thing happens. So, here I am!”

Rosie let go of Sophie and looked at Paula. “Who are you? Oh, Soph, have I interrupted your maid come to clean up? Well, never mind, that. Can you go down and help that fella bring up my luggage, please?” Rosie said to Paula.

Sophie just rolled her eyes at how ridiculous Rosie was being and mouthed to Paula I’m so sorry!

“Rosie –” Sophie tried to get a word in.

Rosie barreled into the living room, “OH, Soph, you have so hit the lottery with your cougar. I can’t believe she and mum were friends back in the day. She must be hot to turn your head, or have you just learned a thing or two from me and decided to cash in on your good looks, which you obvs get from me. She’s a rich lawyer, right? This place is fab! My goodness.” Rosie turned back around and noticed the two still standing in the foyer. “Oh, does she not speak English?” Rosie raised her voice considerably and started to motion with her hands toward Paula, “Uhm, GRACIAS HELPO with, erm, LUGGAGE?”

“ROSIE!” shouted Sophie, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, not Spanish? I don’t really speak anything other than Spanish and Japanese. Sophie, can you just tell her for me? You must be used to telling her what to do.”

“Yes, she certainly is,” said Paula, walking up to Rosie.

“Oh, you speak very good English,” said Rosie, still speaking loudly and nodding her head. “Can you help get my bags, please? Here’s a tip for you,” she said, reaching into the pint-sized pocket on her bright pink velvet coat. Rosie handed Paula a pound coin, then looked at Sophie, “So, sis where’s my room, then?”

Paula just looked at Sophie and shook her head. “So much makes sense to me now,” she smiled and pulled Sophie into a deep and sensual kiss.

Rosie’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Oh, you ARE kidding me?” she squealed. “You’re
having an affair with the housekeeper?"

“Rosie, you pillock, THIS is PAULA!”

Rosie had a blank look on her face. “But Paula is in hospital.”

“When was the last time you spoke to mum, Rosie?”

“I dunno, a few days ago, why?”

“BECAUSE, Paula woke up and is now home,” said Sophie, pointing at her lover standing there holding her hand.

“Oh, well, why didn’t you just say. Hi, I’m Rosie. You must be Paula,” said Rosie, still nearly shouting.

“Rosie, my hearing is just fine, so you don’t need to yell. And, it’s nice to finally meet you,” she said, holding her hand out to shake Rosie’s.

“Wow, nice rock,” Rosie said, grabbing Paula’s hand. She looked over at Sophie, giving her what she considered a subtle look of approval of Sophie landing her goldmine. “Nice to meet you, too. Sorry about the mix up.”

“So, you’ve come all the way from Japan to help me, have you? Or is there more to it than that?” asked Sophie, knowing her sister all too well.

“Well, I might have been sort of fired from my job, but they will come crawling back once they realize I am the glue holding that show together. But I can’t appear to be desperate, so I thought I’d kill a bird and throw two stones and come here … take care of you.”

Paula was speechless. How on earth had Sophie survived so many years living with this woman? It gave her an entirely new respect for her fiancé, realizing now where Sophie had developed her resilient nature, and also her inferiority complex – how on earth could she ever get noticed with Rosie around?

“Uhm, I’m a bit tired, so I think I am going to go have a lie down, let you two catch up,” said Paula, making her way toward the bedroom. “Sophie will show you to the spare room, Rosie.” Paula grabbed her laptop and her phone and retreated to the sanctity of their only remaining private space, needing to get away from Rosie and process what had just happened. Sophie came in right behind her and closed the door.

“You have to believe me, babe, I had no idea she was going to turn up! Oh my god, I can’t believe she thought you were the maid. I am so sorry. Please, don’t hate her. What am I talking about, please don’t hate ME!”

Paula was grinning at her lover, “I had no idea, Sophie. You told me, in detail, about her and how she is, and I thought you were exaggerating, making it up somewhat, out of insecurity or jealousy or something, but, OH MY GOD, she is … well, I don’t really know how I would describe her just yet. Give me some time. But, for now, you need to get out there and handle her. I am going to rest.”

“But, what about … what we were doing when she got here?”

“Oh, no, that will have to wait for later, much later. I can only imagine what she might say if she walked in on us doing that. And I think she WOULD just walk —“
Their bedroom door flung open and Rosie came walking in. “Sophie, babe, can you please have that door guy bring my stuff up? I think I’ve been properly patient.”

“Rosie, you can’t just walk into our bedroom! This is our private space!”

“Oh, what’s the big deal, you’re obvs not going to be having sex or anything like that. You’re over 50, aren’t you Paula?”

“OUT!” screamed Sophie, shoving Rosie through the door, leaving Paula to her peace and quiet. Sophie knew she was going to be celibate while her sister occupied the spare room, and it made her want to cry.

*I have to figure out a way to get rid of her!*

Sophie walked back out into their living room, wondering how the hell her life had blown up in her face so quickly. One minute she was about to make love to her fiancé, perfectly contented with her life, the next she was having to deal with her crazy sister and would likely not get laid until Rosie was gone.

“Rosie, how did you even get around Phillip?” Sophie asked, rubbing her temples with her fingers.

“Who is Phillip?”

“The doorman! Visitors have to call up, they can’t just get on the lift and appear, unannounced!”

“Well, I told him I am your sister and sent him out to the cab to get my bags. I thought he’d be up here with everything by now. So, I just came up. What’s the biggie, anyway?”

“I guess mum gave you my address, then? Why did she not tell me you were coming? Why didn’t YOU call me and tell me?”

“Mum told me how upset you were because the cougar was in hospital …”

“Don’t call her that! Her name is Paula!”

“Oh, whatever, Soph. Don’t be such a drama queen about it. I came here out of the kindness of my heart-”

“Rosie, you came here because you didn’t want to go back to Weatherfield and you know my fiancé has a posh pad, so-“

“What did you just say?”

Sophie’s eyes widened. She had slipped up big time. “Nothing! I said nothing.”

“You just said fiancé. Are you telling me you and the cougar are getting married? OMG, Sophie, you are a lot smarter than I ever gave you credit for. Not only are you living in the lap of luxury, you got moneybags to propose?”

“I proposed to *her*, Rosie.”

“Even better! You are a credit to the Rosie Webster school of landing a rich husband, well, wife. Good on you, Soph! OMG, we so need to go shopping while I’m here! Will the cougar give you your own credit card, do you think?”

Sophie was so angry she could feel her pulse in her neck. She leveled her eyes at her obnoxious
sister and said in a very calm but serious tone, “Listen to me and listen closely Rosie, I proposed to PAULA because I love her, not her money. And she said yes, because she loves me. I couldn’t care less that she has money and I would still marry her tomorrow if she lost every pound she has to her name. And I am tired of listening to you drone on about things because you are so shallow. Now, you’ve already insulted my fiancé numerous times by belittling my love for her, and you won’t do it again, do you understand me? And you will call her by her name. And you will respect my relationship by not reducing it to some sort of financial transaction, which doesn’t even exist in the first place because I don’t care about the fucking MONEY!”

“Well, there’s no need to get so mardy about it! I meant no harm, Sophie. It’s just how I am, you know that,” spat Rosie as she rolled her eyes.

A knock at the door interrupted their fight.

Sophie opened the door to find Phillip standing in a sea of bags, sweat pouring off his brow. “Ms. Webster, I have your sister’s luggage here. Where would you like me to put everything?”

Sophie’s eyes just about fell out of her head. “MY GOD, Rosie, how much stuff did you bring???”

“Just the essentials, babe!”

Sophie just held her head in her hands, shaking it back and forth. “C’mon Rosie, start grabbing your bags and move them into the spare room for now.”

“Just let John take them, Sophie. That’s what he’s paid to do.”

Sophie rolled her eyes again. “His name is Phillip, and it is NOT his job to move everything you own one bag at a time. So, grab a bag!” She turned her attention back to Phillip, “Thank you Phillip, we will handle it from here.”

About twenty minutes later, they had moved all the bags from the hallway into Rosie’s room, Rosie having moved maybe five bags, leaving the rest to Sophie. But she knew she couldn’t let Paula see how much stuff Rosie had brought into the flat or she’d likely kill one of the two of them, or both! She was sweating and exhausted, and all she wanted was to go lie down with Paula.

“So, babe, what’s for lunch? And I need to warn you, I’m only eating organic as it’s so much better for my skin.”

“Go make yourself something, Rosie. I just did a shop and the kitchen is full of food. I am going to check on Paula, and I’m telling you now, you come barging in our bedroom again and I will find one of your prized handbags and I will shred it to pieces with a razor blade!”

“You wouldn’t?”

“You want to try me?”

Sophie pointed, “the kitchen is that way. Clean up after yourself and do NOT use the broiler!”

Sophie remembered all too well Rosie’s attempts at cooking. She turned around and headed toward her bedroom, not sure of the mood she might find Paula in.

She opened the door quietly to find Paula on her laptop. She looked up at Sophie, her eyebrow quirked. “I’m not working, I promise.”

“I would have no right to say a word if you were after the whole Rosie fiasco,” said the exhausted brunette as she plopped onto the bed, spent from moving all the bags.
“What’s she doing now, anyway?”

“Making herself something to eat. Speaking of, are you hungry? I can bring you a sandwich or something.”

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry your sister is driving you crazy. I do not know how you survived growing up with that! Has she always been so … so … “

“Criminally insane? Yes!”

Paula just laughed at her lover. “How long is she planning to stay?”

“I don’t know, babe. I’m already plotting to get her out. I may have to call my dad to come get her and all her junk. I do know that I will be ready for the asylum if she stays longer than a few days. I mean, she’s been here all of an hour and she’s driven you into hiding and me to the brink of insanity. And she keeps going on about how I’ve landed in the lap of luxury and I just want to kill her!”

Paula put the laptop away and patted her thighs, motioning for Sophie to put her head in her lap. The young brunette moved to her lover and laid her head down. Paula began to run her fingers through her hair, trying to soothe her very anxious partner.

“Everything will be okay, love. She won’t stay forever, and I will do my best to overlook or ignore her insanity while she’s here.”

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I sure am glad I’m marrying you,” whispered Sophie, sitting up to deliver a kiss to Paula’s lips. “Is it too early to go to bed?” asked Sophie, not wanting to leave the solace of their bedroom.

“Sweetheart, it’s only just after noon, so I’d say no to bed just yet. Go on out there and find out what her plans are, so we know best how to handle her.”

Sophie whined, “Ugh, do I have to? Why can’t I just stay here and make out with you? That sounds a whole lot more fun than dealing with her.”

“No making out until she’s well under control. So, get your backside out there!”

“Fine! Did you want a sandwich?”

“Yes, please. Thank you, baby,” smiled Paula, knowing her lover was headed for misery. “You know what, I’ll come out, too. Maybe my presence will curb her penchant for making me into a human ATM machine.”

“Ha, don’t count on it! She has no buffers.”

Paula grabbed her laptop and went to sit on the couch. Sophie reluctantly walked into the kitchen, afraid of what mess she might find. To her surprise, she saw Rosie hadn’t destroyed the kitchen and was eating a nice salad and reading Vogue. She walked over to the fridge to pull out the food to make two sandwiches.

“So, Rosie, now that you know Paula is okay and on the mend, what are your plans?” Sophie asked casually. “You gonna go back home? You can have my old room at dad’s, you know, since I won’t be going back.”

Rosie eyed her sister, “So, what did mum say when you told her you’re getting married?”
“We only got engaged night before last Rosie, I haven’t had time to tell her. And she’s going to just have to be fine with it, won’t she, because even if she doesn’t take it well, it won’t affect anything. I’m marrying Paula and that’s that.”

“You better call her, Sophie, because you know she doesn’t do well when she’s kept in the dark!”

“I’m not keeping her in the dark! I’ve been busy …”

“Doing what? You’re not working, are ya?”

“I’m taking care of Paula!”

“She looks capable of taking care of herself, even if she is old.”

“Rosie, I swear, you insult her one more time –“

“She’s mum’s age, for god’s sake! Doesn’t that bother you at all?”

“Are you kidding me? When you were 19 you dated Luke, who had to be nearly 40! But, that was okay, wasn’t it, because he was your meal ticket. Not even mum said owt about it, which makes my blood boil, because she certainly had something to say when she found out about me and Paula.”

“Well, you have to admit it’s kind of gross, like there’s nearly 30 years between you and her. That’s a lot, Sophie. Have you not thought that being with her means you’re not going to have children?”

“What are you on about, Rosie. Of course, we can have kids!”

“Does she even want more kids? Aren’t hers your age? Or have you not even discussed it?”

“Well, not to any great length, but –“

“Don’t you think you should before you go running off and attaching yourself to someone? She’s probably finished, Sophie. She raised her kids. What makes you think she’d want to do it again? Can you see mum having a newborn?”

“Rosie, you are not going to come into my house and –“

“You mean, the cougar’s house?”

Sophie was, again, getting angry at what her sister was saying. “I can’t even … I’ve got to take this to Paula,” said Sophie, seething.

She walked into the living room next to tears and put Paula’s sandwich down on the coffee table. “I need to go out for walk or something. Will that be okay?”

“Sophie, what’s wrong? What’s happened?” asked Paula, concerned.

“I just can’t talk about it right now. I won’t be gone long,” said Sophie, putting on her shoes and heading for the door. “I just need some air.”

The door closed behind her and Paula sighed. Maybe it was time she and her sister-in-law to be had a chat.

Paula walked into the kitchen and Rosie didn’t even acknowledge her presence, just kept her head in her magazine.
Okay, if this is how you want to play this …

“So, why do you find me such a threat, Rosie?” asked the solicitor.

Rosie just kept flipping the pages of her Vogue, ignoring the woman in front of her.

“Or, is this just good old-fashioned sibling jealousy?”

Rosie looked up and glared at Paula, giving her the answer she needed.

“So, the truth is, despite all your outward beauty and arrogance, you’re just an insecure, petty little girl inside. And you spew your poison to that amazing, resilient young woman so you can tear her down to your level.” Paula slapped her hand right into the middle of the magazine, “Well, I’m not going to let you hurt her, do you hear me?”

“So, you’re her protector, are you?” laughed the blonde, rolling her eyes.

“My god, are you really that shallow? You would begrudge your sister her happiness just because you’re miserable?”

“Oh please, she’s doing just fine, so spare me the Saint Sophie speech.”

Paula was incensed at how flippant Rosie was about her sister, how she could sit there and be so selfish. She knew no matter how Paula defended her lover, Rosie was not in a place to hear it. So, she did what she thought might get the blonde’s attention.

“Rosie, stop being small and petty. That girl loves you so much, always has, and even though she gets angry with you, she needs you. You’re her big sister. She shouldn’t have to go through life having to choose between her love for me and her family. Don’t do that to her, because if you do, she will lose, and you will lose. Don’t you think she’s lost enough already?”

“What has she lost?”

“Think about it, Rosie. She lost Sian, then Maddie and she almost lost me. Last week was very traumatic for her and I promise you I am going to do whatever I can to make sure she never loses again.”

“And you don’t think I’ve lost anything?” said an incensed Rosie.

“I’m sure you have, Rosie, but, honestly, you’re not my concern. She is. And if you can mitigate her pain, you should do it, don’t you think? She would do it for you.”

“She’s landed on her feet just fine. Me, on the other hand, I’ve lost everything! Everything, Paula. I have no husband, no career, no home.”

“You’re proving my point, Rosie. When you showed up, did Sophie turn you away or did she help you move all your stuff into the spare room? She wants to help you, not hurt you.”

“Yea, well …”

“Well, what? You need to want her happiness. Can you do that … for her?”

Rosie looked up at Paula. “You really love her, like really and truly?”

“More than I can ever explain to you.”
“I want her to be happy, Paula, I do. And I’m sorry for being so full on, but I want to make sure she’s going into this with her eyes wide open. When she’s your age, you’ll be like what, a hundred? What kind of life will you be able to give her? I don’t want her to wake up in ten years and regret things.”

“All I can do, Rosie, is love her, for as long as God wants me on this earth. And, yes, I am a lot older, but that doesn’t diminish what I feel for her or her for me. Lots of people have very successful and happy lives living outside the boxes society likes to put them in. I’m not afraid of being unconventional, and neither is she. When we look at each other, we don’t see young and old, we see soulmates, love, meant to be.”

“Oh, please!” spat Rosie. “This whole true love thing makes me want to barf.”

“Only because you’ve never felt it. If you’d pull your head out of your ass for a minute and try being with someone for the right reasons, you might get a taste of what it really means to be in love. And I’m here to tell you, it’s a wonderful feeling.”

“What the hell, cougar!”

“You know Rosie, you can slag me off all you like, disrespect me, disregard me, but I won’t allow you to do it to Sophie, so if you want to be a guest in OUR home, you’ll reel yourself in and start behaving like a grown up! Do we understand each other?”

Rosie looked at Paula and saw that she was more than serious. “Yes,” answered the blonde reluctantly.

Paula turned to leave, then hesitated, “Oh, and just so you know, our sex life is phenomenal, like really -“ Paula made the sound of an explosion and flared her hand out. “And unless you want an eyeful of us fucking, I suggest you not come bursting into our room ever again!” Then she winked at her, leaving the blonde speechless with her mouth agape.

The solicitor turned and headed for the living room to eat her sandwich, hoping she had gotten through to her partner’s sister.

Sophie walked a few miles mindlessly meandering the streets of London, wondering why her sister and her mum always had to rain down judgement on her life. Why could they not just trust that Paula loved her as much as she loved Paula, and they would be happy together. As Sophie walked she knew she was going to eventually have to stop allowing their toxicity to affect her. It was her life and she was going to have to live it, with or without their approval or support. Paula was all she needed, and she had her, so what exactly was she fretting about? They had come through a horrible ordeal and God had given Sophie everything she prayed for and here she was moping and feeling sorry for herself. Enough, Sophie! Go home and be with your fiancé and tell your sister to fuck off!

Paula was sitting back in her spot, laptop on and a notepad at her side, when Sophie walked back into the flat. She walked over, bent down and planted a loving, yet lustful kiss on her lips. “You and I are having sex later, babe, and I don’t want to hear the word no or some excuse about Rosie walking in. Now, where is she?”

Paula’s eyebrows raised, and she began to smile at the forcefulness her lover was displaying. It was fucking hot! “I think she is in the spare room.”
Sophie marched her way to the door and didn’t hesitate to fling the door open. Rosie was sitting on the bed, filing her nails. “Rosie, I love you, but you’re not going to tell me how to live my life. I am fucking head over heels, gaga, crazy in love with Paula, and I am going to marry her and live a wonderful life as her wife. Now, you can choose to be my big sister and support me, or you can be a selfish bitch, either way doesn’t matter to me. It won’t change a thing. But I hope you can see past your own selfish motives, so you can be part of our lives, because despite your utter stupidity at times, you are wonderful and funny, and I’d hate for us to fall out.”

Sophie turned to leave. “Sophie, wait.” She turned around, hand on her hip.

“I’m sorry I was such a stupid cow. Paula and I had a talk and I know you love each other, like more than I love Jimmy Choo shoes, and perfume, and handbags, well Jimmy Choo everything really and even though you find my passion for fashion ridiculous, I would never let your seriously lacking aptitude for haute couture effect my clearly keen taste. So, I guess what I’m saying is, congratulations on your engagement. I hope you will … no, I know you will be happy together for a long time.”

“Apology accepted. And thank you for your support. I’m going to go spend the afternoon with my fiancé. I’m making sautéed shrimp and pasta for dinner in a few hours. I’ll call you when it’s ready, or you’re welcome to watch telly with us if you want.”

“Uh, Sophie, you know I don’t eat pasta! Too many carbs, babe. But, I love shrimp. And I love you.”

Sophie was stunned. She closed the door and walked back out to Paula, shaking her head absentmindedly as she sat down next to her lover. “What just happened?”

“What?” asked Paula.

“Rosie just apologized and wished us well.” Sophie looked at Paula, “What did you say to her?”

“Only a few home truths she needed to hear. Nothing ground-breaking, but I did warn her that we like to have sex a lot and unless she wants to see it, she should probably respect closed doors.”

“You did NOT?”

“Oh, I certainly did. Because there’s no way I can go too long without having you, and I realized I was just penalizing myself by banning sex because she might walk in. If she wants to see some hot lesbian sex, then I guess she might barge in anyway.”

“I love you, Paula Martin. More than there are stars in the sky. You’re incredible!” said Sophie, putting her head on her lover’s shoulder. They sat there together, just being, Sophie holding Paula’s hand, running her fingers softly over her knuckles. She loved Paula’s hands. Then she spotted a pile of mail in the corner and sat up. “What’s all that?”

“All what?” asked Paula.

“That, in the corner? Is that all unopened mail?”

Paula looked over to where Sophie was pointing. There was a stack of envelopes and a couple of boxes, just sitting. “That must be two weeks’ worth. I never looked at it once I got back from New York, then, well, I was in hospital. Your mum and dad or Isla must have put it over there. Go grab it for me?”

Sophie collected the pile and the boxes and brought them to Paula. She shuffled through them, putting bills to the side. Most of the other envelopes were irrelevant. “Put these in the bin, will you?”
There were two boxes. One she recognized was an online purchase of her skin care products, but the other was a mystery. “Bring me the letter opener from my office, baby.” Sophie plodded into the office and returned, handing her the metal object. She sliced open the top and pulled out a white box. “What is this?” Then, as she looked at the picture on the outside of the box, she remembered. “Oh, my god! I forgot I even ordered this!”

“What is it?”

Paula began to giggle. “Something you’re going to love! What am I saying? It’s something we are both going to love. And it came at the perfect time!”

“Paula, what the hell is it?” asked Sophie, pulling it out of the box.

“A leather harness!” responded Paula, a sexy glint in her eye.

“A what!? For, like, uhm, you know?” asked Sophie, stumbling over her words with the realization of its function.

“Are you actually blushing, love?” Paula laughed at her lover. “It’s only me sitting here. What on earth do you have to be embarrassed about?”

“You know how I am about this stuff … and the thought of my sister walking in on us doing THAT, well …”

“Sophie, with my arm out of commission, this will make things easier for me and very pleasurable for you. I guarantee you will –

“OMG, what on earth is that in your hand, Sophie?” blurted out Rosie as she walked into the room. A startled Sophie nearly flung it across the room, “Rosie, this is a private conversation!”

“Astartled Sophie nearly flung it across the room, “Rosie, this is a private conversation!”

“Is THAT what I think it is??” asked the blonde, her mouth dropped wide open.

Sophie thought she was going to die of embarrassment. She knew her sister was going to make fun of her relentlessly, unless she took control of the situation. She felt her face get hot, knowing she must be turning many shades of red, but she fought the urge to run and looked at her sister. “Oh, Rosie, it doesn’t take much ingenuity to figure that out.”

“Well, well, well, looks like our Saint Sophie likes it a bit kinky!”

“Oh, grow up, Rosie! It’s perfectly normal, and NONE of your business, so keep that” she said, poking Rosie’s nose, “out of my sex life!”

“Eeewwww, Sophie, let’s not talk about you having sex! You’re my baby sister and the thought of you …” she shuddered, and made a face.

“Are you kidding me? For YEARS all I heard about was YOUR sex life, this bloke, that bloke, who you pulled, when you pulled. And don’t get me started on the fact that most of your clothes would make a hooker blush!”

“Well, if you’ve got it, flaunt it!”

“Well, I don’t need to flaunt anything. And what happens between me and Paula in there,” she said, pointing to their bedroom, “is no one’s business but ours!”

“So, should I not come running in if I hear you screaming?”
“Rosie!”

The blonde just laughed, loving how easy it was to wind up her little sister.

Paula could hardly contain her laughter at watching the interaction between the sisters. She got up off the couch, grabbed their new toy from Sophie’s hands and moved herself toward their bedroom, giving Sophie a wink. “I’ll be in the bedroom, love.”

“So, are we watching telly, or what?” asked Rosie, changing the focus of their conversation.

“Well, Paula and I were about to have a lie down, but knock yourself out. The remote for the telly is over there,” said Sophie, pointing.

“Okay, go have a lie down then! But, what about tea, Sophie? I thought you were cooking.”

“Rosie, it’s only half two! I’ll cook tea later,” replied Sophie, walking backward toward the bedroom, “after we have rest period.”

“Is that what you call it, then?” laughed Rosie.

“Oh, nevermind!”

Sophie managed her way into their bedroom to find her lover relaxing on the bed, pillows propping her up. “Ugh, I can’t believe her. She makes me crazy!”

