

# 6

**STILL**, flowers and an evening of girl movies smoothed out a lot of edges. At the end of the marathon, Phoebe carried her sleeping daughter to bed. Any-o'clock made it to just past midnight this time.

Twenty minutes later, Phoebe was as deeply asleep as her daughter.

The sound of the doorbell had her bolting straight up in bed. She rolled out, glancing at the bedside clock—three-fifteen—before snatching up her robe. She was already at the steps and starting down when Essie and Ava came out of their rooms.

“Was that the doorbell?” Essie clutched her robe closed at the neck, and her knuckles were white. “At this hour?”

“Probably just kids fooling around. You stay up here with Carly, okay? In case it woke her.”

“Don't open the door. Don't—”

“Don't worry, Mama.”

That twenty-year-old fear, Phoebe knew, was always waiting to push off from the bottom of the dark pool toward the surface.

"I'll go with you. Probably just a couple half-drunk teenagers playing pranks," Ava said before Phoebe could object.

No point in making it bigger than it was, Phoebe decided, and let Ava walk down with her. "She'll be upset the rest of the night," Phoebe murmured.

"I'll see she takes a sleeping pill if she needs it. Stupid kids."

Phoebe peered through the pattern of textured glass on the panel of the front door and saw nothing. They'd run off, she thought, likely laughing hysterically as kids would over waking up a household.

But when she rose to her toes to study the veranda more carefully, she saw it.

"Go on up, Ava, tell Mama it was nothing. Just kids being a nuisance."

"What is it?" Ava clutched at Phoebe's arm. "Is there something out there?"

"Go on up and tell Mama. I don't want her scared. Tell her I'm just getting a glass of water while I'm down here."

"What is it? I'll go up and get Steven's baseball bat. Don't you open that door until—"

"Ava, nobody's out there, but I need to open this door, and I can't until you go up and tell Mama everything's fine. She's working herself up into a state by now. You know she is."

"Damn it." Loyalty to Essie overrode the rest. "I'm coming right back."

Phoebe waited until Ava was up the stairs before she unlocked the door. She scanned the street—right, left, across—but her gut told her whoever had rung the bell was gone. She had only to crouch down to pick up what lay on the doorstep. Then she shut the door and relocked it before carrying it into the kitchen to set it on the table.

The doll had bright red hair. It had probably been long hair once but had been crudely hacked off. Whoever had done it had stripped it, bound its hands with clothesline, affixed a square of duct tape across its mouth. Red paint was splattered and smeared over the doll to simulate blood.

"Oh my God, Phoebe!"

Phoebe held up a hand, continued to study the doll. "Carly? Mama?"

"Carly slept through it. I told Essie it was nothing, and you were staying down just a little while in case those kids came back so you could give them a scare and a piece of your mind."

"Good."

"That horrible thing." Ava laid the ball bat she'd snatched out of her son's closet on the table beside it.

"Honey, why don't you get me the camera from the server drawer? I want to take some pictures for my files."

"But shouldn't you call the police?"

"Ava, you're always forgetting I *am* the police."

"But—"

"I'll be taking it in, but I want my own pictures. Don't worry, whoever did this isn't coming back tonight. He delivered the message. And don't tell Mama about this," Phoebe added as she went into the tool drawer for a measuring tape. "Not yet."

"Of course I won't tell her. Phoebe, I wish you'd call Dave. I wish you'd call Dave right now and tell him someone put this *thing* that's meant to be you right on the doorstep."

"I'm not going to wake Dave at this hour. There's nothing he can do." Phoebe rubbed a hand on Ava's arm as she walked back to the table. "But I'll talk to him about it, I promise. Get me that camera now, all right?"

She measured, took pictures, then double bagged the doll in plastic, tucked it into a shopping bag and stowed it in the foyer closet.

Essie called out softly as Phoebe passed her bedroom door. "Honey? Everything all right?"

"It's fine." Phoebe stopped in Essie's doorway. Her mother looked so young and vulnerable in the big old bed. "Excitement's over for the night. You going to be able to get back to sleep?"

"I think so. Kids pulling pranks. What are you going to do?"

"Don't let them know it bothered you. 'Night, Mama."

In her bedroom, Phoebe set the alarm for six. She'd take the doll into the precinct, file a report, be home again before anyone knew she'd gone out. She'd ask Sykes to look into it. He was solid and smart. If the doll could be traced, he'd trace it.

Nobody, nobody was going to upset her family.

As she lay sleepless in the dark, already knowing she wouldn't need the alarm, she wondered where Arnie Meeks had been at three-fifteen.