“She’s just trying to wind you up. I’m proud of the way you handled that, love. You didn’t let her get the better of you and I think that’s a big step for you, especially because it had to do with sex.”

“You think so?” asked Sophie, snuggling up to her lover.

“Yes, I do, sweetheart.” Paula leaned over to kiss her partner, then winced.

“Babe, you okay?”

“My arm hurts a bit. Just a little sore is all. Nothing to worry about,” reassured Paula. “How’s your hangover headache?”

“It’s not my hangover that’s the problem. Do you need your tablets? And did you get yourself booked into see a GP yet?”

“Yes, I did. I go next week, so stop worrying.”

“Just let me fuss over you a bit, it helps take my mind off my current problem of how to get Rosie out of here. You don’t know how she is, babe. If she gets too comfortable, we will never get rid of her, especially since the flat is her idea of luxury.”

“Why are we spending so much time talking about your sister?” asked Paula, pulling Sophie over to her again. “I have a much better idea of how to use our time,” said the solicitor, placing their lips together while laying Sophie back softly on the bed.

“Why, Ms. Martin, what exactly did you have in mind?” giggled the young brunette.

“I believe I made a promise to you yesterday, and I never break a promise,” said the solicitor as she kissed Sophie deeply. “Now relax and let me make love to you, baby.”

Knock, knock, knock.
Sophie sat up, annoyed beyond belief. “What is it, Rosie!” she yelled toward the door.

“Well, at least she knocked this time …” offered Paula.

A very muffled sound came from the door, but Sophie could not understand it. “WHAT?” she said again. Still not able to hear, she gruffly got off the bed and opened the door. “Rosie, what is it?”

“Do you get Netflix on this TV, Sophie?”

*I’m going to kill her!* “Yes, Rosie, it’s a smart tv. All you have to do is … oh my god, never mind, I’ll do it myself.” Sophie marched into the living room and pulled up Netflix on the tv and made sure it was all working. “Okay, now, do you need anything else?”

“OMG, little sis, just go get laid so you can relax!”

Sophie turned three shades of red. “Oh, shut up Rosie!”

“She must have some kind of sex drive, your cougar! Is she any good?”

“I am not talking about this with you, Rosie! Now go watch your Netflix and leave us be.”

“Good thing you’re not celibate anymore, eh? I remember you and Sian sneaking around behind mum’s back –“

“That was ONE time!”

“Oh, it was not. You two were all over each other when mum wasn’t looking! Holding hands under the blanket on the couch, or were you doing other things under there?” Rosie couldn’t contain her laughter as she wound her uptight sister up.

“Rosie, I am not 16 anymore. I live with my fiancé and we happen to have a very active sex life, so get over yourself and leave it. I don’t want to hear another word from you about any of it. Now, I am going to go back into my bedroom and spend some quality time with my partner. You, watch your Netflix and don’t bother us … please!”

“Fine, Sophie. Go fuck your cougar.”

“Rosie!”

Sophie just shook her head and covered her face as she left the room. When she got back to the bedroom she found her lover fast asleep on their bed, so she snuggled up next to her and pulled the throw over them both for a much-needed nap. Paula obviously needed to rest, and a good nap wouldn’t do Sophie any harm either. She laid there, enjoying the warmth of her lover, but couldn’t quite relax enough to fall asleep. She wondered how Rosie’s entrance into their world would affect them, and how on earth she was going to wrench her sister out of their flat and back to Weatherfield.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Rosie stirs things up, sending Sophie to a dark place.

Paula and Sophie came trudging back into the flat from Paula’s check-up visit from the GP.

“I can’t believe how tired just going out for a bit has made me. I need a lie down, love. Do you mind?” asked the solicitor.

“Of course, not. Go rest up. You know you’ve been overdoing it a bit, the doctor as much as said so. I know you think you’re superwoman, but you really need to get more rest, which means we need to stop having so much sex, babe!”

“There’s nothing wrong with having sex, Sophie. It’s good for my heart, in more ways than one.”

“Yea, but if it is hindering your recovery –“

“It’s hindering nothing, Sophie,” said Paula, a bit annoyed. “Can we not talk about this, now? I really just want to lay down. I have a banging headache.”

“I’ll bring you some tablets and some cold water.” Sophie gathered what she needed and noticed Rosie was nowhere to be found in the flat. *She must’ve gone shopping.* “Here ya go, babe. Get them down ya and I’ll leave you to rest.”

“Why don’t you come snuggle up with me?”

“You know what happens when we snuggle, Paula.” Sophie kissed her partner sweetly, “I have some things to do, anyway. Call for me if you need me, yea?”

“I always need you.”

“Good thing, seeing as you’re marrying me! Rest up my love. I’ll check on you in a bit,” said Sophie, kissing her again.

Sophie made herself comfortable on the couch and grabbed her laptop to do some research on a few things she’d been thinking about lately. She had to get her life sorted and become something more than a waitress. She wanted a proper career doing something that made a real difference in people’s lives. She had an idea, but didn’t know if it was completely daft, or worth giving it a shot. She’d have to go back and do her A levels, then Uni, and she was already 24. She was concerned about school taking up too much of her time, time away from a new marriage, time away from Paula. It might be a crazy idea, but what was the harm in just doing the research?

A few hours later, Paula got up to a rather quiet flat. She padded her way out into the living room to find Sophie on her laptop.

“Hi babe! Did you have a nice nap? Did your headache go away?”
“Yes, I’m feeling much better. Thank you for letting me sleep.”

It was late afternoon, about time for Sophie to start getting dinner prepared. “You hungry? How about I make us a pizza?”

“That sounds great, love. Where is Rosie?”

“I dunno. She’s been gone all day. Probably at the shops. Any minute she’ll be coming through that door with bags up to her ears,” offered Sophie, getting up to head to the kitchen.

“What have you been up to?” asked Paula, noticing the laptop.

“Oh, just some research on a couple of things. I’ll talk to you about it later, after dinner, okay?”

“Now I’m curious. Is everything okay?”

Sophie wrapped her lover up in her arms and pulled her close, “Everything is perfect!” The lovers traded a sensual kiss before Sophie wrenched herself away to go make pizza.

Paula watched her fiancé retreat, admiring her backside as she walked away. She wanted to go pin Sophie against a wall, but she knew she had to cool it with their carnal activities, so her shoulder could heal. The doctor had given her a warning about being too active, so, for Sophie’s peace of mind, she would behave.

The front door opened, and Rosie came through, not a shopping bag in sight.

“Hello, Rosie. How’s your day been?” asked Paula. “Sophie’s making pizza for tea. You going to join us?”

“Uhm, thanks, but I don’t do carbs and I don’t do dairy, so …”

“Okay, well, if you change your mind.” Paula started to head to the kitchen, then stopped and looked back at Rosie, “Rosie, are you okay? You seem a bit, I dunno, down.” She walked back over to the blonde.

“It’s nothing,” said Rosie. Paula shrugged and began to leave. “Well, if you must know,” began Rosie, “I’ve been to several modeling agencies today and no one is interested. How can they not be interested? I mean, look at me, for heaven’s sake!”

Paula just laughed internally and shook her head at Rosie’s hubris. “Well, I’m sure there are other places that could—“

Rosie continued, as if Paula hadn’t even opened her mouth, “They just don’t know what they’re doing obvs, because I have loads of experience and the camera loves me! Have you seen my book?” she asked, pulling it out of her bag and shoving at Paula.

“No, I—“

“Here, look at this one, it’s AH-mazing! Just look at my cheek bones. Those are real, not manufactured by some surgeon, and I’ll have you know that these,” she said pulling Paula’s hand to her left breast, “are real as well! I just don’t understand,” she said and began to cry.

Paula pulled her hand away from Rosie’s boob quickly. She wasn’t sure what to do. She stood there feeling very uncomfortable. “Oh, Rosie, it’ll be alright,” said Paula, trying to comfort the blonde. Rosie hugged Paula to her. She felt weird touching Sophie’s sister, so she released her swiftly.
“You’re a beautiful woman. Just keep at it and something will turn up, I’m sure. If I knew anyone in
the modeling world I’d try to help, but I don’t, so …”

“Thank you,” sniffled the blonde. “You really think I’m beautiful?”

“Yes, of course. Who wouldn’t?” Paula said, trying to be supportive. “You alright now?” asked the
solicitor, patting Rosie’s back lightly.

“I’ll be okay. I’m going to my room for bit,” answered the blonde, sniffling again.

Paula nodded and walked into the kitchen, shaking her head as she entered.

“Hi babe! Pizza will be ready soon. You okay?” asked Sophie, noticing the look on Paula’s face.

“Uhm, yes, I’m fine. Rosie’s back. She’s in her room, said something about not eating carbs so I
doubt she’ll be joining us for dinner.”

“Did she come dragging her shopping in with her?”

“No, not exactly. She went to some agencies today and apparently people aren’t quite falling over
themselves to book her. She’s none too happy.”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “She’s such a drama queen!”

“She seemed really upset. Was crying and everything.”

“Please don’t tell me you fell for her ‘poor me’ routine. She does this all the time!”

“It’s not like you to be so callous, sweetheart. Don’t be so hard on her. She’s your sister and you
should try to be supportive. I know she can be full on, but she genuinely seemed upset,” argued
Paula, putting a piece of broccoli into her mouth.

“Are you kidding me?! I’M being callous? You didn’t grow up with that selfish mare. I know all her
tricks, babe, and I’m telling ya, she’s responsible for creating 99% of her own problems.”

Paula meandered her way around the kitchen island to place herself behind her lover, wrapping her
arm around her waist as Sophie put the veg on their pizza. The older brunette placed her lips on the
back of Sophie’s neck and kissed her. “I’d rather not talk about your sister anymore.”

Sophie was annoyed that Paula was falling for Rosie’s ploys and feeling sorry for her. “Can I just
finish this, please?” asked Sophie, an annoyed tone in her voice.

“Sure,” said Paula, moving away from her fiancé. “I guess I’ll be in the living room.”

Paula retreated, and Sophie sighed heavily. Shit. She finished up and popped the pizza in the oven to
bake, then got out makings for a salad. Should I see if Rosie wants a salad? Sophie started to feel
guilty about her irritation with her sister. You know what, fuck that, I am not going to feel bad about
this! Paula can think I’m callous if she wants.

Paula was sitting on the couch, flipping channels on the TV when Rosie came into the living room.
She sat right next to Paula and put her head on her shoulder. “Thank you, Paula, for being so nice to
me earlier. Sophie’s really lucky to have you.”

Paula felt awkward again. She wanted to be supportive of her soon to be sister-in-law, but she could
also see how Rosie was trying to manipulate her. She wasn’t quite sure what Rosie would have to
gain by trying to butter her up, other than a nice place to live rent free. She was Sophie’s sister and
she knew, despite Sophie’s disdain for her sibling’s recent behavior, she loved her and wanted her love in return, so Paula would do what she could to nurture that. The solicitor sighed, then patted Rosie’s hand with her own. “It’s no problem, love. I’m happy to be here for you. Do you have an agent here in London?”

“No, he’s in Manchester,” pouted the blonde.

“Well, call him tomorrow, tell him you’re back in the UK and see if he can make some calls for you.”

“He already knows I’m back. He’s really angry with me,” Rosie said, beginning to cry again. “Said I was useless, and I’d ruined my golden opportunity.”

“Well, he’ll just be upset for a bit. If he’s anything like the entertainment agents I’ve known in my time, he is only interested in making money, so he should be ready to start booking you again soon.”

“You know agents in Manchester?” said a curious Rosie, an idea beginning to form in her brain.

“I’ve had to represent a few in fraud cases when they’ve been sued by their clients. Not one of them was innocent, mind you.”

“Do you still have contact with any of them? It’s just, if I could get a recommendation and one of them would make a call to a London agent for me, I might be able to sign on here in no time!”

“I can make a few calls, I suppose,” said a reluctant Paula.

Rosie squealed and pulled Paula into a full hug. “OMG, that would just be fab! Thank you, Paula!” She hugged her again, then kissed her on the cheek.

Sophie was finished making dinner and had walked into the living room to get Paula, only to find her sister and her fiancé sitting on the couch, hugging. What the fuck? Sophie’s stomach churned, and she walked back into the kitchen. Surely, she was misreading things. Paula would never … Of course, she wouldn’t!

She walked back into the living room, “Babe, you ready for dinner?” asked Sophie, eyeballing them both for curious behavior. “Rosie, I can make you a salad if you’d like.”

“No thanks, babes. I am going to watch some telly. You two go ahead.”

Paula got up and wound her way toward the dining room. “Want me to light a few candles, make it a bit romantic?” she asked her lover. She got an icy feeling off Sophie, though she didn’t say anything. “Honey, you okay?”

“I have a headache,” lied the young brunette. “Let’s just eat, yea?”

Paula knew Sophie must still be put off over their earlier interaction, but she was just going to let Sophie stew in her own juices. Nothing Paula could say at this point would make any difference, so she would just eat and make it an early night.

Sophie picked at her food, the vision of Paula hugging her sister replaying in her mind. She was fighting with herself, her insecurities getting the better of her. She trusted Paula, of course she did, but she had a lifetime of Rosie usurping her attention and jealousy was a hard habit to break.

The conversation was strained and nearly non-existent as the couple struggled in their own camps. Paula chalked the silence up to them both being stressed, trying to process all the events that had
taken place in their lives over the last few weeks. It was an odd feeling to sit with Sophie and not have an animated and flirty banter between them. It made her miss her lover, though she was sitting right in front of her. It wasn’t quite a week ago that they were sitting in these very spots, getting engaged. Now they had a wall up between them and Paula didn’t know where it had come from. Maybe they could talk things through later in bed, when they could be close physically.

The pair finished their meal and Sophie picked up their plates, taking them to the kitchen. Paula followed her, hoping to maybe break through the frosty barrier between them. “Can I help with anything?” asked Paula, feeling guilty that most of the chores in the flat had fallen to Sophie. Paula pulled Sophie’s hand into hers.

“No, it’s fine. You should go do your exercises, babe. Remember what the doctor said,” Sophie offered, pulling her hand away from Paula’s. “I’ll be in shortly.”

“What’s this mood you’re in, love?”

“Oh, so it’s my mood that’s the problem, is it?” snapped Sophie.

“I don’t know what I’ve done, but it’s obvious I’ve upset you somehow. Maybe we can talk about it later? I don’t want to argue, so I am going to head to bed to read,” said Paula, turning on her heel and vacating to their room.

Sophie sighed. *Damnit! Why did Rosie have to come here?* She slammed the plates into the sink, not doing a very good job of containing her emotions.

“What’s put your panties in a twist?” asked Rosie, coming into the kitchen.

Sophie looked up at her sister, her eyes squinted in anger. “Nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing. Don’t tell me there’s trouble in paradise?” asked a snitty Rosie, trying to wind her sister up. “What happened? You knock the cougar back?”

“Shut up, Rosie. Why would you say something like that anyway?”

“Well, seems to me she has quite an appetite is all—“

“What do you mean by that?” Sophie cut her sister off.

“Well, she just seems to really like being physical with people from what I’ve seen,” said Rosie, trying to bait her sister.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“No! You need to explain to me what you’re on about. Physical, how?”

“Well, just being touchy-feely, you know, familiar. I mean, it seems like she’s always hugging me or rubbing my back or my hand, ya know? She told me how beautiful she thinks I am and, well, she touched my boob, Sophie, and frankly, it makes me really uncomfortable. I mean, she is YOUR fiancé after all.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Rosie? She did not touch your boob! I think your imagination is taking off with you!”
“Yea, I was probably wrong. Sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.” Rosie opened the fridge to find something to eat. “Forget it, okay?”

Sophie’s gut began to churn. She remembered her fiancé hugging her sister and how it had made her feel. What else had happened between them? Paula was defending her earlier, telling Sophie to be supportive. She wondered why. She didn’t know, couldn’t make sense of it, but she would have to pay attention and figure it out. Was Paula’s desire for Sophie based more on her physical appearance? Her sister, after all, was drop dead gorgeous and maybe Paula found herself struggling with an attraction to her. The thought made bile come up in Sophie’s mouth and she began to shake. What if Paula did touch Rosie?

“I’m going to bed,” said Sophie, almost to the air. She slowly walked into the bedroom. Paula was in the ensuite, getting ready for bed, just like every other night. But, something felt different tonight. Like there was a gulf between them, a chasm that she’d never felt before.

Paula looked at Sophie in the mirror. She seemed overwhelmingly sad. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” she asked her partner. “Please tell me what is going on.”

“Uhm, I’m just going to have a shower. I feel awful.”

“You are a bit pale, love,” said Paula, putting her hand to Sophie’s forehead, feeling for a fever. “Have a shower then come to bed and I will hold you, okay?”

“Mmm hmm.” Sophie turned the spray on to warm up, then began to take her clothes off, but suddenly felt self-conscious, so took her time until Paula had gone into the bedroom. She finished removing her garments, then stepped into the warm water, hoping it would wash her anxiety away. She struggled to get a grip on her emotions, to figure out what the truth was. Why would Rosie say something like that if it wasn’t true? Surely, she wouldn’t make up something like that to hurt Sophie. But she couldn’t believe Paula would ever cheat on her, especially with Rosie. She was being daft. She just needed to get some rest and get rid of the demons that had gripped her for as long as she could remember.

Paula knew something was eating away at Sophie, she just couldn’t figure out what it was. She assumed it had something to do with Rosie, as her mood had shifted significantly with her sister’s arrival. Paula had tried to be understanding of Rosie’s presence, for Sophie’s sake. She knew the pair of them needed to spend some time working through some of their sibling issues, though Paula would be much happier if Rosie would move on to Weatherfield sooner, rather than later. She missed having Sophie all to herself. Maybe, after she saw Evelyn tomorrow and had picked out the ring, she would get Sophie out for a romantic dinner and a chance for them to reconnect, without Rosie always sticking her oar in.

Paula heard the shower shut off and she looked for Sophie to come into the bedroom. After a few minutes, Sophie had not materialized. Paula waited, wanting to hold her lover close, make all the tension between them melt away. Five more minutes, and still no Sophie. What is she doing in there? “Sophie, sweetheart?” Paula said loudly. No answer. She got up and started walking into the bathroom. “Love? Are you alright?” she asked as she opened the door. Sophie was not at the mirror or in the shower. Where is she? Paula looked around, confused. She walked further in and saw Sophie sitting on the floor in only her bra and panties, her head in her hands, crying.

Concern and terror shot through Paula. “Sophie, darling, what’s the matter?”

Sophie looked up, her face filled with torment, her eyes red and pained.
“Oh, sweetheart. What’s happened?” asked Paula, moving over to Sophie, kneeling down to her. She pulled her hand into her own, noticing how cold it was. “Sophie, baby, you’re freezing! Come with me and let’s get in bed and warm you up.”

Sophie stood up and followed Paula into their room, still shaking, still crying. The pair climbed into bed, and Paula snuggled her fiancé deep into her side, rubbing her back. Sophie noticeably stiffened up at the gesture. “Sophie, please tell me what’s wrong. Have I done something to upset you?”

Sophie pulled away and swung her legs over the side of the bed and cried harder, her head again in her hands.

“Sophie, I can’t do anything to help if I don’t know what’s going on. Please, just talk to me.”

“I …” her voice cracked, thick with emotion. She cried harder, shaking her head. “My head is all over the place …”

“Sophie, please turn around and look at me,” said Paula softly. “Please, love.” She put her hand on Sophie’s back and she recoiled, again.

“Sophie, you need to tell me what is going on, because I am absolutely clueless. I don’t know why suddenly me touching you makes you tense up.”

Sophie turned her head and looked at Paula, pain evident in her eyes. “Do you …” She couldn’t continue.

“And what?”

“Do you … want someone else?”

Paula was stunned. “WHAT? Sophie, what are you on about? Where is this coming from?”

“Just answer the question,” snapped Sophie through her tears.

“NO! I want you, only you,” answered Paula as emphatically as she could without being angry. She had no idea what was going on. “What gave you the idea that I did?”

“I just … well, noticed …” she trailed off.

Paula’s face was pained, her mind trying to figure out what had happened to make Sophie have doubts about her love for her. “You noticed, what, love?” asked Paula, trying to keep her emotions in check.

“Well, Rosie said –“

Paula scoffed. Rosie. She should have known it had something to do with her sister.

Sophie continued, “you had been, well, getting close to her … touching her, hugging her,” Sophie’s voice broke. “You told her she was beautiful.”

Paula closed her eyes and focused her attention on containing her anger, her teeth clenched, her nostrils flared. “Sophie, I am going to say this once and I want you to listen closely, I have absolutely zero interest or attraction or anything to Rosie or anyone else on the entire planet. Now, I don’t know what that cow has said to you, but, YOU are the only one I want. I love you and only you. I hugged Rosie earlier to console her when she was crying about her career, end of story. If anything, she was the one sidling up to me, putting her head on my shoulder, pulling me into a hug. Now I don’t want
to lose my temper and make you feel bad, but I am about to march out there and throw her out of the flat, bad shoulder or not.”

“Did you touch her breast?” asked Sophie meekly.

*That flaming COW! What the hell is she playing at? “Sophie, she was going on about how natural her body is and SHE grabbed my hand and put it on her breast as some sort of proof that they are real. I would NEVER-“*

“So, you don’t want to … well … you know … “

“My god, how can you ask me that after everything we’ve been through? Of course, I don’t want her! YOU are what I want. YOU are what I need. My love for you is … well, it’s so big it bursts out of my chest when you walk into the room or when I hear your voice. Don’t you understand, YOU are it for me. If you walked out of my life Sophie, I would be destined to be alone because no one could ever measure up to how deeply you touch me. And I’m not just talking about physically.”

Sophie continued to cry, her body shaking uncontrollably. “I thought maybe because she’s so beautiful …”

“Oh, baby. She has nothing on you. Don’t you know how incredibly beautiful YOU are? How can you not see it? Rosie is about as deep as a spit wad, whereas you, baby, you are the Mariana Trench.”

“It’s just that my whole life, everyone is always on about her and how gorgeous and sexy she is, and she said awful things to me and made me feel so ugly sometimes.”

Paula pulled her fiancé to her, holding on to her trembling body. “I’m so sorry, baby. I don’t know how to get you to understand how beautiful you are to me. I don’t want anyone but you, do you hear me? I love you, only you, and I always will. I need for you to trust that. I need for you to believe in that.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sophie, her throat thick with sorrow and tears. “I don’t know why I get like this. I just love you so much and it makes me crazy to think about you with someone else.”

“Sophie, I know you have insecurities, and god knows why with a sister like that, but you have to believe in our love, sweetheart. I will never want anyone else. Why on earth would I? You’re my universe, baby, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.” Paula placed her lips softly to Sophie’s, hoping to convey how much she loved her.

Sophie’s mouth began to respond to her lover’s kiss. She laid back on the bed, pulling Paula with her, their mouths fully connected. The kiss was soft and sweet at first, then Sophie deepened it, needing to feel Paula’s tongue. Sophie moaned as Paula’s tongue entered her mouth, both her hands were on Paula’s head, her fingers grabbing at her hair, pulling her deep into her. Sophie’s desire was rising rapidly, and she pulled Paula away, so she could look her in the eyes. “I need you to make me understand. Please.”

The plea from her lover nearly broke Paula’s heart. She wanted to slap Rosie Webster and make her understand the damage she had done to Sophie. But, she had more important things to do at the moment. “Let me show you how much I love you, baby.”

Paula took her time making love to Sophie, roving her lover’s skin with her fingers and her mouth. She didn’t use any of their toys, because this was all about personal touch, skin on skin, making Sophie feel how much Paula loved her, wanted her. It took some time to get Sophie to climax,
mostly because the young brunette was trying to let go of some of her demons, her concentration shaky, but Paula didn’t care how long it took. She would continue to taste and kiss and feel her lover until she screamed out in ecstasy, feeling the pleasure course through her body.

Paula pulled a shuddering Sophie into her body and pulled the duvet up over them. “I love you, sweetheart. More than anything in the world. And I will continue to tell you, every day, how much you mean to me.”

“I’m sorry for being so insecure. It just creeps up on me sometimes. I just love you so much that the thought of you wanting someone else scares me to death.”

“You don’t have to be afraid, love. I am not going anywhere.” *Rosie, on the other hand …*
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Something happens that Paula hadn't expected, making her think differently about Rosie's motives.

Chapter Notes

Sorry to keep everyone waiting for this update. I'm not entirely happy with this chapter, but wanted to keep the story moving. Definitely have one more twist coming soon, so stay tuned. And thanks for your continued support! Cheers!

Paula awoke early, anger still anchored in her belly over Rosie’s antics. Was that cow so jealous of her sister that she would manufacture a story to make Sophie doubt her worth to Paula? This was their life she was messing with and Paula was not going to let the blonde destroy their happiness because of her own petty envy. The brunette held her lover close, remembering their tender love making from last evening. It took some time, but she’d been able to soothe Sophie’s fears, making her feel wanted and loved. But she knew unless she could put a stop to Rosie’s venom, it would be easy enough for her to stir up Sophie’s insecurities again.

She went to the kitchen to make herself some coffee and a bite of breakfast, fury bubbling just under her skin. She hoped Rosie wouldn’t show her face until Paula had time to process her feelings toward the blonde, so she didn’t say anything that she might regret or that might hurt Sophie. What could she say to Rosie to make her understand how fragile this one sliver of Sophie’s self esteem was? She needed to make her understand that the games she liked to play with her sister had major consequences.

To Paula’s dismay, Rosie came into the kitchen in search of a caffeine infusion, her hair a complete mess, her boobs half hanging out of her robe. “Please tell me there is coffee going,” muttered the blonde.

“I ought to throw a cup right in your face!” snapped Paula, unable to control her contempt for her fiancé’s sister.

“What are you on about?” tutted the blonde.

“Have you any idea the number you did on your sister with that poison you spewed at her last night? How dare you make her believe that bullshit!”

Rosie poured her coffee, a knowing look playing across her features.

“Do you think this is some sort of game, Rosie?” asked an incredulous Paula. “Because, I am finding it very difficult to contain my utter contempt for you and your actions, and I guarantee you won’t like me when I’m angry.”
“I’m just trying to get her to see that marrying you will be a mistake, Paula! I am trying to look out for her.”

“By fabricating false accusations against me while tearing your sister’s self esteem to shreds? That’s your idea of being a concerned sister?”

“You’re being rather dramatic, don’t you think? You’re too old for her. You know it, and I know it. But Sophie is young and impressionable. She doesn’t see that it would be a mistake to commit the best years of her life to someone who won’t be able to give her what she deserves.”

“You are unbelievable! IT’S NOT YOUR CHOICE TO MAKE!” shouted the brunette. She clinched her teeth, trying to compose herself before she slapped the woman in front of her.

“If she marries you, you will make her miserable! She told me all about how you dumped her, and for what, trying to figure out a way to get mum out of prison!? I’m sure if it had been your mum or one of your kids, you’d have found a way to bend the rules, kind of like you did when you decided to fuck my sister while you were supposedly representing my mum.”

The fury bubbling in Paula’s gut had skyrocketed. She could feel the cortisone and adrenaline pumping into her body and she began to shake. There was nothing Paula could say to change Rosie’s opinion or her position, so she did the only thing she could. She leveled her eyes at Rosie, and spoke in as calm a voice as she could manage, “I want you OUT of this flat today! You are no longer welcome here, Rosie. I can’t have you going around, spewing your lies and your venom-”

“Hmph, hit a nerve, did I?”

“I have a lunch appointment. When I return, you will be gone. If you’re not, I will be phoning the police and I will have you removed. So, I suggest, you go pack your shit, call your dad and tell him you will be arriving later today.”

“Do you really think Sophie is going to let you do this? Maybe now she will see you for the snotty cow you truly are.”

“You know, I feel sorry for you, Rosie. You have no reason to make an enemy of me. I would have helped you get settled here – free place to live, help finding an agent – but you blew it. And all for what, to make sure your sister doesn’t get what you think you deserve? Shame on you for being so shallow and shame on you for sacrificing your sister’s self-worth for your own gain!”

Paula couldn’t believe her eyes when she was Rosie smiling as wide as a Cheshire Cat.

“How can you sit there and be so –“

“Well, it certainly took you long enough to throw me out!” laughed Rosie. “I was a bit scared there for a minute, thought you were gonna give me a right slap.”

Paula was flabbergasted at this display. “You are insane. Sophie told me –“

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, Paula. I had to make sure you were worthy of my baby sister’s affections. And, I’m happy to say, you passed. Though I wasn’t sure what else I was going have to do to get you mad enough to get rid of me.”

“You mean, you were testing me …”

“Yes, I tried to set you up, see if you would take the bait and betray my sister. Paula, that girl means more to me than, well all my designer handbags and shoes put together. She has been through the
mill and I had to make sure you weren’t going to hurt her again.”

“Wait, let me get this straight. You’ve been winding us both up, trying to get me to either seduce you or throw you out?”

“Well, duh.”

“Do you realize you nearly sent Sophie over the edge last night! DON’T ever do anything like that again, do you hear me?”

“But don’t you see, that’s exactly what she needed because you were there bring her back from the edge by showing her she is the most important thing to you, right? You didn’t come out here to deal with me, and I imagine you were a bit angry. You stayed with her and now Sophie knows that she is your true north. I mean, really, you could have had this,” she said, pointing to herself, “but you didn’t even think twice. You’ve passed the ultimate Rosie Webster test!”

“That’s quite a risky little game you played. What would you have done if I had tried it on with you?”

Rosie quirked her eyebrow, “Well, you’re an attractive woman, Paula, but I only travel one way and I’m certainly not interested in the vagina monologues. I leave that to my sister. And if you had, I would have taken Sophie out of here and away from someone who’s not worthy of her.”

“Did you really have to be so drastic, though?”

“Paula, you don’t think I know that she’s played second fiddle to me her whole life? I’ve made a point of flaunting this nearly perfect body and using it to get what I want, and Sophie’s just not like that, and because she’s modest and humble, I always took the spotlight. Well, you put her in first chair last night, Paula, where she belongs.”

“You’re not quite as thick as I thought.”

“Not just a pretty face, then?” smiled the blonde. “I want you and Sophie to be happy, Paula. And I think you will be, now that she knows how much you truly love her! Oh, and if you need my help telling mum about the engagement, well, forget it, right? I don’t want to be around when that hits the fan.”

Paula burst out laughing. “Well, thanks for letting us deal with that all on our own.”

“Mum is hard, I know, but she loves Sophie more than I do, so you better not fuck this up Paula. If you think I play dirty …”

“I’ve known your mum a long time. She and I will be fine, once she gets over the age thing.”

“I hope you’re right. She’s notorious for being stubborn.”

“Oh, don’t I know it! She sacked me just before court and got herself banged up because of it. I just need for her to understand that Sophie is it for me. This is not a mid-life crisis or an older woman using a younger one as a plaything. I love Sophie, more than I’ve ever loved anyone.”

“I know. I can tell. I’ve never seen Sophie happier or so defensive of a relationship before.”

“Not even with Sian?” inquired the solicitor.

Rosie looked at Paula, a slight grin pulling across her features. “Do I see a crack in the near perfect
armor of the very confident solicitor?”

Paula ducked her head slightly.

Rosie continued, “That was a very long time ago, Paula. Our Sophie has grown up since Sian, who, I’ll tell you, if I ever see again, will get a tongue lashing from me for running out on her! I had to pick up those pieces, and there were many, let me tell you. But, she pulled herself together and moved on with her life. But, to answer your question, I think Sophie’s love for you is real and true. You’ll be fine, unless you hurt her, then you will have me to deal with!”

Paula just shook her head at Rosie, completely baffled with her tactics for protecting Sophie. But, at least she did it all for the right reasons and Paula no longer had to deal with the stress of kicking her ass out of the flat.

“I’m going to go see if our girl is awake,” said Paula, moving out of the kitchen.

“Ok, see you later then. Hope you have a nice lunch!”

Paula quietly entered the bedroom, but Sophie was still sleeping peacefully. She didn’t want to wake her, so she decided to get her exercises out of the way. She sat on the chair and removed her sling, then began working the arm, per her physical therapist’s direction. It hurt like hell, but she moved those shoulder muscles up and down as best she could, much like bird flapping a wing. She could only manage to move it about 10 degrees with her arm fully extended before it bit at her and caused her severe pain, but she knew she had to fight through the pain if she wanted to regain full use of her arm. She missed being able to hold Sophie fully, so she used that as her motivation.

As she shifted her arm, her thoughts returned to Rosie, and how she had stirred things up, albeit for the right reasons. She hoped that Sophie awoke this morning with a new confidence in their bond and her love for her, as Rosie predicted. It was a huge risk on her sister’s part, but the payoff could feasibly be a good one.

Paula continued her workout, wincing with pain, but not stopping.

Sophie stirred as she heard her lover curse. She opened her eyes to see Paula’s face covered in sweat as she exercised her wounded arm. The young brunette sat up, the sheet falling to expose her naked torso, “Babe, don’t overdo it. You’re sweating like mad and you’re cursing so you must be in pain.”

“I’m okay, much better now the view has improved immensely,” said Paula, staring at Sophie’s exposed chest.

“Like what you see, do you?” asked Sophie flirtatiously.

“Oh, yes I do, love. Enough with these bloody exercises. There are other ways to get my heart rate up,” said Paula, moving onto the bed, placing herself on top of her naked lover, attaching her mouth to Sophie’s neck. “Mmmmm, you are the sexiest woman,” breathed Paula into her ear, then put her lips to Sophie’s, “and I really <kiss> really <kiss> want you.”

“Well, as good as your lips feel against me, remember that we are supposed to be cooling it a bit on the sex?” reminded Sophie.

“Oh, come on,” whined Paula, “just let me show you how much I love you.”

“You showed me last night, several times,” giggled Sophie, kissing Paula deeply. “I want you to know how much last night meant to me, babe. You made me feel incredibly loved. And I know I can get mind-numbingly insecure at times, but I promise I am going to do better with that. But, right now,
I want you to take it easy, yea?"

“You’re no fun, Sophie Webster,” complained the solicitor, rolling off her lover and onto her back, sighing.

“Well, I promise I will be more fun later. Besides, aren’t you supposed to have lunch with Evelyn today? What time is she coming by?”

Paula looked at the clock. “She’ll be here half twelve, so that means we have loads of time to exercise …” said the older woman as she traced the back of her fingers up Sophie’s arm.

Sophie closed her eyes as goosebumps raised all over her skin at her lover’s touch. “Don’t do this to me, Paula. You know I can’t resist you when you do that.”

“Why do you want to resist me, love?” asked Paula as she moved her hand over to caress Sophie’s erect nipple. “I want you, baby. I need you,” whispered the solicitor.

Sophie’s arousal sky rocketed. She moved over to capture Paula’s lips fervently, letting her hands roam up under Paula’s shirt, feeling her soft, warm skin. She pulled her shirt up over her head, exposing Paula’s naked breasts, there for the taking. Sophie attached her lips to her lover, sucking the erect nipple into her mouth, massaging the engorged nub with her rigid tongue, eliciting a heavy moan from the woman underneath her.

Paula wound her hand into Sophie’s hair, holding her to her as she pushed Paula’s arousal higher. “Oh, god, that feels so good. Please, don’t stop” breathed the older woman.

Sophie suddenly realized that the last several times they’d made love, Paula had delivered for her, but she had not given Paula an orgasm, forgetting to return the attention to her partner as she was satisfied with her own release. She’s aching for it. How could I be so selfish? Sophie felt terrible. Well, she knew how to remedy the situation and she was going to make Paula cum hard and give her the relief she needed.

Sophie continued to devour her lover with her mouth slowly, painstakingly moving her tongue from one nipple to the other, biting and sucking her lover into a frenzy. Just as she began to move her hand to Paula’s center, a noise broke her focus.

Knock, knock, knock.

You have GOT to be kidding me! Ignore it.

Knock, knock, knock. “Sophie??” came the muffled sound from the door.

I am literally going to kill her!

“You’d better go see what she wants,” said a very frustrated Paula.

“Don’t lose your focus, babe. I’ll be right back, I promise!”

Sophie ran over and cracked the door open slightly. “Rosie, what the hell do you want?”

“Uhm, babes, I thought since the cougar has a lunch date that maybe you and I could go to the shops, you know, spend some sister-time together.”

“I’m a little bit busy right now, Rosie. I will talk to you about it later!”

“But, Sophie, if we are going, we should get a move on,” pushed the blonde.
“LATER, Rosie!”

“OMG, are you like, having sex at half 10 in the morning? My god, that woman is a sex maniac, Sophie.” Rosie smiled to herself.

Sophie slammed the door shut and turned around to hurry back to Paula, but when she looked over, Paula was no longer laying on the bed. “Babe? Wha – where are you?”

Paula came out of the ensuite. “I had to wee, sorry. Too much coffee this morning!” She climbed back onto the bed and motioned her come-here finger to Sophie, who climbed back on top of her lover. “Now, where were we?” purred the solicitor, very happy to feel Sophie’s mouth back on her skin, right where it belonged.

xxx

“What on earth has got you in such a good mood, Paula?” asked Evelyn as they were seated for their lunch date. “You haven’t even stopped smiling since I picked you up!”

“I’m just happy, though the last few days have not been the best, I have to admit.”

“Why? What happened over the last few days,” inquired Evelyn.

Paula tried her best to explain the force known as Rosie Webster, including her idea of testing Paula’s love for Sophie. She was quite animated in telling the story of nearly slapping the woman on several occasions, and finally telling the blonde to leave.

“Well, you certainly have had a few interesting days, haven’t you? So, you decided not to give Rosie the boot out the door, then?”

“Well, how can I? She was right. Sophie seems like a new person. She’s so happy and loving and attentive,” said Paula, her eyebrow raising on the last adjective.

“You’ve not been taking things easy, have you?”

The lawyer had a slightly guilty look, “Well, kind of! I’ve had a few crises to take care of, and they involved showing Sophie some attention. Oh, I’ll be fine, Ev. I’ve been doing my exercises.”

“Speaking of, looks like you’re getting some use back? Physical therapy must be working.”

“Yes, it is. My therapist is actually great, but she’s leaving next week, and I will have to break in someone new. Hope they can handle my colorful mouth as well as Rebecca does.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ve heard it all in that line of work. Anyway, it’s good to see you improving so well. Now, do you want to see the fruits of my labor, or not?” asked Evelyn.

“Of course! Let’s see them.”

Evelyn pulled five boxes from her handbag and put them on the table, opening them one by one so Paula could look at them. The brunette plucked the first one out to hold it and see it properly. She said nothing, just looked. Then another, and another, until she had looked at them all.

“Well?” asked Evelyn, wanting some sort of response.
“Shit!”

“Oh, don’t tell me you don’t like any of them. I thought for sure –“

“No, the problem is I like ALL of them! How am I supposed to choose just one?”

“Well, we have time, so I guess start by eliminating them one by one?”

“Ugh, why do you have to be so good at this?” Paula took them out again, one by one. She had already put her ring onto her left hand, where it belonged, so she started by placing each ring on her right hand and looking at the two rings side by side.

“Did you get the bands like I asked, so I can see what it will look like once we’re married?”

“Oooh, yes,” said Evelyn, pulling out several platinum bands. Paula slipped them on and reviewed all the rings again. It gave her chills to see the band on her finger and made her wish Sophie was with her.

“So, what do you think?” asked Evelyn, hoping Paula was happy with the selection.

“What do you think? Which one do you like the best?” asked Paula, needing some help.

“Sorry, but that decision has to be yours, love.”

“I need a drink. Where is the waiter. You won’t tell Sophie, will you? I’ve had not one drop of alcohol in weeks and this calls for a nice glass of wine.”

“I’ll let you deal with your fiancé if she smells it on you!” Evelyn laughed.

After a glass of Italian Pinot Grigio, Paula was tipsy and relaxed, the stress of the past week draining away from her mind. She was able to finally narrow down the rings to the one she liked the best, and thought Sophie would love.

“Well, for what it’s worth, that one was my favorite, too,” offered Evelyn, smiling at the look of approval on Paula’s face. “So, how are you planning to give it to her? I mean, you don’t need to propose, so have you thought about how you’re going to do it?”

“We are going to go out for a nice dinner, far away from that sister of hers, and maybe I’ll do something cliché, like put it in a glass of champagne. I’ll just have to play it by ear and see what feels right. Like you said, the pressure is off because we are already engaged. I just want her to love it as much as I love mine.”

“Paula, you could slip a twisty tie on her finger and she’d be happy!”

“You’re probably right! But, since I have this fabulous ring already, I think I’ll slip this on instead!” smiled the solicitor.

“Have you told anyone about your engagement? Like, maybe your children?”

“Not yet. Isla is coming this weekend for a visit, so we will tell her then. And, we will be going back to Weatherfield soon enough to pick up Sophie’s things, so I guess we will drop that bomb on Sally then. I hope she responds well. Her arguments to Sophie are always about how I am going to dump her, so maybe the fact that the opposite is happening will put her mind at ease.”

“For your sake, I hope you’re right!” said Evelyn.
“Let’s not talk about that anymore. Tell me something new. When do Mark and Rachel arrive? How is Alexander? What’s happening with the case?”

“I can’t talk about the case with you, not yet, and you know it, so just forget that one, miss! Alexander is holding up just fine, I suppose. He’s tough. He’d never have made it this far without some thick skin. And Mark is due in sometime next week, I believe. There, now you’re all caught up!”

Paula rolled her eyes at her friend. “You’re no fun, Ev. I’m literally going insane with nothing to do but ‘relax’ and ‘heal’! Sophie watches me like a hawk, won’t hardly let me get on my laptop, even though I have promised I won’t check email, which, by the way, is going to be a flaming nightmare to get through once I do go back to work! I’ll spend an entire week just going through it if I’m not allowed to at least look at it.”

Evelyn just giggled at her friend. “You, poor lass. Why don’t you take a holiday or go to Manchester for a visit? There’s nothing keeping you in London, is there?”

“Well, my physio, but I could work around that, I suppose. Hmm, a holiday would be nice. Maybe we could go somewhere warm and beachy. I’ll have to look into that, Ev. Thanks for the idea!”

“What would you ever do without me?”

“I really don’t know. Probably go mad!”

“You’ll be back to work soon enough, love. Just enjoy this time, and be sure to take all the time you need, you understand me?”

“Yes, mother,” quipped the solicitor, winking at her friend.

“Well, I hope your evening with Sophie goes to plan and the next time I see her she will be wearing that stunning ring.”

“Thank you, Evelyn,” said Paula.

“For what?”

“For everything, really. You’ve been a great comfort to Sophie, a rock when she needed it. And for always talking sense into this stubborn old lawyer. I truly owe you so much.”

“Well, pay me back by living a happy life with that wonderful woman you’ve lucked into. I don’t know two better suited people.”

“I’m going to do my best, Ev. I promise.”

Paula looked again at the gorgeous ring sitting in its box. It gave her butterflies thinking about putting it on Sophie’s finger. She was going to enjoy seeing her lover’s eyes when she gave it to her, as well as the brilliant sex they would surely have after. She smiled to herself and checked her watch. It was near two. She would have to figure out where they should have dinner and make a reservation before it got too late. She wanted this evening to be perfect and romantic, and how could it not be when she offered her love this fabulous ring and a promise to love her forever?
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Paula gives Sophie her ring, then Sophie let's Paula in on her thoughts for her future, but it brings up a hurdle they weren't expecting.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long. Hope to post next chapter soon.

Sophie and Rosie returned to the flat late in the afternoon after having spent hours shopping. Sophie was exhausted. Rosie was invigorated.

“Ugh, could you just die happy now or what?” squealed the blonde.

“You are a freak of nature, Rosie. I am flaming worn out and you look like you’re ready to run a marathon. How are you not tired?” asked Sophie, plopping down on the couch.

“Oh, Sophie, don’t be so silly. Have you met me? You know I live to shop!” She dragged her bags down the hallway to her room.

Sophie leaned her head back onto the sofa and closed her eyes. She thought she might just go right to sleep for the evening, unless she could muster enough energy to drag herself up and to the bed. Paula must be home by now. She was likely resting in their room. Sophie reluctantly pulled herself up and trudged into the bedroom. Sure enough, Paula was sitting back on the bed propped up with pillows, reading. Sophie’s heart skipped a beat at the sight of her, her reading glasses on, her legs outstretched, looking sexier than ever. If only I had the energy.

Paula looked up as Sophie collapsed onto their bed and groaned loudly. “Hello, love. Did you and Rosie have a nice time?”

“Too much shopping forme,” muttered Sophie.

Paula laughed at Sophie’s obvious exhaustion. “My poor baby,” she said, rubbing Sophie’s back. “Are you too knackered to come out to a nice dinner with your fiancé this evening?” purred Paula.

Sophie reared her head up. “Just you and me? Nice dinner? Will there be wine?”

“Well, of course there will be wine, love.”

“What’s the occasion?” asked a suspicious Sophie.

“Uhm, I miss getting dressed up and treating my lovely wife-to-be to an enjoyable evening is the occasion. We’ve not been out in ages, love.”

“I’m so knackered,” whined the young brunette.
“You are 24! What do you have to be knackered about?”

“You’ve obviously never been shopping with the Energizer Bunny. We walked a hundred miles today!”

“Oh, come on baby,” whispered Paula, leaning down to Sophie’s ear. “I’ll wear the flowy pantsuit you like so much,” chimed the solicitor, kissing Sophie’s ear.

“Can I have a nap first?”

“Our reservation is for 8, so sure, you can get a quick nap in.”

“Oh, thank god. Okay, I’ll go then,” agreed Sophie.

Paula just chuckled. “Alright, you sleep. I’ll wake you for a shower around 6:30.” Paula kissed Sophie’s cheek, then got up and walked out to the kitchen for some water. She needed some paracetamol as her shoulder was aching a bit. She anticipated the look on Sophie’s face when she saw the ring and it made her smile.

“What are you smiling about?” asked a chirpy Rosie as she came into the kitchen for a glass of wine.

“I am a woman in love, what’s there not to smile about?”

“Where is the cub, anyway?” asked Rosie.

“The cub?” questioned Paula.

“Yea, you’re the cougar, she’s the cub,” said the blonde very matter-of-factly.

Paula just rolled her eyes and shook her head. There was no point in asking her not to use those terms, because she would just keep doing it. “So, you wore my fiancé out today. She’s fast asleep on our bed.”

“Oh, she’s such a lightweight, that one. Always has been. Fashion is just not her thing, obviously.”

“I like Sophie’s style. It’s kind of quirky.”

“Well, you would say that. All I ever see you in are jeans, pajamas, and floppy shirts! It’s not like you have much of a style.”

“Rosie, I’ve been healing, so all I can wear are loose items. You’ll see a different side of me this evening,” quipped Paula.

“Why, what’s happening this evening?”

“I’m taking Sophie out for dinner.”

“Oh! I thought she was knackered.”

“She only needs a quick rest. Our reservations aren’t until 8, and if you’re out here when we head off, you’ll see I can scrub up nicely,” offered Paula, a bit annoyed that Rosie made her defensive about her appearance.

“Whatevs! I’m going for a bath. See ya later, cougar.”

The solicitor just shook her head. Rosie was beginning to grow on her.
Not wanting to disturb Sophie, Paula grabbed her laptop and spent some time doing some research on the internet. She thought she and Sophie might go on holiday in a few months, once she had a good grip on the fraud case. She hadn’t been allowed to talk to Alexander about the case, so she had no idea what was happening, or how the effects of the discovery of the drug cartel were playing out. It was infuriating for Paula to be sidelined, but she would be back to work in a little over a week, if she was ready. She knew Sophie would not be happy with her returning, but the fraud charges against Cooper Securities had not disappeared with the shooting. Paula would have to determine how much fabrication of evidence Ian Walker was responsible for and how much, if any, of the evidence had merit. She would do her best to get Alexander out of the mess Ian and Lawrence had put him in by using his company as a cover for their criminal activities.

Paula finished looking for holidays, perhaps it would turn out to be a honeymoon if the pair could decide on a wedding date. She needed to do her evening exercises, so she made her way to their room. When she entered, she saw Sophie sleeping peacefully, and she couldn’t help but go and lay down close to her. She could feel the warmth radiating from her lover and couldn’t help but want to touch her. She brushed some hair from Sophie’s face and traced her finger along her jaw, and she smiled. “I love you,” whispered Paula.