It had been enough to see the lights come on in her fancy house. Flash, flash, flash. Enough to see that before he'd bolted into the park, into the trees. Into the dark.

But it had been even better—a nice bonus—to see her open the door and pick up her little present. Worth the time, worth the trouble, yeah, to see her come out for his gift.

Just some foreplay, bitch, he thought as he drove home. Just a little tickle before the main event.

He wasn't nearly finished with Phoebe MacNamara.

She'd have canceled the date if it wouldn't have made the incident the night before too important. And if canceling wouldn't have meant answering a dozen questions from her mother, and even from Carly.

She'd already answered her share that morning as it had taken her longer than she'd hoped to deliver the evidence, make a report, get home again on the damn CAT. At least she'd had the foresight to wear sweats so she could use the excuse—simply lie, Phoebe admitted—and say she'd gone for an early run in the park.

Then, of course, Carly had walked her feet off during the afternoon. The battle of wills over the purchase of the "cutest" outfit had tried her patience so that she and her daughter were *not* on the best of terms when they'd returned home—Carly to sulk in her room and Phoebe to escape to the courtyard chaise with a broad-brimmed hat on her head.

Now she had to go out to dinner, she thought, as, after refusing all opinions, she pulled out her all-purpose black dress. If it was good enough for weddings, funerals and the occasional cocktail party, it was good enough for a dinner date.

The fashionista gene had skipped a generation, she decided with some irritation, along with the curls and dimples.

She started to put her hair up, but fiddling with it made her think of the rudely shorn hair on the doll. She left it down. And while she

knew her family would have preferred a little time to grill her date—and for Phoebe to make an entrance down the stairs—she made sure she was in the parlor well before seven.

And at the door first when the bell rang.

“Hello, Duncan.”

“First let me say: Wow. Then, hello, Phoebe.”

She stepped back, raised her eyebrows at the nosegay of pink rosebuds he carried. “You already sent me flowers, which are gorgeous, by the way.”

“Glad you liked them. This isn’t for you.” He glanced around the foyer. “I like your house.”

“We do, too.”

“Phoebe, aren’t you going to invite the man past the foyer, introduce him?” Essie stepped out of the parlor, aimed a smile at Duncan. “I’m Essie MacNamara, Phoebe’s mother.”

“Ma’am.” He took the hand she offered. “It sounds like a line, but has to be said anyway. I can see where Phoebe gets her impressive looks.”

“Thank you. I’m pleased it had to be said. Come on into the parlor. My son and his wife aren’t here, but I’ll introduce you to the rest of the family. Ava, this is Phoebe’s friend Duncan.”

“I’m so pleased to meet you.”

“Phoebe didn’t mention so many beauties in the family. She did mention you.” He smiled over at Carly. “I went for pink.” He held out the flowers.

“Isn’t that sweet!” Essie had already melted. “Carly, this is Mr. Swift. And I believe those are your first roses from a gentleman caller.”

The sulky child tumbled into a coy female. “They’re mine?”

“Unless you hate pink.”

“I like pink.” She flushed nearly the color of the buds she took from him. “Thank you. Gran, can I pick a vase for them myself? Can I?”

“Of course you can. Mr. Swift, can I offer you something to drink?”

“Duncan. I—”

“We should go,” Phoebe interrupted. “The dazzle in here’s getting blinding.” She picked up a jacket from the back of a chair. “I won’t be late.”

“Ouch,” Duncan said.

Ignoring him, Phoebe bent to kiss Carly's cheek. "Behave."

"You enjoy yourselves," Essie said. "And Duncan, you be sure to come back."

"Thanks. Next time I'll have to bring a meadow. Nice to meet you all."

Phoebe knew very well there were three faces plastered to the parlor window when Duncan opened the car door for her. She sent him a thoughtful look, then slipped inside.

She sent him the same look when he got behind the wheel. "Are you trying to clear the path by charming my daughter?"

"Absolutely. Now that I know about your mother and Ava, I'll work on them."

"Now I have to decide whether to appreciate your honesty or be insulted by it."

"Let me know when you make up your mind. Meanwhile, do you hate boats?"

"Why?"

"Because if you hate boats I need to make an adjustment. So, do you?"

"No, I don't hate boats."

"Good." He flipped out a cell phone, punched a number. "Duncan. We're on the way. Good. Great. Thanks." He clicked it closed. "Your daughter looks like your mother. The dimples missed you."

"To my great sadness."

"How's Ava related?"

"Not by blood, but she's still family."

He nodded in a way that told her he understood completely. "And you have an older brother."

"Younger. Carter's younger."

"Okay. Do he and his wife live in that great house with you, too?"