The solicitor moved over to her chair, so she could do her exercises. She began working her sore muscles, and she noticed that she was quickly regaining the use of her shoulder. Her recovery was going well, she would likely only need 6 more weeks of working with a physio and she would be back to full function, or at least that’s what she’d been told by Rebecca. Paula finished her workout and decided to figure out what she was going to wear to dinner. She opened the wardrobe and pulled out a couple of things, laying them out one by one, looking for just the right complement to Sophie’s blue dress. She could wear the pantsuit she’d told Sophie she was wearing, but she thought maybe she’d try something else, considering it was a special occasion. She wished Sophie had bought something new while she was out with Rosie, but she knew she hadn’t because there were no bags. Paula knew they needed to make the trip to Manchester to collect Sophie’s things, because she really needed to officially move in and she had a limited amount of her clothing in London with her. Paula had put off their return because she really did not want to have to deal with Sally, but that wasn’t fair to Sophie, so they would go in a few days and face the music. After all, they had some big news and it was only fair that they shared it sooner rather than later.

Paula chose her simple black knee-length dress along with black suede four-inch heels which made her calves look good. She knew Sophie would like her in it. Paula went into the ensuite to shower, shave her legs and get ready for their evening.

Sophie woke to the sound of the shower running. She looked at the clock – 6:12pm. She needed to get up and start getting ready. She walked into the bathroom and looked at her love through the shower door, doing her best to wash her hair. Sophie opened the door and startled Paula.

“OH, Jesus! Sophie! I thought you were sleeping.”

“Well, I was, but I need a shower too, so thought I’d join ya. Besides, it looks like you could use a hand or two,” offered Sophie as she stripped her clothes off. “Shove over, gimpy.”

Sophie got into the shower and continued to shampoo Paula’s hair, massaging at her scalp, running her hands down to her shoulder muscles, being careful of her left side.

“Mmmm, that feels great, baby. I love your hands,” said Paula, her eyes closed, enjoying the strength of the fingers kneading the tight muscles.

Sophie smiled, then rinsed Paula’s hair, kissing the wet skin of her neck, running her tongue up to her earlobe. “You are so sexy,” uttered a very turned on Sophie. She then ran her hands down to
Paula’s hips then up to cup her breasts, rubbing at the nipples.

Paula moved her hands up to cover Sophie’s as they squeezed at her, pushing her lover’s hands deeper into her. She moaned at the pressure, but needed more. She turned around to face Sophie and kissed her deeply, pulling her lover into with both arms.

Sophie noticed Paula’s left arm pulling at her back and stopped. “Babe, you’re using your arm! That’s great!”

“My exercises are working well. I’ve been wanting to hold you properly, with both arms, so I’ve been working hard. I’m definitely not where I want to be with it, but, it’s getting better,” smiled the solicitor. “And the wound is nearly healed up, so I’d say all systems are go!”

“You are incredible, you know that?” Tears began to sting at Sophie’s eyes.

“Hey, why are you crying, love?”

“When I think that I nearly lost you, I …”

“But, you didn’t. I’m here … with you. And we’re getting married and are going to be really happy together, yea?” Paula kissed Sophie again, slowly, sensually. “Now, I’m going to get out of the shower and let you finish up, because I have something quite special planned for us.”

Sophie whined, “but, babe, I was gonna –”

“Oh, don’t think you’re off the hook that easily. There will certainly be some of that going on later, I guarantee,” assured Paula, winking at her fiancé as she wrapped a towel around her naked body, leaving Sophie to have her shower. She dried off and put on her sexy underwear, then her dressing gown so she could dry her hair and do her makeup.

Sophie got out of the shower, but couldn’t find a towel. “Babe, where are all the clean towels?”

“I think we’ve been neglecting the laundry.” Paula walked into the bedroom and grabbed the damp towel she had used and brought it back in for Sophie, who was standing on the mat dripping wet. “Mmmm, maybe I won’t give you this … you look good enough to eat standing there all wet.”

“Hey, you’re the one who put the brakes on my intentions earlier, so hand over the towel, otherwise we won’t make our reservations,” directed Sophie.

Paula reluctantly handed her the towel, poking out her bottom lip. “You’re mine later!”

“Promises, promises!” said Sophie as she started to walk into the bedroom.

“You forget I’m getting use of my arm back, so you better watch out, Webster!” said Paula, pulling unsuccessfully at the towel covering her fiancé, hoping to see her naked backside.

“Uh uh, that’s for later, you perv!”

Paula just laughed, almost wanting to cancel their dinner plans and take her lover now. But, she also couldn’t wait to give Sophie her ring, so she picked up the blow dryer and finished getting ready.

Paula had finished her make up and put on her jewelry. “How you doing, Sophie? Are you dressed?” asked Paula as she walked into their empty bedroom. “Sophie?” she called out. Where the devil did she go? Paula pulled on her dress and her shoes, but needed Sophie to zip her. She took a good look in the mirror, smoothed down the dress, then grabbed a shawl and her clutch, where she
had firmly placed the ring. She called out again, “Sophie?” as she walked out into the living room. “Sophie, baby, where are you? I need you to zip me up!”

Rosie came from her room at the call of Paula’s voice. “Sophie is just finishing up, Paula. She’ll be out in a minute. Here, let me get your zipper,” said Rosie, as she pulled the metal fasten up Paula’s back for her. “Well, I have to admit, you really do clean up well cougar. You really are a MILF – I mean for other people, not me, so maybe that makes you a MOLF?”

“Thank you, Rosie,” offered Paula, looking at her watch for the time. She picked up the phone and called Phillip for the car. As she was hanging up, Sophie came walking out dressed in a deep red thigh high long-sleeved dress, her hair pulled up, make up perfect. Paula’s mouth dropped open and her heart skipped a few beats. “WOW! You look amazing! Where did you get that dress?” asked Paula, her eyes clouding over with appreciation.

“OH, I knew tonight was a special night, so I took it upon myself to lend Sophie something deadly out of my collection,” purred Rosie. “She looks gorgeous, doesn’t she?”

“Rosie, I think it might be too tight,” squirmed Sophie, pulling a bit at the bottom of the dress.

“Nonsense! You look amazing. Just look at the cougar, she’s speechless, so I’d say my job here is done. Now, you two go out and enjoy your evening. And, please, behave yourselves until you get home! I don’t need to be dragged down to the police station because you two couldn’t keep your hands off!”

Paula just shook her head, but couldn’t keep her eyes off Sophie. “You ready?”

Sophie nodded, and Paula interlaced their fingers and headed for the lift. “You are the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever laid eyes on! I can’t believe I get to marry you. I am going to be the envy of everyone in the restaurant tonight.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself, babe. I’ve not seen you wear that dress before! I like it A LOT and how it makes your ass look when you walk, phew! It makes me want to rip it right off ya!”

Paula smiled at her fiancé and leaned in for a quick kiss so as not to smudge their lippie. She closed her eyes and rested their foreheads together, “I love you.”

“And I love you.”

Ding. The lift doors opened. Phillip’s eyes widened at the pair. “Well, if I may say so, you both look very beautiful this evening. Your car is waiting,” said Phillip.

“Thank you, Phillip,” said Sophie, holding Paula’s hand.

“Let’s go have some dinner, shall we?” said the solicitor.

The pair got into their car and Paula gave their driver the address of the restaurant.

“So, where are we going, babe? Somewhere swanky, I guess, since we are all dolled up!” asked Sophie.

“It’s a place called Solstice, supposed to be excellent, but truth be told, it won’t matter if the food is good or not, because all I need is you. I can’t take my eyes off you, you’re that gorgeous. I can’t believe I get to call you mine,” gushed the solicitor.

“Flattery will get you whatever you want, missus, so keep it up and you will probably get lucky
later,” laughed Sophie.

Paula quirked an eyebrow, looking at Sophie with complete lust in her eyes. “Don’t say things like that to me when I can’t do anything about it. It’s so not fair!”

“Patience is a virtue, so they say.”

“Whoever said that, never saw you in that dress!” said Paula, shaking her head. She placed her hand on Sophie’s knee as they rode toward the restaurant, then quickly realized it was a mistake to touch her lover’s smooth bare skin. The feel of her made Paula want to run her hand up her thigh, to enter her and deliver her right there in the backseat of the car. Paula’s breathing increased as she moved her hand slightly up toward Sophie’s center. She looked at Sophie and was leaning in to kiss her when the car came to a stop, snapping Paula out of her arousal-filled state. Moments later, the door opened, and the driver offered his hand to Paula, who grabbed her clutch and stepped onto the sidewalk, followed by Sophie who was struggling to keep the hem of her short dress at a decent level.

The pair entered the restaurant and Paula approached the maître d, having to clear her throat so she could speak, “Reservation for Martin, please,” croaked the solicitor.

“Ah, yes, Martin, party of two. Right this way, Ms. Martin,” directed the maître d. He took them to a small cozy table situated perfectly out of the way and presented them with menus.

“What would you like to drink, love?” asked Paula. “And before you say anything, I think I deserve a real drink this evening!”

“Really?” asked Sophie.

“I haven’t had alcohol in weeks —“

“What about that glass of wine you had with lunch today?” asked Sophie, a knowing grin pulling across her face.

“You knew about that?”

“Babe, I could taste it on you when you kissed me!”

“Okay, but it was only one glass! Baby, please,” whined Paula, “I really want a proper drink since we are out, and you look so amazing.”

“What does us being dressed up have to do with you ignoring your recovery?” asked Sophie, winding her fiancé up a bit.

“Oh, come on baby. How about we just get one bottle of champagne, to celebrate our engagement? We haven’t done that yet!”

Sophie smiled at her fiancé, loving that Paula was asking permission. She didn’t have to do it, but she respected Sophie enough to consider her feelings on the matter. “Okay, one bottle! And that’s it!”

“You got it!” said an excited Paula.

Sophie just laughed at her, “you’re like a kid in a candy store, babe. Are you sure you don’t have a problem we need to talk about?”
Paula rolled her eyes. She waived the waiter over and ordered a bottle of Veuve Clicquot.

“So, what looks good to eat?” asked Paula, perusing her menu.

“I know what I’d like to eat,” said Sophie, staring at her fiancé.

“I meant something from the menu, darling!”

“Oh, well, I guess I had actually look at the printed menu then, hadn’t I?” Sophie picked it up and scanned it quickly. She took off her shoe and ran her foot up Paula’s smooth leg, making her lover jump a bit.

“Sophie!” Paula hissed.

“What?” said Sophie in an innocent tone.

“You’ve already got me slipping and sliding all over the place, the last thing I need is to leave a wet spot on the chair.”

Sophie salivated at the thought of Paula being that wet. “Okay, I’ll stop. Now I am feeling rather slippery myself,” admitted Sophie.

The waiter returned with their champagne and poured a bit for Paula to taste and approve. She gave the go ahead and he poured both ladies a glass, then took their order and left them alone.

“Mmmm, this is really good,” said Sophie. “I don’t usually like champagne, but this is nice.”

“Oh, it’s delightful! I forgot how much I like champagne.”

“Well, since we are celebrating, let’s toast, to us and a long and very happy marriage!” offered Sophie.

They clinked their glasses and Paula drained hers quickly, enjoying the champagne, but she was also a little nervous about the ring. She had not come up with a clever way to give it to Sophie and she wanted it to be memorable. She filled her glass again, but Sophie gave her a look, so she didn’t drink this one down quite so quickly.

The pair chatted about their days, Paula’s lunch with Evelyn, Sophie’s shopping with Rosie. Paula made it a point to extend their talk about Rosie, revealing to her what Rosie had been up to, trying to bait Paula into betraying Sophie as a measure of her love and commitment to her. Sophie was incensed, apologizing for her sister, but Paula just laughed it off, telling Sophie her sister was only trying to look out for her, albeit in an underhanded and deceitful way.

“You mean, you’re not mad at her for what she’s done to you?” asked an incredulous Sophie.

“Well, I was, initially. I really was this close to giving her a good slap, but when I realized how much she loves you, and how you had responded to my reaction, I just couldn’t be angry with her. She made you realize how much I love you, something I couldn’t do with words.” Paula filled Sophie’s glass. “Which kind of brings me to the reason I wanted to bring you out for dinner.”

Sophie knitted her eyebrows together, “I thought we were celebrating our engagement.”

“Well, that’s true, but there’s something else,” said Paula, grabbing Sophie’s right hand with her left. “Since I haven’t needed my sling anymore, I’ve been able to wear my engagement ring in the correct place. Did you notice?”
“Of course, I did,” Sophie said softly. She toyed with the ring on Paula’s finger, pushing it back and forth, admiring how it looked on her slender digit. “I want to the world to know you’re mine!”

“Well, I want the same. I want the world to know I’m completely taken, off the market, and belong to the most beautiful woman in the world, but …”

Sophie’s throat tightened, “But what?”

“Buuut, I don’t think it’s quite fair that you get to walk around with a naked finger.”

“What do you mean? Do you think I wouldn’t let someone know that I’m engaged if they were interested in me?” Sophie began to worry. “Because I would never …“

“Sophie, I know you would never cheat on me! I’m not worried about that at all,” assured Paula.

“Then what? I don’t understand.”

“I just think that your gorgeous hand needs a little something that says you’re mine. I mean, I get to flaunt this beautiful ring you gave me, so …” Paula pulled the black velvet box out of her purse. “I thought it only fair,” she said softly, “that you get something special as well.” She opened the box and held it out to Sophie. “Be mine forever?”

Sophie’s eyes just about popped out of her head at the sight of the amazing ring sitting snugly in the little black box. “Oh my god, Paula, it’s beautiful! I … it’s … you shouldn’t have …” A lone tear fell from her eye as she looked up into the face of the woman she loved most in the world.

“May I place it on your finger?” asked Paula with a smile.

Sophie smiled wide and nodded her head quickly, holding her hand out. Paula pulled the ring from the box and slid it onto Sophie’s finger. She looked up at her fiancé, “I love you, Sophie Lauren Webster, and I can’t wait to become your wife.”

Sophie held up her hand and admired the ring and how it felt on her hand. “Paula, I can’t believe you’ve done this. It’s just the most beautiful ring. Oh my god, I don’t deserve you!” She scooted her chair around closer to her lover and pulled her into a full-on snog right there in the middle of the restaurant. Thankfully, they were over in a secluded area and no one seemed to even notice.

“I’m glad you like it, baby. I looked at about a million rings online, then Evelyn helped me find just the right one!”

“I think she’s my fairy godmother! I really do. She has been so good to me, babe. And you really are my fairy tale come true, do you know that? I simply can’t believe how incredibly lucky I feel to have found you. God bless Duncan Radfield!”

The pair of them laughed, but they knew it was true. They would never have met if Sally hadn’t been set up for fraud.

“Wait, you looked online for this ring? Is that what you were doing when I yelled at you that one time, and accused you of working?” asked Sophie.

“Yea, it was,” said Paula, smiling.

“Oh, god, I’m so sorry, babe. What a terrible fiancé I am, always skulking after you, like a warden. From now on, I am going to trust you,” promised Sophie, kissing her fiancé again.
The waiter came over with their food and placed their plates in front of them. “Can I get you ladies another bottle,” he asked as he poured a bit of the remaining liquid into each of their glasses.

“No, I think we are just fine, thanks,” said Paula. She had promised just one bottle, and she was going to keep her word. She was high on life and really didn’t need alcohol to enjoy the evening. The food smelted wonderful, so they tucked in and devoured their meals, continuing to talk and gaze at one another adoringly.

“That ring really is quite stunning, and it looks perfect on your hand. Are you sure you like it, because if you don’t, I can get something different for you,” offered Paula.

“You will not touch my ring! I love it, almost as much as I love you, but not quite,” grinned the young brunette. “You know, you’ve really given purpose to my life, Paula. Before you, I felt like I was just existing, you know, just going through the motions. Now we’re together, I look forward to getting up in the morning and doing something with my life. Which brings me to something I want to talk to you about.”

“Okay, love. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking lately about my future, and though the priority in my life will always be us, our marriage, I would really like to do something meaningful, too. I mean, you’re a successful solicitor, and that gives meaning and purpose to your life. I don’t really have a lot of direction there and I think I would like to go back to school.” Sophie didn’t know how Paula was going to react, so she held her breath and waited.

“I think if you want to find something just for you, you should go for it! Sophie, darling, I just want you to be happy, and if going back to school will do that for you, then I will support you 100%.”

“You really mean that?”

“Of course, I do! I have my work, so why shouldn’t you have something you love?” Paula took Sophie’s hand. “Do you have something specific in mind?”

“Yea. I do, and I don’t want you to think I’m mad, but … babe, I want to become a doctor, so I can save lives, like they did yours. I felt so helpless when you were hurt, and I stood by and watched as they saved you, and it was amazing. And I started thinking, god, if I could do that for someone else, I would feel like I was really making a difference, ya know?” Sophie’s face was lit up like a Christmas tree. She continued, “Now, I know it will take a long time, but I’m still young and you work long hours anyway, so I think I can do it, babe, I really do!”

Paula was silent.

“What do you think? You’re not saying anything.”

“Well, I think you’ll make an amazing doctor,” smiled Paula. “I had no idea you were that ambitious, love! You do realize you’re talking 10 years of school, right?”

“You think I’m daft, don’t you?” asked Sophie, pulling her hand away.

“NO! I don’t. I think it’s wonderful that you want to do something so incredible. And, like I said, I will support you all the way! I just want you to realize the time it’s going to take, that’s all.”

“I’ve been looking into it all, and I know it’s going to take a lot of time, that’s why I wanted to talk to you about it, make sure you were okay with me taking so much time away from us, from you,” said Sophie.
“Sophie, listen to me. We will be just fine, love. You need to do whatever it is that will fulfill you, give your life as much purpose as possible, and if that means 10 years of school, then 10 years it is!”

“You really mean that?”

“Oh, my darling, your happiness means more to me than anything else, so, of course, I mean it.” Paula leaned over and kissed Sophie gently. “I want you to be happy, baby.”

Then something dawned on the solicitor, and her body language changed.

“What is it, Paula? What’s wrong?”

“I just thought of something. Something Rosie mentioned,” said Paula, concern showing on her face.

“Rosie! About what?”

“About children.” Paula looked Sophie in the eye. “Sophie, if we are going to have children, we need to figure that out, and soon. I hate to say it, but I’m not getting any younger and –“

“Don’t say that! You’re not old!”

“Love, I’m pushing it as it is. I’m 51 and even if we had kids tomorrow, that puts me at nearly 70 when they turn 18. Now, I’m not saying I don’t want kids, but I think we have to talk this all through carefully.”

“Do you want more kids?” Sophie asked.

Paula thought for a moment, “I will do it all again if that’s what you want. If you need to have children, Sophie, then I will do it, for you. But, to be honest, I have done it already, so it’s not something I feel compelled to do again. I just don’t know how we could do it if you’re in school full-time, unless we have help.”

“Like a nanny?”

“Well, yes.”

“Oh, I don’t like the thought of not raising my own kids, being hands-on. What’s the point in having them if you don’t actually spend time forming them?”

“I know. But, Sophie, I struggled a lot. I was always torn between doing my job and being a mum. When I was at work, I felt like I should be at home and vice versa. It’s a horrible place to be, feeling like you’re never giving enough.”

“So, basically you’re saying I need to choose between having kids or becoming a doctor?”

Paula sighed. “Do you think we could really do both? I know what raising kids is like, Sophie, and it’s hard. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done. It makes law school pale in comparison. And I can only imagine what med school is like, though, you wouldn’t be in med school for years and maybe by then, if we had them soon, they’d be old enough to handle us both being so busy.”

“Maybe I’m just being selfish,” said Sophie. She had thought about them having kids, but didn’t think Paula would be on board.

“Well, do you want to have kids?” asked Paula.

“I do, but …”
“But, what, love?”

“I don’t want to force having kids on you, Paula. That’s not fair to you.”

“I will do it for you, Sophie. I want you to be happy.”

“But, if you do that, would you come to resent me later, especially if I’m away with school, chasing a dream, leaving you to care for the kids after you’ve worked all day?” said Sophie. “Realistically, I think I need to make a decision. Kids or med school.” Sophie sighed.

“I’m sorry, Sophie,” said Paula, tears threatening to fall. “I feel like I’m failing you, cheating you out of having the things you deserve. Maybe, I am the one being selfish. Maybe I should just …”

“Just what!!?” asked Sophie, panic rising in her voice.

“Can we table this discussion until we get home?” said Paula, looking around, realizing they were having an important life discussion in the middle of the restaurant. “I’ll pay the bill,” said a forlorn Paula.

Sophie just nodded. The heaviness of their situation was weighing on her.

Paula took care of the bill and the pair hopped in a cab. The ride back to the flat was silent, both of them thinking about what to do, how to move forward. Sophie held Paula’s hand tightly, fighting back tears.

“Hey, everything is going to okay, love. I promise,” said Paula, pulling Sophie into her side. “We will work it all out.”

They arrived to a quiet flat.

“Rosie must be out,” said Sophie.

“I need a drink. Do you want one?” asked Paula.

Sophie sighed. “Yea, I think I need a strong one, me. Vodka rocks. I’m gonna get changed,” said Sophie, heading toward their bedroom.

“I’ll bring your drink in to you,” said Paula, walking to the wet bar. She poured herself a bourbon and downed it in one. Then poured another. How could she selfishly deny Sophie of the things she needed? She deserved to be a mother, and to have a career that fulfilled her completely. Paula was holding her back and it wasn’t fair. She had a decision to make, even if it meant letting Sophie go.

Sophie went into their bedroom and stripped off her clothes, washed off her make-up and pulled off her jewelry, everything but her ring. That would stay where it belonged. She looked at it in the light of the bathroom and marveled at how beautiful it was, how lucky she was to have Paula. She sighed heavily, remembering the feeling she had when she thought she was going to lose Paula, and it anchored her. She had everything that was truly important. God had listened to Sophie’s prayers and brought her love back to her, and Sophie didn’t care if she never had kids or never became a doctor. She had true love, and that meant more than all other things combined. Sophie let go of the brick sitting on her chest, realizing she was creating problems for herself.

Paula materialized, drinks in hand, and passed one over to Sophie, who was dressed in a t-shirt and panties. She stepped out of her heels and tried to reach her zipper. Sophie stepped up behind her lover, and unzipped her dress, running her hand up to her shoulders to push the dress down her arms. Sophie kissed the back of Paula’s shoulder, her hands on Paula’s hips. “I love you, Paula,”
whispered Sophie.

Paula stepped out of the dress and turned to face her lover, and kissed her deeply. She pulled away, Sophie trying to continue their kiss. “We need to talk, Sophie. We can’t let this go,” said Paula. “I’m going to change, then we are going to make some decisions.”

Sophie downed her drink and waited for Paula to return. She sat on the edge of their bed, their bed, and smiled.

Paula came back into the room, drink in hand, stress written on her face.

Sophie stood up and took the drink from Paula’s hand and put it down. “I know what’s been running through your head, and I’m telling you right now, Paula Martin, you are not going to play the hero card and release me because you think somehow being with you will be cheating me out of something I deserve, like kids and a career.”

Paula started to open her mouth, to argue with Sophie, but all that came was tears. The thought of leaving Sophie was impossible for her to process.

Sophie cupped Paula’s face in her hands, “What I deserve, Paula, is you. You are my world, and without you, I have nothing. No number of children or letters behind my name could ever amount to what I feel for you,” she whispered as she placed her lips to her fiancé’s. Sophie wrapped her arms around Paula’s waist and pulled her to her, deepening the kiss.

Paula’s head was swimming with desire, but she would not allow her emotions to run away with her. She’d always been pragmatic, and they needed to talk everything through. She pushed Sophie back and pulled out of her arms. “Sophie, stop. We need to discuss this properly and not try to cover it up with sex.”

“Alright, let’s talk. I love you and that’s all that matters.”

“Sophie, don’t be naïve. Life is complicated, and feelings change over time. I can’t have you giving up important aspects of your life for me. Look, you need to think about this, I mean really think about it. Giving up your dreams is not necessary. You can have it all, Sophie. You can be a mum and a doctor, if you want. It will just mean …”

“Yea, well, you can forget it! I am not giving you up. Paula, we have been through too much to be together, besides, I can’t live without you.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Sophie. You will be just fine. You should be with someone your own age.”

“What do you mean, will be? So, now you’ve decided to cut me loose? For what, to absolve you of some kind of fabricated guilt you’ve conjured up in your head? Well, I’ve got news for ya, I am going nowhere! We are meant to be together, Paula, you and me, forever. And all the other stuff will work itself out. When God brought you back to me, I knew it was my responsibility to honor Him –“

“Is that why you proposed to me? Because you felt like you owed it to God?” asked an upset Paula.

“No, that’s not wha –“

“Well, why did you do it then?”

“Are you kidding me?” Sophie shouted. “I asked you to marry me because I love you and I lived for five flaming horrible days thinking I would never hear your voice again. It nearly destroyed me, Paula. My love for you is that deep, and I will NEVER apologize for that. And if you can stand there
and tell me that I will be just fine without you, then you don’t know me at all!”

“Sophie, I –“

“Just stop being so fucking noble, Paula! I don’t want to be left to the life you think I somehow need, because the truth is I need YOU! I won’t survive if you leave me, Paula. I just won’t. And if you walk away from me, you will be the one taking everything from me.” Sophie was crying heavily now, anger evident on her face. “Why did you give me this ring, eh? Because, the last time I checked, you loved me as much as I love you. So, are you telling me that if we split up, you would be just fine?”

“Well, no, I wouldn’t, but –“

“But, nothing, you pain in my ass. You promised me you would never leave me, and I am going to hold you that promise. Just last night you were showing me that I come first in your life, that I am the most important thing to you. Well, now it’s my turn. You are not allowed to walk away because you think it might be in my best interest, because it’s not. YOU are what’s in my best interest. You and the life we are going to build together. And if that has kids in it, great! And if I become a doctor, great. But, even if neither of those things comes true, then it’s all still good, because we will be together, and that, Paula Martin, is what’s important, nothing else. Do I make myself clear?!?”

Paula was stunned at the force with which Sophie delivered her thoughts on their conundrum. All she could do was nod her head and take Sophie at her word. “I’m sorry, Sophie. I only want to make sure that you are considering all your options.”

“Babe, I have one option for happiness, and that’s you. Got it?”

“Yes, dear,” said Paula, smiling through her tears.

“Good! Glad we got that all figured out. Now, come here and kiss me, because someone who puts a ring like this on my hand is certainly going to get laid!”

“Well, I guess we’ve established who wears the pants in this relationship!”

“Oh, I think it’s more like who strips the pants off her fiancé,” uttered Sophie in her lover’s ear. “I love you, Paula Martin, soon to be Mrs. Paula Webster-Martin, and don’t you ever forget it,” said Sophie, fixing her lips to Paula’s firmly.

“Sophie, are you sure you don’t want to think about this some more?” asked the solicitor as lips roamed over her neck.

“I don’t need to think about anything, except when we are getting married. We do need to set a date, but that can wait for later. Right now, I want to remove every last stitch of clothing on you and …” Sophie covered her mouth with hers again, moving her tongue deep into Paula’s mouth while she walked them both over to their bed. She unfastened Paula’s bra, flung her own shirt to the floor, then laid her lover back onto the mattress and removed Paula’s panties.

“You shaved your legs, didn’t you?” asked Sophie as she felt her lover up and down.

Paula smiled, “mmm hmmm.”

“Oh, I am going to enjoy every inch of you this evening, so hold tight, babe. It's going to be a bumpy ride.”
Paula faces a few unexpected obstacles and a crisis looms.

Paula and Isla came bursting into the flat, laughing uncontrollably, inciting an eyeful from Sophie, who was sitting on the sofa doing some research on her laptop. She was determined to figure out her conundrum of how to get through med school and have a family as well.

“What’s so funny, you two?” asked Sophie as the pair bounded into the living room.

“Oh, well, let’s just say Isla has now been introduced to the Johnson’s,” said Paula, giving Sophie a look.

“Where? On the lift or in lobby?”

“In the lift,” confirmed Paula.

“Oh no. Closed quarters! I’m so sorry Isla,” said Sophie, laughing along with Paula. “Did you get the full spray?”

“They were in rare form today. Probably fully hydrated,” replied Paula, rolling her eyes.

Sophie turned her attention to her fiancé’s daughter, “We try to avoid them at all costs.”

“What are the odds that both husband and wife spit when they talk?” offered Isla. “Do you think they know and ignore it? Or are they just oblivious?”

“Like Sophie said, we do our best to avoid them. I can’t count the number of times I’ve ‘forgotten’ something in the flat when the lift doors open to their faces. They must think I am an idiot, but I’d rather than get a spit bath on the way out,” said Paula, leaning over to give Sophie a kiss. “Hey, love. How’s your morning so far?”

“Yea, good. Did you have a nice breakfast?” Sophie asked, having opted out of breakfast so mother and daughter could spend some time together.

“Yea, it was nice. It’s great to see this one back on her feet,” said Isla, nodding her head over toward her mother.

Sophie smiled and nodded at Isla, “Yea, she’s doing great, int she? I’m glad you two got out this
morning.” The young brunette looked questioningly at her lover, needing to know if she’d told Isla about the engagement. As nothing had been said, she assumed Paula had not broken the news to her. She got up and headed toward the kitchen, “Can I get anyone anything? I’m making another coffee for myself.”

“No, thanks. I had three cups at breakfast,” said Isla as she turned toward the toilet, “speaking of, I need the loo.”

Paula followed Sophie into the kitchen and wrapped her arms around her lover, planting a very sensual kiss on her lips. “I missed you,” said Paula, not releasing Sophie from her grasp.

“So, I take it you’ve not told her?” asked Sophie, splaying her hands through Paula’s hair as she kissed her neck.

Paula stopped, and pulled back to look at Sophie. “Well, I decided it would be better if we told her together.”

“You mean, you’re a chicken –“

“Told her what?” said Isla as she entered the kitchen, looking at the pair with suspicion.

They both turned, startled. Paula let Sophie go and looked at her fiancé, then at her daughter. “Well, we do have some news to share,” said the solicitor to her daughter. Paula didn’t know why she suddenly felt nervous.

Isla stood and stared, her brow shooting onto her forehead as in question.

Sophie took Paula’s hand, “Well, Isla, your mum and I, uhm, well, we,” stuttered Sophie.

“We’re engaged!” said Paula. “We’re getting married!”

Sophie took in a deep breath, wondering how Isla was going to take the news. It was one thing, the pair of them being together, and quite another making their bond legal.

“Wow! Congratulations. I assumed this would be the next step, I just didn’t think it would be so soon,” said Isla, moving to give her mum a half-hearted hug, then Sophie. “So, have you set a date?”

“No yet,” offered Paula. “I need to get back to work and get things there figured out before I can plan out the timing of a wedding and a honeymoon. Plus, Sophie is looking into going back to school, so …”

“Oh, really? Sophie, that’s great! What are wanting to do?” asked her future step-daughter.

“Well, I’m just doing research at the moment. I haven’t completely made up my mind at this point. There are a lot of things to think about, one being this one here,” she said, putting her arm around Paula’s waist. Sophie wanted to leave it vague for the time being.

“So, there must be rings. Let me see!” said Isla.

“Hold on. I’ll get them,” said Sophie, heading toward their bedroom.

As soon as she left, Isla looked at Paula, “Are you sure this is what you want? You’re not doing this out of guilt, right?”

Paula scrunched up her face, “What do you mean, guilt? Why on earth would I feel guilty?” asked the solicitor.
Sophie came back wearing her ring, and placed Paula’s on her finger for her, smiling as she did.

“Wow, well, uhm, those are both really … wow!” offered Isla.

Paula was still thinking about what her daughter said before. She needed to talk to her and get to the bottom of her question. She didn’t like that her daughter thought she had gotten engaged for the wrong reasons. She needed to get her on her own, because the last thing she needed was Sophie overhearing them talking about something like that.

“I love mine,” said Sophie. “It’s almost as perfect for me as she is,” offered the young brunette, talking about Paula. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy before,” said Sophie. “Well, maybe when you woke up from your coma,” remembered Sophie, squeezing her lover to her. “God, it seems like so long ago now.”

“It’s all worked out the way it is supposed to,” said Paula, kissing Sophie gently. She looked at her daughter for some sign of emotion and got nothing. Something was up. “So, darling, what are you up to the rest of the day? I think I need a rest. I’m feeling a bit tired, and if we are all going to dinner later, I need a nap. Where is Rosie, anyway?”

“Where do you think?” said Sophie. “She’s at the shops as usual. Shopping somehow charges her batteries, whereas, me, ugh, it makes me so flaming tired,” laughed Sophie. “I do need to run to the grocery. Why don’t I do that while you have nap, yea?”

“Sounds good, love, thanks,” said Paula.

“No, you want to come with me?” asked Sophie.

“No, I think I will hang out here, maybe watch some telly,” said Isla.

“Right, then. I’m off,” she said, giving Paula a wet kiss. “Back soon. Text if you want something specific.” Sophie grabbed her keys and headed out the door, leaving mother and daughter to their respective activities.

Waiting for Sophie to vacate the flat, Paula motioned her daughter into the living room, “Come sit with me and tell me what the hell you’re on about!” spat Paula. “Honestly, Isla, I cannot believe you asked me if I am marrying Sophie out of guilt!”

“Who asked the question?” asked Isla, looking at her mum square in the eye.

“What do you mean?”

“Who asked who to marry who?!”

Paula knew where this was going. “Sophie. She asked me, but that changes nothing –“

“Really? Were you planning to ask her, then?”

“Well, no, I hadn’t–“

“Exactly! How could you say no to a woman who had sat vigil at your bedside, playing the loyal, caring, martyr of a girlfriend?”

“Now she’s a martyr? Where is this coming from? I did NOT say yes out of guilt, Isla. I love her!”

“Mum, she’s 27 years younger than you! I know you love her, but do you really think you have a long-term future with her? Are you planning a family with her?” asked Isla, her voice breaking
slightly. A light went on for Paula.

“Isla, look at me,” instructed Paula. “Are you jealous? Is that what this is about?”

“I am simply looking out for you, and Sophie, mind you!”

“We are grown adults, love. We can look out for ourselves. Don’t need anyone telling us how far apart our birth years are or that there are obvious obstacles that will need to be overcome. What I asked you is, are you jealous? Because, that’s what I am picking up on. You’re either jealous that I am in love and you want to be, or you’re somehow afraid my affection for Sophie will affect my love for you. Now, which is it?”

Isla looked at her mother with contempt. She hated that she could be read so easily. “Is she going to sign a prenup?” said Isla with some force.

“So, you’re worried about your inheritance, is that it?”

“Can you blame me? Someone has to look out for Theo and I-“

“Yes, she is going to sign a prenup.”

Both women turned to the sound of Sophie’s voice. They stared. “I forgot my wallet.”

“Sophie, I’m sorry, I-“

“Isa, don’t,” said Sophie. She walked over to Paula, intertwined their fingers. “I love your mum, Isla. I don’t want her money or your inheritance. I couldn’t care less about any of it. I just want her, and I would never do anything to come between you two. You’re her daughter, and she loves you as mum’s do. But, she also loves me, as lovers do, which is normal and healthy. There is no reason she can’t love us both, right?”

“I didn’t mean for it all to sound so harsh,” offered Isla. “I want you two to be happy, I do, I just –“

“I don’t have a problem signing whatever you want me to sign,” Sophie said to Paula. “I just want you, babe. That’s all,” she said as she kissed her again. “Now, I will leave you to talk about it, because we are out of wine, and frankly, that’s unacceptable in the Webster-Martin household …”

Isla sat down and put her head in her hands as the door closed. “I’m sorry, mum. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

Paula just shook her head at her daughter. “When did you become so insecure, Isla? I raised you better than this. I can’t believe you sat there with that girl, watching her worry herself nearly to skin and bones over me, and then come out with such bullshit!”

“Mum, I am only trying to look out –“

“For yourself! Never mind, me. Never mind, Sophie.”

“Sophie can look out for herself!” retorted the younger Martin.

“So, you think she’s had this planned all along? Woo me and my money into submission until the iron was hot so she could propose, knowing that I would be so guilt-filled that I would automatically commit the rest of my life to someone? What kind of fool do you take me for?”

“Mum, your judgement is clouded. You’re in love, so you’re not thinking straight! Listen, I like Sophie and I like you two together. I know she makes you happy, but why do you have to get
married?!”

“It’s what people who love one another do when they realize there is only one person they want to be with.”

“Yea, well, things change, don’t they? I mean, you were supposed to be with dad forever, and we all know how that turned out!” spat Isla, annoyed with her mum.

“So, you’re going to dredge all that up again? Are you still so wounded by my indiscretion that you refuse to let go of something that happened years ago?”

“Dad didn’t deserve –“

“NO, he didn’t, Isla, but you act like he was a saint! Our marriage had BIG problems, problems you knew nothing about, so don’t sit there –“

“What could be so bad that you decided cheating was the answer?”

“Maybe you should ask him that question,” growled Paula, her eyes cut at her daughter. Maybe it was fucking time she knew the whole truth.

“What does that mean?”

Paula closed her eyes. She swore to herself that she would never tell either of her children.

“Nothing,” offered the solicitor.

“No, mum! You said it, now explain yourself!”

Paula looked at her daughter. She didn’t want to cause her any pain. “Forget it, Isla. It’s not –“

“I am NOT a child! What did you mean?” she nearly screamed, her anger bubbling to the surface of her emotions.

Paula sighed, and she sat down on the couch, then began to speak. “When you were about 8 years old, your dad,” her voice broke and tears began to sting the back of her eyes, “had … an affair.”

“He WHAT? With who?”

“Do you remember the young woman who used to sit you and Theo, Jennifer? She lived down the street from us, with her parents.”

“Oh god,” said Isla.

“I started to get suspicious of some of his behavior, never being where he was supposed to be, making excuses to go for walks on his own in the evenings, leaving me to the dinner dishes, bath time and stories. Well, one night, when he went for one of his walks, I had Mrs. Bingham from next door watch you kids, and I followed him. He walked straight to Jennifer’s house, so I thought maybe he was arranging for her to sit one evening. I felt relieved. He went in and I snuck up closer to the house, so I could see through the bay window,” she closed her eyes, a tear falling at the memory. “When I looked in I could see them. His pants were down around his knees and he was … fucking her against the wall. I just ran. I ran home and crawled into bed with you and held you tight and cried. I felt so sick and so betrayed. I wanted to vomit, but I couldn’t move. I just held you to me and stroked your hair, trying to ground myself. When he came home, I acted like I was asleep, and he left me there with you.”
“Mum, I-“

“I couldn’t quite wrap my head around it all. She was 17, Isla. And your dad was 35.”

“What happened then?” asked Isla quietly.

“Well, about a week later I confronted him, after taking some time to center myself. He denied it at first, said I was imagining things. When I told him I saw them together, he knew he hadn’t a leg to stand on. He became remorseful, begged me to forgive him, said it was a mistake, that it only happened once – all the things men say when they get caught. We fought, and I told him I wanted a divorce. Then he tried to turn it all on me, blaming me for not being a proper wife, being too busy with my career and never having any time for him. He claimed he only went looking for comfort because we never had enough sex and he was starving for physical attention, that Jennifer was young and hot for him and gave him what he needed.”

“Oh, mum. I’m so sorry.”

Paula just shook her head.

“So, why did you not get divorced?”

“After his gaslighting, he became a model husband and father. He begged me to forgive him, over and over, said he was sorry he had been so weak, that it was all his fault. And I looked at you and Theo and you loved him so much. How could I break your hearts like that?”

“So, you did it for me and Theo?”

“Yes,” whispered Paula. “I was never the same after that. I didn’t trust him anymore. I didn’t trust anyone, really. Then 10 years later I found myself in his shoes, unhappy, unfulfilled in the marriage, needing someone to want me again, make me feel like a woman.”

“And you let dad rake you over the coals?”

Paula just nodded.

“Why on earth did you not at least tell me about his affair? You just let me scream at you, tell you I hated you, call you all sorts.”

“Because, Isla, what good would it have done? You would just know that both your parents were cheaters. I couldn’t do that to you. I knew I could take whatever you threw at me, that one day you would grow up and perhaps understand a bit more, and forgive me. And you did.”

“I wish you would have told me …”

“I’m glad I didn’t. No mother ever wants her child to hurt, Isla. I would do it all over again.”

“So, why tell me now?”

“Because, I need you to know that I have finally rediscovered that trust that your father broke in me. I love Sophie so completely, Isla. She is the most loving, loyal woman, and I know she would never do to me what he did. I haven’t felt this secure in a relationship since I married your dad. And I need that.”

“Are you sure she won’t stray, mum? Not even when you get older and she is still young?”

“Well, Isla, there are no guarantees in life, darling. I can only tell you what I feel now, and, no, I
don’t think she will go looking for anyone younger. I’m not as old as you seem to think. I can keep up with my young lover just fine, thank you.”

“Eeew, I don’t need to hear this. I trust you,” said Isla, holding up her hands. She looked at her mother with empathy, “Does Sophie know … about dad?”

“No. I’ve never told anyone before. Not even my mum.”

“Why the hell not?”

“You know Nana, she’d have killed him!”

“True! But, mum, you shouldn’t have carried that burden all on your own.”

“It just made me strong, love. Albeit, cynical, until Sophie.”

Isla cocked her head at her mother, “Ok, I give. I’ll be supportive from here forward. No more hassling you about the prenup or the wedding. I promise.”

“Please just trust me, Isla. I am no one’s fool, and I am telling you, the love Sophie and I have is real and true, and we are forever.”

Isla gave her mum a hug. “I love you, mum. Thank you for being so strong all those years ago. I can’t imagine how different my life would have been if you and dad had split up when I was so young.”

“It’s what mum’s do, love. You’ll find out someday and then you’ll understand. Speaking of … any dates lately?”

“Well, there was this one lass I met months ago, but seems she’s now taken and getting married to a wonderful woman.”

Paula smiled. “Yea, sorry. She’s taken, off the market, all mine and only mine. You’ll find someone, love, and probably when you least expect it.”

Paula hugged her daughter and breathed a sigh of relief that they worked through this particular issue. She would have to think about the prenup, to show her children she was looking out for their futures, though she hated the thought that Sophie might think she didn’t trust her. Just one of the many obstacles they still had to work through as a couple.

About an hour later, Sophie returned to the flat, not knowing what she was going to find. She’d thought a lot about Isla and how she must feel about her mum getting married again, and to someone so much younger. She felt for her and would never fight over Paula’s money.

Isla was sitting on the couch asleep, the telly on, but the volume low. Paula must be in the bedroom. Sophie put the few groceries away, wine in the fridge then walked into their bedroom to see her fiancé wrapped in a towel, hair wet, shoulders bare. She could see the marred, reddened skin where the bullet had pierced her, and she said a silent prayer of thanks to God for having spared her life.

“Hi, love!” said Paula, reaching out for Sophie. “I’m so sorry about earlier. Isla and I apparently had some unfinished emotional business to handle, but we’ve managed to clear things up.”

“Babe, I meant what I said. I will sign whatever papers you want,” said Sophie, wrapping her lover up in her arms. “I don’t want your money … mmmm, but I do want you,” said the young brunette, placing a wet kiss to Paula’s naked shoulder. “God, I flaming want you all the time! Why is that?”
“Maybe because I want you just as much,” whispered the solicitor, letting her towel fall to the floor. She placed her hand in Sophie’s hair and pulled her close to her, walking her towards their bed. Paula’s arousal climbed, and she began to strip Sophie down, first pulling off her shirt, then pushing her leggings and panties down off her hips. Paula absolutely loved that she wanted Sophie so much, all the time, in fact. Sometimes she could simply catch a slight glimpse of her doing something mundane, like hoovering or cooking, and it made Paula want to jump her. Like now. She used her hands to feel the young woman’s skin, her mouth to taste her. “I love you so much, Sophie,” said Paula just as she unclasped the young brunette’s bra. “Feel like playing a little?” asked the solicitor, one eyebrow cocked up.

“What did you have in mind?” asked Sophie, laying back on the bed, propped up on her elbows.

“We’ve not put that harness to use yet …”

“Oh. Well, I suppose we could –“

Paula reaching into the drawer and pulled out their newest toy, along with both dildos. She looked at Sophie. “You choose. How do you want to do it? You want to give or receive?” asked Paula.

“Let me wear it first, so I get an idea of how it all works, yea?”

“Works for me!” said Paula. “Here, slide down a bit and put your legs through the straps,” instructed Paula. She put Big Ben into place and tightened the harness around Sophie’s hips. And she smiled a great big lustful smile. “Oh, god, you look so hot in that,” said Paula.

“It feels weird,” said Sophie, looking at the thing sticking up. “I don’t know if I’m gonna like this or not.”

“Just try to go with it,” said Paula, laying down to Sophie’s side. She leaned over and began to kiss her lover gently, grabbing her breast, teasing the nipple. “You are so fucking sexy, baby. I want you.”

Sophie was a bit tentative at first, not knowing how to maneuver her body with the dildo protruding. She rolled onto her side and it wobbled on Paula’s outer leg and she laughed at its awkwardness. “This is so weird, babe.”

“Just relax. You’ll get comfortable with it.” Paula took Sophie’s nipple into her mouth and moved her hand down to feel the dildo, stroking it with her hand. “Mmmm, it’s going to feel so good when you fuck me,” she said against Sophie’s breast. She moved her mouth up to Sophie’s and kissed her deeply again. She grabbed Sophie’s hand and placed it to her center. “Feel how wet you make me?”

Sophie’s head was spinning, her arousal sky high. She felt Paula’s pussy with her hand and it made her almost cum she was so wet. She wasn’t at all sure what to do. She had the urge to thrust her hips, so she rolled Paula onto her back and placed her hips between Paula’s thighs. “Do you want me?” asked the brazen brunette, so turned on that she just let her mouth take over.

“Oh, god, yes!”

“Then you need to tell me,” she said, her teeth grazing at Paula’s neck, hot whispers in her ear.

“Sophie, I want you. I want you inside me so bad, please,” growled Paula, pulling at Sophie’s ass, her legs spread open awaiting her lover to enter her.

“Please, what?” commanded Sophie
“Fuck me … fuck me now!”

Sophie reached her hand down to Paula’s hot wet center and she rubbed at her clit, teasing her. “Does that feel good, babe?”

“Mmmmmnhh,” was all Paula could glean from her throat. Her hips were thrusting, and she kept trying to pull Sophie into her.

“Patience, babe,” cooed Sophie in her ear as she sucked on Paula’s earlobe, then moved to give her lover a very hot and sloppy kiss. “Are you ready?”

Paula’s eyes were squeezed tight and all she could do was nod quickly. Her body was on fire and she needed Sophie inside her. “Please,” she eeked out.

Sophie placed the head of Big Ben at Paula’s entrance and swirled it around, teasing her more, taking her lover to the edge of complete want. She owned her at this point in time, knowing Paula would do anything she asked. Paula’s hands were scraping at Sophie’s back, nails biting into the flesh of Sophie’s shoulders, her head arched back into the bed, her body aching for relief. Sophie couldn’t deny her any longer, so she pushed her hips forward, plunging into her lover.

“Ohhhh, gooooood, yeeeeees,” screamed Paula, her hands again on Sophie’s ass, pulling her in as deep as she could. Sophie began thrusting in and out of Paula’s pussy, working her lover into an insane frenzy of lust and pleasure, her knees gripping at the bed for leverage. Sophie found a rhythm, pulsating against Paula’s center, she herself finding an odd pleasure at the sensation. She continued fucking her lover, but her knees were slipping, and it became difficult to keep her pace.

Paula could feel Sophie struggling, so she rolled Sophie over onto her back so that she could straddle her. She continued undulating her hips against her, thrusting her hips up and down. She palmed one of Sophie’s breasts, pinching at the nipple, then laid her body down against her lover, all the while continuing to move her hips. She put her mouth to Sophie’s for a tense open-mouthed kiss. “I’m almost there, baby. Oh, god you are so good at fucking me, oh, yes, yes, yes, there it isssss, uuuuuuuuuughgghgughghh,” she screamed out as her orgasm exploded inside her. Her whole body tensed up, then she collapsed on top of Sophie, her breathing heavy.

After a few minutes, Paula rolled off and fell flat on her back next to Sophie. “That was so great! You can do that to me anytime, anywhere you like. Glorious!”

“I take it that was satisfying for you then?” asked a shy Sophie, not sure she liked that Paula liked the dildo so much.

Paula snuggled up to Sophie, nuzzling her face into Sophie’s neck. “You are an incredible lover.”

“You sure you shouldn’t be saying that to this?” said Sophie, pointing at the erect silicone.

“Are we back to this, again? Baby, it’s just a tool to bring pleasure. YOU used it to make me scream, it didn’t do that on its own.”

Sophie didn’t look convinced.

“Okay, just give me a minute to recover and I’ll show you what I mean,” said Paula, determined to prove to Sophie how incredible it could feel.

“Meh, you don’t have to,” said Sophie. “I think I’d prefer it if we just had regular sex.”

Paula just looked at her. She knew she wasn’t going to win the argument with words. She would
have to show her. “Okay, love. Whatever you’re most comfortable with,” Paula said. “Let’s get this off, yea,” she said as she unbuckled the straps, removing the leather from around Sophie. She slyly replaced Big Ben with Sophie’s smaller dildo, then set the apparatus to the side. Paula returned to lay next to her lover, kissing her sweetly on the side of her face and neck while running her fingertips slowly down her sternum, between her breasts and to her belly. “Mmmm, you are such a beautiful woman, you know that?”

Sophie giggled at Paula, “What are you on about?”

“You are! Just look at you. Perfect smooth skin, full luscious boobs, just the right curves here,” she said, running her fingers over Sophie’s hips, “and here,” scraping her nails up the side of her thigh. “Not to mention, perfect lips <kiss> beautiful shoulders <kiss> and your neck is, well, it’s delicious,” cooed Paula, running her tongue up Sophie’s neck slowly. “Just lay back and let me love you,” purred the solicitor into her lover’s ear.

Sophie relaxed into the bed, eyes closed, taking in the slow ministrations of her lover against her skin. Her arousal began to climb with every stroke of Paula’s tongue, every kiss from her mouth, every scrape from her nails. Sophie’s body was alight with sensation, her skin covered in goose bumps wherever Paula’s fingers traveled. She could feel warmth gathering at her center as her lover worked her into a frenzy of arousal.

Paula avoided extremely sensitive body parts, wanting to take her time working Sophie’s fire into a white-hot fever before she amped her up more. Paula used her mouth and her hands to caress every inch of Sophie’s skin, feeling her lover shiver under her fingertips as she traversed her body. “Do you feel good, baby?” cooed Paula.

“Mmmm hmmm,” responded Sophie, her head arched back into the bed. She began to move her hand down toward her own center, but Paula stopped her.

“Oh, uh, love. That’s my job,” said Paula, pulling two of Sophie’s fingers into her mouth, then sucking at them. Sophie felt a jolt of arousal to her pussy. Paula removed Sophie’s fingers from her mouth and placed her lips to her lover’s chest, moving closer to hard nipples. She licked and squeezed one breast, then the other, avoiding the tight nubs.

“Babe, please,” cried Sophie, pulling at her lover’s head, trying to get her lips to latch on. “I need more …”

“All in good time, hummed Paula against Sophie’s skin, driving the young woman beneath her wild. She continued to slowly work her lover into a new state of excitement, taking her time to ramp up Sophie’s need to be fucked. The young woman squirmed beneath her, her body begging for hard stimulation, hand pulling at Paula’s head.

Paula could see that Sophie was highly aroused. Her center was very wet, and her nipples were puckered and begging to be sucked. It was driving Paula wild to see her like this and not just plunge right in, but she needed Sophie ready and begging. She continued to nibble at her flesh, nudging her body closer to extreme need.

Sophie finally cried out, “Paula, my god, will you please put me out of my misery?”

“Can I do what I want?” came the seductive question, a whisper into Sophie’s ear.

“Yea, please, just hurry up …”

Paula quickly slipped on the harness, then finally, pulled a bursting nipple into her mouth, sucking at
it and biting it gently. Sophie’s satisfaction was evident as she arched her body up off the bed and into Paula’s hot mouth, all the while moaning with great pleasure.

“Oh, yea, that’s it, babe, please give me more,” panted Sophie, her legs spreading in anticipation.

Paula spent some more time working on Sophie’s nipples, giving them both a few more licks and bites before she moved her mouth down toward her center. Sophie was glistening, waiting for satisfaction and Paula smiled at how much she loved giving it to her fiancé. She hoped the thrill of making love to Sophie never went away. She breathed in deeply, cherishing the aroma of her lover, then she flicked Sophie’s clit with the tip of her tongue before circling it.

Sophie thought she was going to lose her mind at how on fire her body was, and Paula was pushing all the right buttons, pushing her closer to carnal bliss. Her lover was a master at giving her pleasure, placing just the right pressure in just the right places at exactly the right time. How she had found a lover that her body was so in tuned with was a stroke of dumb luck, but something for which she was eternally grateful.

Paula continued to tease at Sophie’s pussy with her tongue, never quite giving the hard stimulation the youngster’s body was begging for. Her plan was working perfectly. Sophie was bucking her hips against Paula’s mouth, again, hands pulling at Paula’s head, needing deliverance. Paula knew it was almost time to give her lover a new experience.

Paula moved her mouth up Sophie’s body, getting a moan of disapproval as she removed the oral stimulation from her center. Sophie inadvertently pushed Paula’s head back down, but the solicitor prevailed, placing her mouth next to Sophie’s ear. “Are you ready?”

Sophie opened her eyes and looked at Paula, her eyebrows knitting together.

“Trust me …”

Sophie nodded, understanding what her lover meant.

Paula slowly pushed her hips, entering Sophie gently, then stopped. “Is this alright?” asked Paula, needing to know she wasn’t hurting her.

“Yea, it feels good,” breathed Sophie.

Paula began a slow rhythm, in and out of her lover, who was so primed and wet her pleasure came easily. Hips were pushing and gyrating slowly, then Paula quickened the pace as she kissed Sophie’s mouth and bit at her neck while pushing her closer to the edge. Sophie moaned out her pleasure, encouraging Paula to continue and thrust harder, nails biting into her back as she pulsed against Sophie.

“Oh, babe … uhnnn … mmmm … mmmm … feels … so … good …”

Paula was in heaven, being able to make love to her girl in a new way, a way she was enjoying. She continued to kiss at her skin and squeeze at her breasts, pinching her nipples and running her tongue all over her. She knew Sophie must be getting close to climax as she began to grip haphazardly at her back, her moaning becoming labored.

“Oh, god, yes … so close … just … mmm … a little … faster,” breathed the young brunette.

Paula did as she was told and increased the thrusting until finally Sophie’s entire body tensed up and she let out a moan from deep within, clenching hard at Paula’s ass.
Triumph!

Paula stayed inside, letting Sophie ride out her orgasm, her walls needing the pressure inside to squeeze against. A minute later, she rolled off Sophie and out of her, continuing to kiss gently at her body as she came back down.

“Are you okay, love. Was that okay?” asked the solicitor, hoping Sophie had enjoyed it as much as it sounded like she did.

Sophie kept her eyes closed and rolled into Paula, wrapping herself up in her, completely spent. She couldn’t speak just yet.

Paula rubbed her back softly and hugged her to her. “Now do you get what I mean?”

Sophie finally spoke, “Uh huh, I get it now.” Sophie smiled, kissing her lover on the cheek, a bit pensive. “Babe, you do realize you’re the first one inside me like that? I’ve never … before …”

“I know,” said Paula softly. “I will cherish that forever. It makes me feel so close to you,” offered Paula, squeezing at Sophie gently. “No one will ever be closer to me.”

Sophie placed her lips to Paula’s and kissed her so softly and so deeply, Paula thought she might cry. This woman in her arms was so far beyond incredible and it made the solicitor so grateful to God, the universe, whatever entity it was that brought Sophie to her. She would never let her go. “I love you,” she whispered softly into her ear.

xxx

“Alright, do we have everything we need?” asked Paula.

“Uhm, yea, I think so, besides, aren’t we going to get all my stuff, not take more stuff there,” offered Sophie, zipping up their bag. “We’re only gonna be there a few days, babe, we don’t need too much for that.”

“And you’re sure your dad is okay with us staying?”

“What has got you so worked up? Of course, we can stay with my dad. It’s still my room over there, remember?”

“I guess I am just dreading telling your mum. She’s gonna kick off, and most likely at me, Sophie. It’s not something I am looking forward to is all.”

Sophie grinned and wrapped Paula in her arms. “Is my amazingly strong kick-ass lawyer afraid of her mother-in-law-to-be? Paula, you stared down a cold-blooded killer and Sally Metcalfe makes you shake? Hilarious!”

Paula sighed. “That’s different! Your mum can be quite scary,” she mumbled.

Sophie placed her lips to Paula’s. “You are so cute, you know that? If anything, she’ll be happy, babe. Her whole problem with us is that she kept saying you were gonna dump me eventually, but this is just the opposite, int it?”

“Yea, maybe so. She’s got to see that this means we are forever, right?”

“Everything is going to be fine, babe. You wait and see, only great things are ahead for us,” said
Sophie as she hugged Paula close to her. “Isla was happy for us, eventually. Rosie’s happy for us. They will be, too. Now, are you gonna go to your physio, or not? If you don’t leave now, you’ll be late, so off you go. I’ll pick you up there at 11 so we can get to Weatherfield by tea time. Mum is cooking.” She kissed Paula again and swatted her ass playfully.

“Oh! Didn’t you get enough of my bum last night?” teased Paula.

“Never, babe! I’ll never get enough of any part of you. See ya later,” winked Sophie, blowing Paula a kiss.

Xxx

Paula checked in at physio and waited to be called back. She would meet her new therapist today, which made her a little anxious. She had built a great rapport with Rebecca, trusted her with something that made Paula feel weak, so she was hoping her new therapist would be as effective as Rebecca.

“Paula, you want to come back please?” asked the receptionist.

Paula walked into the back, to her normal area, and waited.

“Hi, Paula. How you feeling?” asked Tom, one of the other therapists. “You meeting your new physio today?”

“Oh, I’m fine, Tom. Just waiting. What can you tell me about him?”

“It’s a her, actually. She’s great. I think you’ll get on well with her. She’s young and energetic. And smart. She should be here any minute … ah, here she is now!”

Paula turned to see an attractive blonde heading toward her, a broad smile on her face. “Hiya, you must be Paula! It’s so nice to meet you. I’m Sian and I will be working with you from here forward,” said the blonde.

The hair stood up on Paula’s neck. Paula smiled weakly at the woman, her gut clenching. “Hi, Sian, it’s nice to meet you.”

“So, I’ve gone over your notes, but I thought we could chat a bit before we start working. I like to get to know my patients, so they feel comfortable with me. Will that be okay?”

“Uh, yea, that’s fine.”

“Well, I am a Master’s certified physical therapist, been working for about a year here in London. I’ve worked with many types of injuries, including GSW’s, so I know what I’m doing, especially with your area of injury. Now, I see that you’ve been working for two weeks on that shoulder. And you’ve been doing your home exercises?”

“Yes, I’ve been quite diligent.”

“Great! Those are as important as the work we do here, so keep that up. I see what Rebecca has been doing, but I’d like to try something new to get you some better rotation, if you’re up for it?”

“Yea, okay.” Paula was distracted. She’d never seen a picture of Sophie’s Sian, but what were the
odds that this Sian was the Sian? She tried to relax.

“You okay, Paula? You seem troubled,” said a concerned Sian.

She needed to find out more information. “No, I’m fine. I am just heading to Manchester in a bit and I can’t remember if I’ve packed my phone charger.”

“Manchester?! What you heading there for?” asked Sian as she stretched Paula’s arm.

“My law firm is there, and I have some meetings. Do you know Manchester?” asked the solicitor.

“I’d say I do. That’s where I grew up. There and Southport, where my mum lives.”

“Really?” Paula tried to sound normal. “What part of the city are you from?”

“Uh, Weatherfield. Do you know it?”

“Mmm, I’ve had a client or two from that area.” It’s her. Oh, dear god, it’s her. What am I to do with this?

“What a small world, eh? So, do you live in London now?”

“I’m here on a specific case, but I will return once it’s finished,” Paula said absentmindedly.

“Ok, so now that you’re good and stretched, I want you to rotate that shoulder joint for me …”

Sian went on to give Paula instructions, but all she could think about was Sophie. How was she going to tell her? Should she tell her? She only had a few more weeks of therapy, then Sian would be out of her life. Her head was spinning. She was lost in fear. What if Sophie wasn’t really over her. Sian was her first lover after all. They almost got married for heaven’s sake! What if Sophie wanted her back?

“Paula, are you okay? You look awfully pale,” commented Sian.

“I forgot to eat breakfast,” she lied.

“Can’t have that, now can we?” smiled Sian. “We have some bananas in the break room. Let me go grab you one.” Sian took her leave.

Why does she have to be so beautiful? And kind? Oh, shit. Sophie is picking me up today. What am I going to do?

Sian returned with the fruit and handed it to Paula, along with a cup of ice water. “Here, eat that. It should help. Bananas are filling and full of potassium.”

Paula ate the banana, but the sick feeling in her gut wasn’t going to be assuaged by potassium. She decided she needed some more information. “So, Sian, what brings you to London all the way from Manchester?”

“Well, I went to Uni in Birmingham and worked there for a while, but then I split up with my partner and needed some space, so I moved to London about a year ago. I really like it here. Got a nice flat with some mates. Love my work, so yea, all good.”

“So, you’re not married?” Not very subtle, Paula!

“Uh, no. Not married. Single and free, me. What about you? That’s a nice ring you’re wearing,”
said Sian, a bit confused by her client’s curiosity.

“Engaged.”

“OH, how nice! When you getting married, then?”

“We’ve not set a date yet. Waiting for a few things to fall into place.”

“Well congratulations. He’s obviously a lucky guy,” bubbled Sian, smiling wide. “Is he a solicitor, too?”

Paula didn’t know if she should correct Sian or just leave it. She couldn’t think straight. Lying only ever complicated things, so she decided to stick as close to the truth as possible.

“She manages a restaurant,” smiled Paula, seeing Sophie’s face in her mind.

“OH! Well, then she’s a lucky gal. What’s her name?”

Paula froze. She just stared.

Sian furrowed her brow, looking for some kind of response.

Before entirely too much time went by, Paula answered, “Uh, Sophie, her name is Sophie.” She watched Sian’s face.

The name took Sian by surprise. Memories flashed in her eyes for a moment. “That’s a great name. I had a … friend … named Sophie a long time ago. Maybe I will get to meet her someday.” Sian became pensive for a moment, then got right back to business. “Okay, so, let’s get that rotation exercise going, then I am going to show you how to improve the angles.”

The rest of their session was spent with each of them doing the needed work, but equally distracted. Paula had to think things through and figure out what she was going to do. The thought of losing Sophie paralyzed her, but she knew she had to have more faith in her lover than that. But, the thought sat in her gut, the what if factor. Would Sophie want Sian again, if they reconnected? She was single, after all. Did the two of them make more sense that she and Paula? She had no answers, just an abundance of questions, and fear.

Paula eyed the clock. Sophie would be by to pick her up at 11am. She wasn’t ready for her know about Sian just yet, so Paula pushed herself to do her work quickly, so she could get out front to intercept her lover. Sian iced the shoulder down and put Paula back in her loose sling.

“Well, I’d say you did a great today, Paula. You’ll be a little sore for a couple of days, like usual, but keep it iced and take paracetamol if you need to. No point in suffering. And, I will see you next week, then. Have a good time in Manchester.”

“Thanks, Sian. See you next week,” said Paula, heading for reception, praying like mad that she could head Sophie off in time. Just as she opened the door to the outer office, her lovely fiancé appeared in the doorway.

“Hiya, babe! Was just coming back to get you,” chirped Sophie.

Paula nearly panicked. Her eyes widened, and she turned quickly back to see if Sian was still in the open area where she’d just been. Thank goodness, she wasn’t. Paula forced a smile, “Oh, just on my way out, love. C’mon, let’s go,” said the solicitor, nearly pushing Sophie out the door.
“I thought I might get to meet your new therapist,” said Sophie.

“Uh, no she’s really busy and we ran over a bit, so …”

“Well, do you like her? What’s her name?”

Paula froze. “Her name?”

“Yea, her name. What’s she called?” asked Sophie, a bit confused at Paula’s behavior.

Paula had to think fast. “Uh, oh, yea, it’s Sha … uh, Shannon. Come on, love, we need to get moving. Don’t want to miss our train,” pushed Paula.

“Alright, keep your wig on! We have plenty of time, babe. I have a cab waiting with all our bags downstairs,” said Sophie, wondering what had gotten into Paula. “Babe, you’re acting weird! Has something happened? Do you not like your new physio?”

“Everything is fine, Sophie. Let’s just get to the station, okay?”

“Okay,” said Sophie. She felt Paula grab her hand and pull it to her lips for a quick kiss. She smiled at her, and her heart melted like always. “Come on, you! Let’s go tell your old school friend that you’re going to marry her daughter and make an honest woman of her.”

Paula held tight to Sophie’s hand, trepidation filling her gut. She was going to have to tell her. She just didn’t know how. She knew it was going to blow her fiancé’s world open, and maybe blow Paula’s apart. Earlier, she had thought her biggest problem was telling Sally about the engagement. Now, that seemed to pale in comparison to what she now faced. She may have just discovered the one thing that could threaten her happiness and tear her dreams to shreds, and the truth was, she didn’t want to deal with that reality. She wanted it to go away.

Could she figure out a way to make it go away?
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The pair announce their news and Sally and Paula clear the air. Paula feels compelled to be honest with her fiancé, afraid of what it might mean for the couple's future.

The train ride to Manchester seemed long and arduous to Paula, perhaps because all she could think about was Sian and how her surprise arrival into Paula's life was already wreaking havoc. She looked at her fiancé, sitting next to her, holding her hand, oblivious to the turmoil swirling around in Paula’s chest. Oh, how she wished this cruel twist of fate had not reared its ugly head. But, the fact remained, it did, and Sian was a complication Paula had not counted on. It seemed that just when she and Sophie had managed one problem in their relationship, another would come along just as swiftly. They never seemed to be able to catch a break, but, despite it all, they had managed every obstacle thrown their way, including a bullet that almost claimed Paula’s life.

Was Sian just another test to their love for one another?

Her thoughts shifted to her therapist. Sian was quite beautiful, all-natural blonde hair, blue eyes and perfect smile. And young. Much younger than she was. More suitable for Sophie? With Sian, Sophie could become a doctor. And they were young enough to have children in a few years, even 10 years, after Sophie finished med school. The thought of Sophie happy with Sian tore at her heart and a tear trickled out of one eye and down the side of her face. She pawed it away quickly, before Sophie noticed.

Sophie brought Paula’s hand up to her lips and pressed the soft flesh against it, an act of love and contentment. Then Sophie smiled at her and bit her bottom lip as she scooted her mouth over to her fiancé’s ear, “You look good enough to eat,” breathed the young woman. It made Paula nearly burst out crying, but she held her composure. She wanted to grab Sophie and never let her go.

“Behave yourself!” was all she could muster. If she tried to say anything else, do anything else, she couldn’t be responsible for the tears that would certainly fall, nor would she be able to NOT explain why she was crying.

“Can I at least have one kiss?” asked Sophie, her voice low and sexy.

Paula dug deep for control of her emotions. She wasn’t ready to let Sophie in on her anxiety just yet, nor could she deny her lover this simple request. She closed her eyes and cupped Sophie’s face with her right hand, pulling her lips to her own, reveling in the softness. She lingered a few moments, then took things a bit further, tasting Sophie sensually, deeply. The pair got a bit lost in the feeling as their tongues caressed, sending shock waves through their bodies. Paula began to breath heavily, then she pulled back abruptly, her heart beating rapidly. “If you keep kissing me like that, I won’t be responsible for what I do next, and I’d prefer to not to get arrested for indecent exposure.”

“I thought you could talk your way out of anything?” smirked Sophie.

“There are just some things better left untested,” said Paula. “I need the toilet. And that’s not an invitation to follow me, either,” directed the solicitor. She made her way down the aisle to the loo, giving herself enough time to gather herself. She patted some cool water to her cheeks and looked at...
herself in the small mirror. *You look like shit, Paula. Get yourself together!* She took in her image, looking at the signs of age evident on her face, the crinkles around her eyes, the laugh lines around her mouth. She was still attractive, this she knew, but was it enough to keep someone half her age engaged for the long haul? Maybe Isla had been right. Maybe once Paula really began to show her age, Sophie would begin to look elsewhere. Were they being smart about getting married? Should they just continue being together, without the piece of paper, until one of them decided they needed out?

Paula sighed deeply. *Damn it.* Truth was she wanted to be married to Sophie, wanted her for the rest of her life. Why shouldn’t she have her? Why shouldn’t she be selfish and keep what was already hers, instead of always trying to do the right thing? How different might her life had been if she had divorced Tim when she caught him cheating? Had she, via her decision to stay with him, just cheated herself out of something that might have been wonderful? But, how could she second guess all that now that she had Sophie? She looked again at her reflection and decided that she was not going to make the same mistake twice. Sophie was hers, and she was going to fight to keep it that way. Sophie loved her, and they could get through an old lover returning, even if it was Sophie’s first love. Paula needed to have faith in Sophie and in her love for her.

The solicitor returned to her seat.

“Do you feel better, now?” asked Sophie, a tinge of lust still lacing her voice.

“Yes, you sex maniac! I’ve managed to calm my libido, but be warned young lady, when the threat of incarceration is removed from the situation, you are in big trouble!”

“Really? What kind of trouble?”

“The kind that will make you scream my name,” promised the solicitor.

“Well, thank god we are staying at my dad’s then. He sleeps like a zombie,” giggled the young brunette. She placed her head on Paula’s shoulder, “I will look forward to what you have planned for me later.” She held Paula’s hand and ran her thumb across her skin gently. “I’m very glad you’re getting use of your arm again. I like it when you scratch your nails down my back …”

Paula gave Sophie a warning look. “Talking about it doesn’t help, ya know? We still have over an hour on the train, then dinner and time with family before I get you alone, so, please, stop driving me mad when you know full well we can’t do anything about it!”

Sophie smirked. “Fair enough. I’ll try to behave,” said the younger woman, kissing Paula’s hand again, then relaxing back for a rest.

The rest of the trek was uneventful and mundane, lulling Paula into a state of semi-consciousness. She watched out the window as the countryside swished by and she tried to just enjoy being with Sophie at her side, still holding her hand.

Xxxx

“Mum, will you please stop making such a fuss! We are fine at my dad’s. Besides, we already put all our stuff over there,” argued Sophie, pulling a bottle of water out of the fridge.

“Well, Soph, I just think you and Paula might be more comfortable here. It has more room and I’m a
much better decorator than your dad,” pleaded Sally.

“We are only going to be here for a couple of days, so it really doesn’t matter. Plus, we will be over here all the time anyway, so I don’t know what you’re getting so worked up over.” Sophie knew full well that she wanted to stay at Kevin’s, so she and Paula could have sex without worrying about Sally hearing them or bursting in. She remembered very clearly Sally walking in on her and Sian having sex and the fallout from that. Granted, Sophie had only been 16 at the time, but the feeling was still there in her gut. And there was no way she was going three days without having sex with Paula!

“I just want you both to feel at home, love, that’s all.”

“We will be fine, mum. Don’t worry,” offered Sophie, looking over toward the front door. “I wonder what’s keeping Paula?”


“She should be here any minute,” offered Sophie, peering out the front window onto the street. “Mum, do you need a hand with dinner?”

“Why don’t you pour us all some wine? Everything will be ready in about five minutes,” said Sally, pulling the Shepherd’s Pie from the oven.

“Yea, okay,” said a distracted Sophie. She walked over and began to fill the glasses when she heard the door go. “Babe, is that you?” shouted Sophie.

Paula walked in and greeted Tim, then made her way to the kitchen and gave Sophie a smile and a quick kiss.

“Where have you been?” asked Sophie. “I was starting to worry!”

“Just nipped to the shop for these,” said Paula, pulling out two bottles of champagne.

“Champagne! Well, how nice,” said Sally. “Are we celebrating something?”

“I certainly hope so,” said Paula under her breath.

“Oh, we are just happy to see everyone that’s all,” inserted Sophie, giving Paula an eyebrow. She pulled her fiancé to the side, “What are you doing?!”

“We need to just go ahead and tell them, Sophie. I can’t spend time with your mum with this kind of secret. She’s like a bloodhound and will rumble us in five minutes! It’s better to rip the bandage off.”

“So, our engagement is like pain to you, is it?”

“That’s not what I meant, love, and you know it. There is no point in keeping it a secret, now is there?” said Paula, pulling Sophie close. She could feel Sally watching them. “Sal, can I help with anything?” asked the solicitor as she released her lover.

“Here, put the salad on the table, would you?” instructed Sally.

Paula did as asked, feeling the glare of her old school friend on her back. *This is going to be fun.*

“TIM!” yelled Sally, calling for her husband. “Time for tea!”
“Is Kevin not joining us?” asked Paula.

“Uh, I told him half 6, but he must be running late,” said Sally, looking at the clock. “He might be along in a bit.”

“Ooooh, that smells great!” said Tim, sitting at the table, palming his glass of wine.

The rest of them took their places and Sally put their plates down, serving up their food. Everyone tucked in to their dinner, and conversation flowed about Paula’s recovery, some vague details about the drug cartel, Rosie’s arrival, Paula’s return to work.

“So, you’re going in to your law firm tomorrow for a catch up then?” asked Sally.

“Yea, I have meetings with the partners and the staff. They want to see that I am still in one piece, I suppose,” laughed the solicitor.

“Well, we are all quite happy you’re recovering so well,” offered Sally. Changing the subject, “And, Soph, what are you planning to do in London once Paula returns to work?”

“It’s going to be a few more weeks until she’s back full-time, then I was actually considering going back to school.”

“Really?” asked a stunned Sally.

“Yea, really! I think it’s time I started working toward a career instead of wasting away waiting tables. Before you know it, I’ll be thirty with not much to show for it.”

“And what are you planning to work toward?”

Sophie looked at Paula and they exchanged a look. It didn’t go unnoticed by Sally.

“Well, I was thinking seriously about medical school.”

“Medical school? Well, that’s wonderful, love!” beamed Sally. “Isn’t that wonderful, Tim? And, you’ve checked into what you need to do for you A levels and Uni, then?”

“I’ve been doing some research and I think I have a plan. A lot will depend on how much longer Paula has at Cooper Securities, and she won’t really know that for a while yet, so I am likely going to take courses online that I can transfer when we move back here,” said Sophie.

“So, you are still planning to come home, then?”

Sophie looked at Paula and smiled. “Yea, that’s the plan,” said the young brunette. “Paula’s company is here, and London was always going to be temporary.”

“Well, I’m so proud of you Sophie. You always were the brains in the family, despite Rosie getting the better education. What a waste, there, eh? Remember when you got your GCSE scores?” asked Sally, a look of reverie playing on her face. “It seems like a lifetime ago. You had such promise, then everything went haywire.”

“Mum, let’s not dredge all that up now,” said Sophie. She’d told Paula some of it, but not in too much detail. She really didn’t want to talk about it anymore. It was a horrible time in her life. The only thing that was good at the time was Sian. She had been like an anchor for Sophie, until she messed things up and Sian left. Sophie sighed. Paula squeezed her hand.

“Actually, Sally, Sophie and I have some other news to share,” said Paula, looking at her fiancé for
the go ahead.

Sophie widened her eyes, then she looked at her mum.

“Oh? What news is that then?” asked Sally as she scooped food into her mouth.

“Well, we were hoping Kevin would be here, but as he’s delayed, we will tell him later,” offered Paula, taking in a deep breath. She pulled Sophie’s hand into hers, “Sophie and I are engaged!!”

Sally didn’t move. She stopped chewing and sat there. Tim’s eyes widened, then darted over to his wife’s face, then back to Paula and Sophie. “You’re getting married?” he asked.

“Well, yes, that’s generally what engaged means,” said Paula, trying to gauge Sally’s disposition.

Finally, Sally swallowed her food, letting the information settle in. She smiled. “So, Tim, seems we are going to have a lawyer and a doctor in the family!”

“So, you’re okay with all this?” asked Sophie.

“Oh, love, all I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy, and if you’re getting married it must mean you’re happy. When did you get engaged?” asked Sally.

“The night we got home from hospital,” said Sophie. “I couldn’t see wasting one more day not going after what I want, so I popped the question!”

“So, you proposed?” asked Sally.

“I certainly did,” smiled Sophie, squeezing Paula’s hand. “I’ve never wanted anything more, and you’re right, mum, I am happy. Happier that I’ve ever been. When she said yes, I thought I’d finally found my way home, where I’m supposed to be for the rest of my life.”

Sophie pulled her ring from her pocket and placed it on her finger, hoping this was the last time she’d have to take it off. Sally’s eyes widened as she pulled her daughter’s hand into her own to admire the ring.

“That is a beautiful ring, Sophie! But, I thought you proposed to Paula?” queried Sally, a bit confused.

“I thought it only fair we both had rings, Sal, so I enlisted Evelyn’s help to find that little gem,” said Paula. “My ring is in my jewelry case, so I’m afraid I can’t show you, but it’s spectacular, I assure you. Your daughter has very good taste.”

Sally nodded her head, a wisp of jealousy playing across her features, but only for a moment. “Well, we’re so pleased for you both, aren’t we Tim?”

“Yea, yea. It’s great news!” said Tim.

“Have you set a date for the wedding?” asked Sally.

“Not yet. Too many moving parts at the moment, but we will know more once I get back to work,” said Paula. “How about we pop open some of that bubbly then?”

“So, that’s why you brought the champagne?” said Sally. “Good thinking, Paula!” Sally grabbed the champagne flutes and the bubbly from the fridge

The solicitor noticed a considerable shift in Sally’s feelings toward her. Maybe Sophie was right
about Sally assuming Paula would dump her daughter eventually. Sally really had no clue how in love with Sophie she was, but it would become evident as the years passed. She had a hard time thinking of Sally as her mother-in-law, it was just a bit weird. They had been great friends as teenagers, and had once again become good friends due to the time spent together with the trial, so they would move forward, in Paula’s mind, as friends.

Tim popped the cork and poured the liquid into their glasses.

“Congratulations!” said Sally. The doorbell rang, and Tim went to answer it. Moments later Tim returned with Kevin.

“Sorry, I’m late. Got hung up with a customer at the garage. So, what’s all this, then?”

“Well, seems your daughter is getting married!” said Sally, a smile on her face.

“Really? You two?” said Kevin, his hand motioning between Sophie and Paula.

“No, dad. I’m gonna marry Bethany Platt! Of course, us two!” smiled Sophie, her arm wrapped around Paula’s waist. “Get him a glass, wouldja Tim?”

“Congratulations, Soph. You, too, Paula. I hope you’ll be very happy,” said Kevin.

They all spent some time toasting the engagement and cleaning up dinner dishes, then moving into the living room for more conversation. Kevin ribbed his daughter about this being her second engagement, to which Sophie nearly killed him with a look. He decided to shut his gob and leave it. He remembered how his mouth had brought Sophie’s entire life down into shambles when Sian left.

“Well, I’m heading over to the Rovers for a pint. Anyone want to join me? We can share all the good news with the neighbors,” said Kevin.

“I’ll have a pint with you,” offered Tim.

“No, dad, I think we will give it a miss this time. Maybe tomorrow. It’s been a long day for us, but thanks,” said Sophie, still miffed at his statement.

The men vacated, leaving the ladies to chat. Though Sally was smiling and seemingly supportive of the engagement, Paula was still getting a negative vibe from her old friend. She would have to have a chat with her, one on one, if she could get Sally on her own.

“Well, what’s Rosie been up to, Soph? I’ve not heard much out of her since her return,” Sally asked her daughter.

“She’s been shopping! And she’s been trying to find some modeling jobs, but I think her manager has black-balled her, so she’s struggling. Which is fine with me, because maybe she’ll give up and come home and get out of our hair,” muttered Sophie. “She’s cramping my style.”

Paula’s eyes widened, and she gave Sophie a look. She didn’t need Sally thinking about the two of them having sex. She changed the subject quickly. Earlier she had eyeballed a shelf full of photo albums, “Are those photo albums?” she asked. “Can I look at them? I’ve never seen any pictures of you when you were younger.”

“Oh god, do you really want to do that?” whined Sophie.

“Oh, come on! I’d love to see some.”
Sophie reluctantly grabbed a few of the photo books and handed them to Paula, then sat beside her for the onslaught of comments she knew were coming.

Paula flipped the first one open, perusing through shots of the Webster family, posed and candid, mostly when Sophie and Rosie were little girls. Paula thought Sophie was adorable, and it made her heart swell with every new picture she saw. Sally provided commentary about the details of when and where the pictures were taken – family holidays, weekend trips to nearby places, school plays and awards. They finished one, then moved on to the next and then the third, to when Sophie was a teenager.

Paula had used the photo albums as a distraction, and wasn’t at all prepared for the contents of this final book.

Sian.

Sophie wasn’t prepared for it either.

“Oh, look, Soph, this was your baptism,” said Sally. She commented to Paula, “She made us all get dressed up to witness her re-birth,” said Sally. “And they dunked her in that tank of water. And there’s Sian, wrapping you up and drying you off.”

Sophie shifted uncomfortably.

“Yea, I remember now. Ben was in the doghouse and Sian stepped in at the last minute. This was before you two were …” Sally caught herself, realizing it might make Sophie a bit uncomfortable.

Paula flipped the pages, seeing candid photos of Sophie with Sian, laughing and touching. It nearly broke her heart at how happy they looked. Sian was just breathtakingly attractive.

“Oh, this was your bloody 16th birthday party!” screeched Sally. “Everyone got drunk and tore up my front and back gardens, soiled my carpets, vomited in my bushes! I could have killed you, Sophie Webster!”

Needing to defend herself yet again, “Mum, you seem to always forget that all of it was Rosie’s doing! She’s the one who brought all the Vodka in and literally poured it down my throat!”

Paula was laughing, listening to the antics, then flipped the page and froze. There was a picture of Rosie and some awful drag-king, but in the background, she could see Sophie and Sian kissing, a moment captured in time. The pair were plastered together, fully embraced, lips completely attached. And right next to this photo was one of the pair of them, side by side, arms around waists, heads together, huge grins on their faces.

Paula couldn’t say anything. She just smiled weakly.

Sophie felt heat rise in her face. She could only imagine how she would feel if she saw a picture of Paula with Tim, all loved up and happy. It would rip her heart out. “Okay, enough memory lane,” she said, taking the album from Paula’s lap. “I’m knackered and would like to go to bed. You coming, babe?”

Paula sat there, stunned. She tried her best to pull herself back together. The photos of her and Sian made bile rise in her throat and she needed some time. “No, I’m going to stay and clear the air with your mum. There is something going on with her. I’ll be across in a bit, okay?” offered the solicitor.

“I didn’t notice anything strange about her. Are you sure you’re not being paranoid?” asked Sophie, frankly a bit relieved to put some space between herself and Paula for a few minutes as she grappled
with the memories of her and Sian.

“Trust me. Something is bugging her, and I need to talk to her. Don’t worry, sweetheart. Everything will be fine,” assured Paula. She kissed Sophie quickly as Sally returned to the living room, having gone to the kitchen for a refill on her wine.

“Night, mum. I’m heading over. I’ll see you tomorrow, yea?” said Sophie, closing the door behind her.

“Aren’t you going with her, Paula?” asked Sally.

“Uhm, no, I thought we could have a chat if you don’t mind,” said Paula, sitting back down, bracing herself for the conversation that was coming, while still trying to center herself over the pictures of the woman she loved kissing someone else.

“Oh, okay. This sounds a bit ominous,” said Sally, sitting in the soft chair so she could face Paula.

“It’s not ominous, Sal. But I know something is bothering you about the engagement and we need to talk it out. I can’t have it hanging over Sophie and I.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Come on, Sally. We’ve known each other a long time, and though Sophie is not picking up on it, I am. I know you’re not completely happy about our news. What’s wrong?”

Sally just looked blankly at her old friend, but didn’t say anything. She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know what you’re on about, Paula. If Sophie is happy, then I am happy.”

“That certainly was not your position a few weeks ago. Sophie called me in New York very upset, telling me you said I would dump her when I got tired of her, like I did before.”

Sally looked like a kid caught with her hand in the candy jar.

“You really didn’t think she’d tell me?” asked an incredulous Paula.

“Alright, fine! I’m not at all sure this is the right thing for my daughter. There, I said it,” blurted Sally.

“But, why? Sally, I’m in love with Sophie and we are good together. What’s giving you reservations? Do you really think I’m going to divorce her when she does something I don’t like?”

“It’s not that …”

“Well, what then??”

A forlorn look appeared on Sally’s face. “She’ll never have children,” said Sally, sadness evident in her tone.

And there it was. The problem that continued to arise. Paula’s Achilles heel. The insurmountable fact that the age difference would rob Sophie of many things in her life.

“Sally, I’ve told Sophie we will have children, if that’s what she wants. I will do it all again, for her. But she also wants a career. And you and I both know what goes into raising a child, and doing both, raising kids and having a career, especially one as demanding as becoming a doctor, will be extremely difficult. She and I have gone around and around about it, trying to figure out a solution,” said Paula, looking at Sally with torture in her eyes. “I don’t want to cheat her out of something
wonderful, Sally, but what we have between us is special and not something you find every day. I’ve thought about stepping away, giving her up, so she could have all those things, but then, she wouldn’t have me. And you will not find anyone more devoted to your daughter than I am. Sal, I will love her so fully and so deeply, until the day I die, that I can promise you. The solution is not for us to split up.”

“Well, why can’t she do both? You can afford to hire help raising any children you have, so I don’t see the problem!”

“Would you have wanted a nanny raising Sophie and Rosie, you not being around to shape them and be with them? Of course, I can afford financially to do that, but what would Sophie have to give up emotionally not being with them daily?”

“I see your point,” said Sally, wringing her hands together, her brow furrowed in thought. “There must be some way to make it work. Where did this whole becoming a doctor come from anyway? I’ve never once heard her talk about it.”

“She was so distraught when I was shot, Sal. And she watched the medical staff save me. She wants to be able to give that gift to someone else, pass along her gratitude for their abilities to other people. Personally, I think she’ll make a fantastic doctor. She’s smart and kind and caring …” Paula’s voice trailed off, thinking of Sian, again. Should she talk to Sally about the young blonde and how best to handle the situation?

“Well, I suppose you should just keep talking about it. You’ll figure it out, eventually.”

“Yea, I guess. So, are we okay, then?” asked Paula, looking at her friend.

Sally sighed. “I just want Sophie to be happy and loved, Paula. Please, don’t hurt her, again. When you split before, it brought her to her knees. She just feels things so deeply, that one. Our Rosie is another story, but not Soph. She’s sensitive. You can’t hurt her again, Paula.”

“I promise you, I won’t,” said Paula, thinking again about Sian. She needed to tell Sophie, not keep something this important from her. She got up off the sofa, “Well, I’m going head over. It’s been a really long day and I have meetings tomorrow.”

Paula hugged Sally quickly and made her way to number 13. Her stomach was flipping, nerves about Sian getting to her, but she had to be honest with Sophie. Truth is, she probably should have told her before now.

Paula climbed the stairs to Sophie’s old room to find the door open and Sophie sitting on the edge of the bed in her usual night clothes – loose t-shirt and panties. She looked up at the sound of Paula approaching and she smiled, “Hiya babe! Did you and mum work out your issue? Was there anything to work out?”

“It was the children thing,” said Paula, pulling her night clothes from their bag. “I knew something was bugging her. She’s sad about it, Sophie. She wants you to be able to have kids.”

“Well, we can, if we choose! Did you tell her that?”

“We both know it’s not quite that simple,” said Paula as she undressed. “Can you get the latch on my bra, love?”

Sophie stood and unhooked Paula’s bra, placing a kiss on her shoulder as she ran her hands around to Paula’s front and under the loose bra to cup her lover’s breasts. “You feel so good, babe,” whispered Sophie in her ear, forgetting all about her mum and kids. She wanted her lover.
Paula’s body responded to Sophie’s touch immediately, her nipples becoming erect. But, before she let her libido take over, Paula moved away from Sophie. “I need the toilet,” said Paula, padding her way to the bathroom, her pajamas in her hand. She closed the door and looked in the mirror. _You have to do it, Paula._ She wanted to go in and make love to Sophie, over and over, try to forget the problems that plagued them, but she knew it would only prolong the inevitable. She washed her face and changed her clothes, then went back to the room to face the music.

She opened the door to find Sophie had stripped down to nothing and was waiting for Paula on the bed, laying on her side, head propped up against her hand.

_Oh, holy shit!_

“Come here, babe. I’ve been horny all day and I want you,” commanded Sophie.

Paula sat on the edge of the bed and closed her eyes. She was struggling to keep her lust in check. “Sophie, there’s something we need to talk about,” said Paula, her voice shaky and uncertain. She couldn’t look at her lover or her resolve would crumble.

Sophie sat up and began to run her hands up Paula’s arms, kissing the back of her neck. “Can’t it wait? I really need to feel you, babe,” muttered the young brunette against Paula’s skin.

Paula swallowed heavily, her eyes closed and clouding over with desire. Her nipples were again at full attention and begging for Sophie’s touch. But, this was important. “Sophie, please. Stop. There’s something I have to tell you,” Paula’s voice was serious.

Sophie didn’t like the tone in Paula’s voice. What had her mum gone and done now? She stopped and grabbed her t-shirt, pulling it over her body. “Okay. So, what’s happened?” asked the brunette, disappointment evident in her mannerism.

Paula sighed. “I’m not sure where to start,” said Paula, turning to look at her lover.

The look on Paula’s face startled Sophie, “You’re scaring me, Paula. Please just tell me whatever it is.”

“It’s about … Sian.”

“I’m so sorry about those pictures, babe! I didn’t want you to see all that, but you insisted on the looking —“

“It’s not about the pictures, Sophie,” said the solicitor. She swallowed hard. “Well, not entirely.”

“Well, then what?”

“I don’t know how to …” Paula trailed off.

“Paula, what is going on? What does Sian have to do with anything?”

Paula looked Sophie in the eyes. “Sophie, Sian is … well, she …” _Oh, god, help me do this._

“Sian is what, Paula?” Sophie’s tone was panicked.

“She’s my new physical therapist.” Paula steadied herself.

“She WHAT?” Sophie nearly shouted, her eyes wide.

“I met her today, remember? I wasn’t completely sure it was her until I saw the photo of you together
a few minutes ago,” said Paula, a tear rolling from her eye. “I had a suspicion, as the physio told me her name and I dug a little because I was panicked, but I didn’t know for sure, until …”

“You said her name was Shannon!”

“I wasn’t ready to talk about it until I knew for sure it was the Sian, so I flubbed her name,” offered Paula.

Oh my god!” Sophie just sat, stunned at the news. “And you’re absolutely sure?”

“Yes, quite sure,” said Paula. “I thought about not telling you, not stirring up the past, but that wouldn’t be fair to you. I wasn’t comfortable lying to you.”

“Is that why you’ve been so distracted all day? Every time I looked at you, your mind was off somewhere, fretting.”

“Can you blame me?!” Paula said, an incredulous tone lacing her words. “I didn’t know what to do, Sophie! All I could think about was … well, was losing you, and I –”

“What do you mean, losing me?! How does Sian showing up mean you’re going to lose me?”

Paula just looked at her fiancé, tears welling in her eyes, pain and fear evident.

The look in Paula’s eyes broke Sophie’s heart. “Paula Martin, are you kidding me with this? Oh, my god, babe, I love YOU, not her. Why on earth … come here,” she said, pulling her lover to her. “You’re my life, Paula. And I am going nowhere, babe, except right here into your arms.”

“Sophie, she could give you things I can’t, don’t you see? You could put off having kids and go to med school –”

“I don’t want to hear any of this bullshit, Paula. I don’t care about Sian bloody Powers, not anymore. I don’t care how old she is or what you think she can offer me, because I’m telling you right now, I don’t want it, never will. I want you, only you, forever you. Do you hear me?” Sophie put her forehead to Paula’s.

Paula nodded and squeezed Sophie tight to her, letting out a rather large sigh. She knew this wasn’t over, not by a long shot, but it made her feel better to have everything out in the open. Sophie said she didn’t want Sian, not anymore, but she had yet to come face to face with her first love again. Paula knew that could certainly change the landscape, especially if Sian was interested. She would have to play this all out so as not to lose Sophie. She couldn’t hang on too tight, nor could she not worry about it at all – either would be a mistake.

“Let’s go to bed, yea?” asked Sophie.

“Okay, sounds good. It’s been quite a day,” offered Paula.

They pulled the covers back on the small bed, Sophie removing her shirt again. Paula smirked at this.

“What? You think anything has changed? I may be tired, but I’m still horny and I want to make love to you, babe. So, let’s get you out of these,” said Sophie, pulling at the pajamas covering her lover. She stripped Paula down slowly, kissing her and touching her as she laid her back on the bed. Sophie brushed the hair from Paula’s forehead and leaned to kiss her lover deeply. “Mmmm, I love the way you kiss me, babe,” said Sophie against Paula’s lips.

The pair enjoyed each other, making love until they both felt safe and sated. Paula drifted off to sleep.
quickly, feeling better for having told Sophie the truth. She loved this woman and would do what she needed to keep her.

Sophie couldn’t quite find slumber, Sian Powers playing on her mind. So, she’d become a physical therapist and was living in London. Sophie had literally zero contact with her ex for over eight years and knew very little about her life, other than the few bits of information she got from Ryan here and there. She knew, initially, that Sian had dated the girl she’d met on vacation with her mum, Chloe Hughes. She wondered how long that had lasted and if Sian ever got married. She couldn’t lie to herself and say she wasn’t at all interested in what Sian’s life had been like, because she would like to know. But, she also knew that the woman laying in her arms was everything to Sophie. She didn’t need anything more than her.

It took a while for Sophie to drift off, the image of white blonde hair and blue eyes teasing at her memory. She and Paula would discuss what to do with the information of Sian’s presence in their lives and how best to handle it, but for now, she was happy and content in the arms of her sexy cougar.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Sophie experiences sexual awakening, much to Paula's liking.

Chapter Notes

Explicit content.

Needed to show Sophie's growth and maturity in an area where she'd been insecure.

The visit to Manchester went pretty much to plan for Paula and Sophie. The couple announced their engagement, which spread around the street rather quickly and the pair got a few free drinks from the neighbors when they went out to the Rover’s on their last night. Paula had successful meetings with her colleagues at the firm, all of whom were thrilled to see she hadn’t changed at all and things were rolling along without a hitch. But, most importantly, Sophie had packed up the clothing and things she needed to officially move into the London flat. She brought a few extra bags back on the train with them, but most of it they shipped.

The couple had tabled the Sian discussion, waiting until they could talk about their next step without prying ears around. If Sally got wind of the news, she would surely stick her oar in and that’s the last thing they wanted. They had simply enjoyed being in Weatherfield, together, visiting with family and friends over the course of their stay.

Something about Paula being insecure about Sian had shifted something deep inside Sophie. She felt their relationship was on more even ground, with her not being the only one to get jealous over past lovers, or the only one afraid of losing something so precious. And with that new-found security came a flood of sexual freedom for Sophie. She found herself wanting Paula all the time. It was odd, but they were both rather carefree, giggling at each other’s bad jokes, flirting shamelessly with one another in public places, then barely making it in the door in the evening before the touching began. They made love as often as they had the chance, once just fucking with sheer abandon, not at all concerned with the noise they were making.

Paula noticed Sophie’s attitude toward their sexual escapades had changed significantly, barely able to keep her hands to herself, even in public. The young brunette, who was usually quite reserved with PDA, held Paula’s hand all the time, grabbed her thigh under the table, kissed her in front of everyone without hesitation, whispered very indecent things in her ears. It was like someone had flipped a sex switch on her lover, delivering a wonderful onslaught of sexual attention her way. Paula hoped it wouldn’t change once they returned to London.

The lovers rode the train toward London, contemplating what their immediate future would look like. Paula would return to work, albeit only part-time at first, and Sophie would begin her online classes. They also had a wedding to plan, Rosie to deal with, and, the inevitable issue of what to do about one Sian Powers. Paula was due in to see Sian in five days, so they would have to come up with something.
They returned to the flat, both a bit tired from their morning journey, but happy to be home. Phillip helped them bring their bags up and placed it all in the foyer for them to get at their leisure.

“Rosie?” shouted Sophie, not sure if her sister was home or not.

No answer.

“She must be out on the town,” said Sophie, shaking her head at her sister’s non-stop energy.

“What time is it, anyway?” asked Paula

“Uh, it’s 2:23. Time for a lie down, ya think?” said Sophie, her eyebrows shifting up and down, a sexy twinkle in her eye.

“You are insatiable, woman,” said Paula, walking over to her lover slowly, placing her arms around her waist. Just as she was about to put her lips to Sophie’s, the door opened and in walked a rather drunk Rosie. And she wasn’t alone.

Rosie stumbled into the flat, her companion groping at her bum, their lips attached. “Down the hall, last door,” mumbled Rosie, “come on!” The pair stumbled past Paula and Sophie, not even noticing they were standing there.

“ROSIE!” shouted Sophie, so angry she wanted to slap her sister.

A startled Rosie spun around. “OH, what are you two doing here?”

“Uh, we LIVE here! Question is, what the hell do you think you’re doing bringing some stray bloke back to OUR home, Rosie? If you want to pull, you need to do it in someone else’s flat!”

“Well, you weren’t here, were ya? I don’t know what the big deal is, Sophie. It’s not like this flat is a convent or anything. You and the cougar fuck like rabbits most days, so what’s wrong with me wanting to have some fun of my own?” asked an incredulous Rosie.

“Maybe it has to do with the fact that YOU don’t pay rent!”

“Well, neither do you, dear sister!”

Paula stepped in before this got physical. “Rosie, if you would like to have a guest over, you need to clear it with us first. This is not your flat to do with what you want. Please, I would like it if your friend would leave now.”

“Oh, whatever. You’re both such hypocrites. Come on, Andre! Let’s go,” huffed Rosie, turning on her six-inch heels and heading for the door. “Don’t wait up,” she spat at Sophie, then slammed the door.

Sophie just shook her head.

“Well, guess we have the flat to ourselves, then,” said Paula, pulling Sophie’s hand into hers, laying it gently onto her own breast.

“I’ve lost the mood, babe. Sorry. I’m just gonna grab some of my bags and get to unpacking,” griped Sophie, trudging into the bedroom, two bags in hand.

Paula sighed, hoping it truly was not the end of Sophie’s non-stop horniness, and went to the kitchen and got some water. It was too early to have a drink, so she made a snack of cheese, crackers and grapes, and moved into the living room. Her phone began to chime. She didn’t recognize the
number, so she let it go. She sat down and flipped on the telly, deciding to let Sophie calm down and
do what she needed to do to process her anger at her sister. Paula wasn’t bothered. Rosie did have
the right to a private life, and she was single and not hurting anyone, unless, of course, Andre was
married. Paula shook her head. Her phone chimed again. Message. She dialed in to retrieve and put
the phone up to her ear.

“Uh, hi, Paula, this is Sian Powers from PT Solutions. I was just calling because I have a conflict for
our appointment on Wednesday and I was wondering if you were available on Monday, 1:30? I
don’t usually reschedule appointments, so please accept my apology. I’ve had a family emergency
and I need to leave Tuesday early. Uhm, please just give a call back on this number and we can
work out a time if Monday is inconvenient. Thanks, Paula. Talk soon.”

*Great! Reality is setting in sooner that I wanted.*

Paula dialed Sian back, holding her breath for the blonde to pick up. Answer phone. *Thank god!*

“Sian, hi, this is Paula Martin. I got your message and Monday is fine. I will see you then. I hope
everything is okay with your family. Okay, bye.”

Paula walked into the bedroom, testing the waters for Sophie’s mood. “Love, you calmed down
some?”

Sophie just started ranting, “I can’t believe her! She’s such a slapper, always has been loose and easy
with the lads. Did I tell you about my boyfriend Ben, and how she basically tried to seduce him
when she knew I really liked him? She just has no shame, Paula, I’m telling you! And to bring some
strange man back here, who knows who he is or what he’s capable of. I think it’s time she leaves.
She’s driving me crazy, babe. I’ve had it up to here with her crap!”

Paula just listened as she sat on the bed, cracking a smile at her gorgeous fiancé, “You never told me
you had a boyfriend!”

That stopped Sophie right in her tracks. She whipped her head around to look at her lover, “What?”

“This boyfriend of yours, Ben. Tell me about him. I know you never, well, you know, with him, but
—”

“What are you on about, Paula. I was talking about Rosie and her —“

“I’d much rather hear about your foray into the hetero world,” laughed Paula, trying to lighten her
lover up a bit. “Was he cute?”

“Well, yea, he was well fit. Captain of the swim team, very polite. He actually introduced me to
Christianity for the most part. We used to go down to the youth center together.”

“The youth center? How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

Paula began to giggle.

“Hey, you asked! It was just before I realized I was really wanting to be around Sian all the time,
forget Saint Ben … that’s what Rosie called him,” said Sophie rolling her eyes. “That cow! How are
you so calm about her dragging some guy off the street in here?”

“Now, to be fair, we don’t know anything about Andre or who he is or how well she knows him.
She’s an adult, Sophie, and if she wants to have sex, she’s entitled. I do agree that she needs to clear
any guests with us first, but –“

“But, nothing! I don’t like it, Paula. She can be such a flaming slapper sometimes.”

“Oh, come here my little prude. Sit down and let me comfort you a bit,” said Paula, motioning Sophie to sit on the bed next to her.

“I am not a prude! I like sex as well as the next person, I just don’t like that she’s always pulling.”

“Isn’t this the first time since she’s been here?”

“We don’t know what she’s been up to since we’ve been gone! Oh, god! We need to change the sheets! Get up!”

Paula laughed heartily at her lover, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her down onto their bed. “I love you, Sophie Webster. Now shut up and give your old bird a kiss she’ll never forget.”

Paula moved her lips to Sophie’s, leaning over her, running her hand over her body. Just as they began to deepen the kiss, they heard a sound from their open doorway, “See, you’re just two flaming hypocrites! Thanks for ruining what could have been a very fun afternoon for me!” cried Rosie as she stomped down the hallway to her room, then slammed the door.

“Ooops,” said Paula, laughing again. “I forgot to close the door apparently.”

“I don’t bloody care. Get them lips down here and kiss me some more!” said Sophie, pulling Paula down to her.

“Your mood has certainly changed,” murmured Paula against Sophie’s lips. The solicitor slid her arm under Sophie’s shirt and bra, so she could fondle her breast, playing with the nipple.

“You have a way of making me horny,” breathed Sophie into Paula’s ear. “That feels so … good.”

Paula popped the clasp on Sophie’s bra, releasing her breasts, but before she buried herself in them, she got up and closed their door. “No need to rub it in her face,” said Paula, pulling off her shirt and bra as she walked back over to Sophie.

“Oh, that’s a gorgeous sight, I must say. Come here and let me feel your sexy body against mine.” Sophie pulled her shirt off, baring her torso as well. Paula laid back down and began to kiss Sophie again, deeply and sensually. She ran her hand into Sophie’s pants and could feel the heat coming from her crotch. Sophie grabbed Paula’s hand, pushing it harder into her, spreading her legs open for her. “Oooh, I like that a lot. Keep that up, yea?” said the young brunette, her hips beginning to rock into Paula’s hand.

Sophie’s openness caused Paula’s arousal to explode, and she nearly ripped Sophie’s pants off her, needing to inhale her scent and feel her slickness. She reattached her mouth to a nearly bursting nipple while she ran her fingers down into the wet folds of Sophie’s pussy. “You feel so good, so fucking wet. Oh, god, I want to fuck you,” purred Paula. “Can I get the harness out? Would you like that?”

“Oh yes, please, now … hurry …” Sophie was gagging for her lover.

Paula didn’t waste time pulling the toy out of their drawer. Sophie frantically helped Paula out of her remaining clothing, fastening the strap-on onto her lover, then she pulled Paula down onto her quickly, not able to get the dildo into her fast enough. Paula shoved it deep into her lover, eliciting a deep moan, fingernails digging into her back. “Oh, yes, that’s it! Push harder,” screamed Sophie.
Paula was doing her best to thrust into Sophie, to deliver an orgasm to her, but her shoulder was hurting, and she was having trouble keeping up the pace in the position she was in. She got an idea. She pulled out of Sophie, much to the young brunette’s dismay. “I need to move you, baby. Get on all fours.”

“What?!”

“My shoulder hurts and I’m not going to get you there in this position. Just trust me, baby, okay?” urged Paula, pulling at her. Sophie rolled onto her front, then got on her hands and knees, trusting Paula knew what she was doing. Paula was up on her knees, behind her lover, and she entered her again, slowly, holding to Sophie’s hips. Her lover gasped out a moan of approval at the new sensation. Paula began to thrust again, taking her lover gently. She leaned over Sophie, running her hands to her front and began to massage her breasts, pinching at the tightened nipples. Then she moved one hand down to manipulate Sophie’s clit with her fingers, still thrusting into her from behind.

Sophie’s body was on fire, her hips gyrating as Paula fucked her and squeezed at her clit. “Faster,” cried Sophie, needing friction, “I’m getting close, babe. Oh, my god … fuck … yes …”

Paula was about to cum herself at the sight of Sophie so uninhibited, her body writhing. She began to thrust into her faster, holding her body close, sweat covering them, both women moaning at the pleasure their bodies were feeling. Sophie’s body began to quake and shiver, her climax arriving in waves. She screamed out in ecstasy as she came hard with Paula inside her, her walls clenching tightly to the extension filling her.

Sophie collapsed onto her front, pulling Paula on top of her, the silicone still clenched inside her. Her breathing was heavy with pleasure, then she finally relaxed, allowing Paula to pull out of her.

“Oh, my, that was …” Sophie couldn’t even finish her sentence. “We’re gonna do that again, right?”

“Right now?” asked Paula, laughing at Sophie’s obvious pleasure.

Sophie opened her eyes and rolled onto her side, looking at her lover. “You know what I mean!”

“See, love, when you trust me, you get rewarded. We’ve been together long enough that it’s time we started trying new positions, exploring things that make us feel good. Once my shoulder is back into good working order, you’re going to fuck me just like that, yea? I love it, me.”

Sophie quirked her eyebrow up, “no more cocks, though, understand me?” Sophie hated that Paula had had penises shoved up her vagina.

“The only ‘cock’ I want inside me will be attached to you, love. No one will ever fuck me again, besides you. I promise,” said Paula, scooting closer for a kiss. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get fucked now, because you have made me so damn horny.” She began to un buckle the harness. Sophie sat up and reached for Big Ben, a lustful look on her face.

“My pleasure, babe … I’m beginning to really like this thing,” offered Sophie.

They secured the harness in place and Sophie pounced on her lover, assaulting her with her mouth, teasing her nipples with her fingers, circling her clit with her tongue, licking at her entrance until Paula was soaking wet and ready. Sophie pushed Paula onto her back, then spread her legs wide open with her knees. Paula was pawing at Big Ben, trying to position it into place while pulling at Sophie’s ass.

“Don’t tease me anymore, baby. I need you to fuck me, and fuck me hard, okay?” commanded
Paula, her pussy more than ready.

Sophie couldn’t deny her lover any longer. She plunged into Paula swiftly and began a hard, fast rhythm against her lover’s center. It didn’t take long before Paula was writhing uncontrollably beneath Sophie, her lips and mouth attached to Paula’s nipples. She sucked hard at them, biting down to increase Paula’s pleasure, until her body went rigid and began to shake. Sophie could tell she was coming, but she would not relent the assault on her lover’s body. She licked and kissed and sucked at skin all over her lover until she cried out.

Sophie let Paula ride out her orgasm, then rolled off her. “Oh my god, I love fucking you,” said Sophie emphatically. “I have never loved sex like I love it with you. Sometimes I feel like I just can’t get enough of you,” offered the young brunette as she kissed at Paula’s neck, tasting the salty sweat oozing from her pores.

“So, am I the best you’ve ever had?” asked a cheeky Paula, the memory of the picture of Sophie kissing Sian flashing across her mind, knowing their young bodies had pleasured one another.

“Do you even need to ask? You, my love, are the best lover ever. I don’t think you’ve ever not made me cum, and we’ve slept together a million times, so what does that tell you!??”

“It tells me that having sex with you is bloody fantastic, that’s what! I guess it’s a good thing I was brazenly confident all those months ago, and you were interested! I can’t imagine my life without you now.”

“Well, you won’t have to Mrs.,” said Sophie, smiling widely. “I can’t believe we’re getting married and you’re going to be my wife! It’s still hard to wrap my head around.”

“It’s pretty incredible when you think about it. If anyone had told me a year ago I would be engaged to someone half my age, I’d have laughed them out of the room. Especially someone as … well as gorgeous and sexy as you are,” said Paula, her hands roaming over Sophie’s body. “It feels like you were made for me. Does that make sense?”

“Uh huh, it does. I guess we were just meant to be, yea?” Sophie pushed the hair from Paula’s brow, leaning in to kiss her lover. “So, let’s try to stop finding reasons we shouldn’t be together, okay? No matter what’s happened, we always make our way back together, so it must be written in the stars. I love you, more than I ever even thought it was possible to love another person. You make me so happy, babe, and I never want be without you.”

“Good thing, because you’re stuck with me. I’m going nowhere, love. No matter what happens, you’re mine,” whispered the solicitor, kissing her lover again. *Sian Powers can kiss my ass!*

“I need some water, babe. You want anything? I’m going to the kitchen,” said Sophie as she put her dressing gown on and headed toward the door.

“Uhm, sweetheart, don’t you think maybe we should take the harness off you before you go wandering around the house?” asked Paula, giggling at the dildo peeking out from Sophie’s robe.

Sophie shrugged. “I suppose you have a point, no pun intended!”

Paula removed the harness for Sophie then slapped her ass as she turned for the door.

“Oh, you’ll pay for that when I get back. Did you want anything from the kitchen?”

“No, I’m good. I’m going to have a nice hot bath, though. Care to join me? There is something I need to talk to you about.”
‘Well, how can I turn down that offer? I’ll be back in a few. You start the water.’

Sophie padded into the kitchen, startled to find Rosie sitting at the island, eating something that looked like seaweed. ‘Hello, Rosie!’ chirped Sophie, pulling a glass from the cupboard.

‘Oh, shut it, Sophie! I can’t believe you! I finally pull the hottest bod in London, and you have to go ruin things for me. That should have been me screaming my lungs out, not you!’

‘Oh, you heard that, did ya?’ asked Sophie, only a little embarrassed. She was beginning to see that enjoying sex was a gift and nothing to be ashamed of, especially when she was shagging the most beautiful woman in the world.

‘I think the people on the floors above and below us heard you as well! My god, Sophie, what has the cougar done to my little sister? You used to be like, so, like, prudish, and now you’re fucking like a cheap slapper in Vegas! Paula must have stellar skills to get you worked up so often. I mean, really, Sophie, you two fuck more than two guys!’

‘Well, first off, it’s none of your business, Rosie! We are in our own home, so I don’t see what the problem is. And second, yes, Paula is quite skilled,’ said Sophie, smiling widely, biting her bottom lip. ‘What can I say, we enjoy one another, like really enjoy one another.’ Sophie thought about asking Rosie some questions about positions, but didn’t want to give her any fodder to use against her later. ‘Maybe you can get ‘hot bod’ back over here. Paula’s fine with you having someone over, but you need to give us some notice, okay?’ offered Sophie to her sister.

‘You really mean that?’ asked the blonde.

‘Yes, it’s fine, Rosie. But, don’t make it a habit, okay? Once in a while is fine, but not every night, and try to limit the number of different blokes you’re shagging, yea? I don’t want to have to lie to mum about what you’re up to.’

‘Oh, like you talked to mum about your sexual escapades when you were home, did you? She shouldn’t be asking you questions about me anyway. If she wants to know something, she should ring me.’

‘When are you planning to go home, Rosie? Mum and dad miss you. They’d like to see that you’re okay for themselves.’

‘Okay, okay, already! I’ll go home soon. I promise!’ said Rosie, holding up her hands. ‘But, right now I have a call to make. See if Andre can come round later. Please tell me you and the cougar are going out tonight!’

‘Hadn’t planned on it. We’ve been traveling all day, and we’re tired.’ said Sophie.

Rosie guffawed loudly, ‘Oh, please! You’re not tired from traveling. You’re tired from fucking. At least be honest about it.’

Sophie just gave her sister a snide look, ‘We’ll just be watching telly, Rosie. You do have a room to yourself, remember. Just try to keep it down.’

‘That’s rich coming from you, ya screamer.’

‘Well, what can I say, Paula knows just where to put her-‘

‘I DON’T need the details,’ shouted Rosie.
Sophie laughed as she headed for her bath with her fiancé, feeling like she’d finally gotten past letting Rosie get one over on her.

Paula was buried deep in a sea of bubbles when Sophie came into the bathroom. “Well, I see you had no trouble starting without me!”

“Oh, come on in, love, it’s glorious in here,” said Paula, only opening one eye.

Sophie dropped her robe and climbed into the pool of hot liquid, sinking down into the bubbles. “OH, god, that feels almost as good as sex,” moaned the young brunette.

“Well, if it ever starts to feel better than sex, you need to tell me, so I can step up my game.”

“You game is just fine where it is, babe. In fact, I was just telling Rosie what it is that you do to me that makes me scream so loud.”

“You what?”

“Mmmm hmmm, she was getting on my tits about us making noise, so I began to enlighten her about how skilled you are, but she stopped me. Didn’t want to know the details. See, she’s all talk, no substance.”

Paula was shaking her head and grinning at her lover’s awakening. “Sophie Webster, you are amazing, you know that? But, for future reference, if anyone is going to get on your tits, it’s going to be me!” said Paula, moving herself to Sophie’s side of the tub so she could run her hand over Sophie’s wet boobs.

“Ooooh, that’s nice,” purred Sophie, enjoying her lover’s hands on her. “I could use a little attention further down as well,” she said, laying her head back a bit.

Paula latched her lips to her lover’s neck as she ran her fingers down Sophie’s belly until she found her clit. She began to roll it gently between her thumb and forefinger. Sophie moaned at the feeling, grasping at Paula’s back with her nails, her hips bucking a bit. “Oh, fuck,” cried Sophie. Paula continued manipulating her clit, biting at the skin of her neck and chest until Sophie arched back when her orgasm struck, letting out an approving sound, her body pulsing with pleasure.

“Oh my god, Rosie’s right. You’ve turned me into a sex maniac!” muttered Sophie, barely able to speak. “I bloody want to fuck all the time! This is crazy, Paula. Look what you’ve reduced me to. I can’t even have a bath without wanting to have sex.”

“Baby, there is nothing wrong with enjoying your partner, as often as you like. Now that you’ve let go of your inhibitions, you’re exploring new territory. I’m just glad I’m the one you’re doing it with, because, believe me, I love having sex with you, and I will keep loving it until I can’t anymore.”

“It’s like something has broken free inside me. I want to try new things and new positions, but I don’t want you to think I’m weird.”

Paula just laughed. “Oh, this is fabulous. Listen, I will never think you’re weird for wanting to try new things in the bedroom. It’s fun and it feels good. Didn’t you enjoy me taking you from behind just a bit ago?”

“Oh, yea. I liked that, a LOT!”

“Some things you will like, some things you won’t, but you don’t know until you try! We can try anything you like, baby. I’m very open to new things – toys, positions, food, paint – you name it, as
long as it’s with you, I will try anything.”

“Have you always been this open sexually?”

“Mmmmm, not until I started having a lot of sex, probably around 22 or so. It’s different for everyone, love. I just really enjoy carnal pleasure, especially with you. I’ve never connected so completely with anyone else. Did you not explore with your other partners?”

Sophie was a bit embarrassed about her lack of sexual experience, so she blushed a little. “Well, not too much, really. I guess it’s because I was young. It was all so new with Sian, and Maddie was only 17, so neither of us knew anything. Jenna was older, but she wasn’t very comfortable with her sexuality, so she was kind of repressed.” Sophie was delighted she and Paula were talking so openly about things. It felt very freeing to be able to talk about her other lovers without feeling weird. “But, you’ve changed me, babe. You make me feel like sex is an exploration, not something to be ashamed of. You know, I used to be so self-conscious of my body, but you make me feel so loved and secure—“

“Are you kidding me? How can you not see how incredibly gorgeous your body is?” Paula was caressing Sophie’s curves gently, moving her hand all over her lover in praise. “You’re bloody perfect! And I love every inch of you. I love making love to you, and I love fucking you. Both are wonderful and exciting, and I am never not going to want my mouth and hands on anyone else.”

“I suppose that’s a good thing, because you’re flaming well stuck with me. The minute I put that ring on your finger, you were done for, Martin.”

“Oh, love, the truth is I was done for way before that ring slid onto my hand,” said Paula, pulling Sophie’s mouth to hers. “I’ve been yours for quite some time now,” she mumbled against soft, wet lips. Paula slid her tongue into Sophie’s mouth, the feel of her lover igniting her arousal again. Hands were roaming and feeling under the water, both women about to give in to their mutual need, when they heard Rosie’s voice.

“OMG! Can you two stop for like five minutes?”

Sophie and Paula were startled, both of them jerking up, water and bubbles sloshing all over the floor.

“ROSIE! What the hell do you think you’re doing? Get OUT!” yelled Sophie.

“Well, I knocked several times, but you wouldn’t answer.”

“MAYBE because we’re BUSY!!!” shouted the young woman, stepping out of the tub while she pulled a towel around herself. She pushed her sister into the bedroom, closing the bathroom door so Paula could cover up without an audience.

“Oh, like I’ve never seen a pair of boobs before! Please!”

“What do you want Rosie?”

“Well, I came to tell you that Andre and I are going for dinner and we will be coming back here later.”

“You interrupted us in the bath for THAT?”

“Well, you said you needed notice, so I’m only trying to do what you asked! Geez, Sophie.”
“I was in the middle of something important, Rosie –“

“You were about to have sex for the tenth time today, big deal!”

“Oh, you know, sometimes I want to give you a good slap! Please get out and leave us alone. If I want to have sex fifty times today I am going to, and it has nothing to do with you. I only hope Andre can make you cum like Paula does me!” she said as she shoved her sister out of the room and slammed the door.

Sophie walked back into the bathroom where Paula was dressed in pajamas and tidying up the soaking wet floor. “Ugh, I’m sorry about her, babe. Here, let me get the rest of that. You go rest up and I’ll be in in a minute.”

“No, let me do this. It’s good for my arm, see, wax on, wax off!” laughed the solicitor.

“Wax what?” asked Sophie, her eyebrows knitting together.

“Karate Kid … wax on, wax off … oh, never mind! You’re too young.”

Sophie just shrugged. “Are you sure that’s good for you to be doing?” asked Sophie watching Paula wince as she slowly ran her left hand in circular motions on the floor.

“Yes, Sian showed me …” then she stopped, momentarily forgetting that Sian used to be Sophie’s lover.

“Sian showed you what?” asked Sophie.

“How to strengthen these muscles with circular exercise,” said Paula softly. “Speaking of Sian … she rang earlier.” Paula watched Sophie for a reaction. She got very little.

“About what?”

“She rescheduled my Wednesday appointment to Monday. Said something about a family emergency,” replied Paula.

Sophie’s face was blank. She just shrugged, but she wondered what had happened. There was only Vinnie and Janet.

“Do you think I should tell Sian about you?” asked Paula. “Just come clean so it’s all out in the open?”

“I dunno. What do you think?”

“Honestly? Part of me just wants to give it a miss, finish with my therapy and be gone.”

“And the other part of you?”

“I think, the other part of me would always wonder if there was a part of you that regretted passing up the chance to see her again. Sophie, she once meant everything to you. Are you not the slightest bit curious about how she is?” asked the solicitor.

“Of course, I’m curious, Paula. I’m not made of stone. But, I don’t know if I want to open that particular can of worms. I don’t know how I’ll react at seeing her again, how I’ll feel about her.”

It made Paula jealous thinking that Sian could invoke feelings in Sophie, perhaps rekindling long lost romantic feelings. “Well, I think you should face it head on and deal with whatever comes.”
The couple had moved into the bedroom, both sat on the edge of the bed. Sophie caressed Paula’s hand. “Does it upset you to think about us together?” asked Sophie calmly.

Paula looked at her lover, a glint of sadness behind her eyes. “Yes, it does. I’m sorry it does, but the thought of anyone with you makes me a little crazy, I’m not going to lie.”

“Hmmm, that’s how I felt when Tim walked into the hospital. It made me sick to think of him ever having …” Sophie couldn’t finish the sentence. She just shook her head.

Paula nodded in understanding. “I guess we both have demons to deal with. I hope you know Tim means nothing to me anymore, not in that way. He’s Isla and Theo’s dad, and that’s it. I know I will always be tied to him, and you will have that to deal with that, and I’m sorry, baby, but you are what’s important to me now.” Paula kissed Sophie softly.

“And Sian is my past, babe,” said Sophie, looking at her lover. “I loved her once, I did, but not nearly as much or as deeply as I love you. Go ahead and tell her. Let’s face it and deal with it together.”

“I think I should wait until after she’s back from whatever her emergency is. Not fair to spring something like this on her when she’s got something major to deal with,” offered Paula.

“You’re amazing, you know that? And so incredibly sexy,” whispered an aroused Sophie.

Paula pulled Sophie into a full embrace with both her arms. “You do realize you’re only wearing a towel, right?” asked the solicitor as she slid her mouth to Sophie’s bare shoulder.

“Mmmm hmmm. What are you going to do about it?” flirted the nearly naked woman in Paula’s arms.

“Oh, you just wait and see …”

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