"No, they have their own place. What made you think to bring Carly roses?"

"Ah . . . Well, I don't know much about seven-year-old girls, and didn't know if this specific one went for dolls or footballs. There was also the possibility you're one of those sugar Nazis, so that eliminated

the candy route. Figured I sent you flowers, and she'd probably get a kick out of getting some, too. Is there a problem?"

"No. No. I'm complicating it, and it was a sweet gesture. She'll never forget it. A girl doesn't forget the first time a man gives her flowers."

"I don't have to marry her or anything, do I?"

"Not for another twenty years."

After he'd parked, Phoebe assumed they were going to one of the restaurants along River Street. Something with a view, she supposed, even alfresco dining, which made her glad for the jacket.

Instead he led her to the pier, past a few boats, and to a graceful, gleaming white sailboat. There was a table on deck under a white cloth. Tea lights under a little dome in the center.

"This would be yours."

"If you hated boats, we were going for pizza, and this relationship would probably have ended with the last pepperoni."

"Fortunately for me I like boats. I had pizza last night."

She let him help her on board, adjusted to the sway. As first dates went, though she supposed technically this was their second, it had a lot of potential.

"Do you do a lot of sailing?"

"I live over on Whitfield Island."

"Ah." That answered that. She walked to the rail, looked across the river. "Did you always live on Whitfield?"

"No. Didn't plan to." He took a bottle of champagne from the ice bucket, began to work out the cork. "It just sort of happened and I got to like it."

"Like winning the lottery."

"More or less."

She turned at the sound of the cork popping.

"So this part?" he began. "It's the showing-off part. The boat, champagne, fancy food—which is under the table in a warming bin. But it's also because I thought it would be nice to eat out on the water, just you and me."

"The showing-off part's a bull's-eye. The just-you-and-me part is problematic. Not for dinner, but as a concept."

He poured the wine. "Because?"

She leaned back against the rail, wallowing in the breeze and the sway. "I have layers of complications."

"Single parent, complex career."

"Yes." She took the wine. "And more."

"Such as?"

"Long stories."

"So you said before. I'm not in a hurry."

"All right, let's just start this way. I loved my ex-husband when I married him."

He leaned back with her. "Always a good plan."

"I thought so. I loved him very much, even though I knew, I understood going in, we weren't on equal terms."

"I don't get it."

"He didn't love me very much. He couldn't. He just isn't built for it."

"Sounds like excuses."

"No. No. Easier if they were. He was never abusive, never—to my knowledge—unfaithful. But he couldn't put his whole self into the marriage. I was sure I could fix that, I could work with that. Then I got pregnant. He wasn't upset or angry. After Carly was born . . . There was just nothing," she said after a moment. "No connection, no bond, no curiosity. He coasted, we coasted for nearly a year that way. Then he told me he wanted out. He was sorry, but it just wasn't what he was looking for. He decided he wanted to travel. Roy's like that. Impulsive. He married me on impulse, agreed to start a family on one. Neither really satisfied him, so, on to the next."

He tucked her hair behind her ear again, just that casual swirl of finger around the curve. "Does Carly ever see him?"

"No. Really no. And actually handles the situation better than I do. That's only one complication."

"Okay, give me another."

"My mother's agoraphobic. She hasn't been out of that house in ten years. She can't."

"She didn't seem—"

"Crazy?" Phoebe interrupted. "She's not."

"I wasn't going to say crazy, hair-trigger. I was going to say nervous around strangers. Such as me."

"It's not the same thing. In the house, she's fine. She understands and feels safe inside the house."

"It must be rough on her." He ran the back of his hand down Phoebe's arm. "And you."

"We deal with it. She fought it a long time, about as long as she hasn't been able to fight it. She fought it for me and my brother. So now Carter and I—and Ava and Carly—deal with it."

"You've got some rough stuff." He turned, shifted so he was facing her, so his free hand rested on the rail by her elbow.

So she could feel him, the pull of him as their eyes met and held. "But I don't understand what it has to do with you and me as a concept."

Right that minute, she was trying to understand it herself. "My family and my work take nearly all my time, all my energy."

"You may be laboring under the mistaken impression I'm high-maintenance." He took her glass, moved back to the bottle. He topped hers off, then his own. When he went back to her, he leaned in first, laid his lips on hers. "Got a zing going there."

Oh, God, yeah. "Zings are easy."

"Have to start somewhere. I like here. Sexy redhead, beautiful night, bubbles in the wine. Hungry?"

"More than I like."

He smiled. "Why don't you sit down? There's supposed to be some sort of cold lobster deal in the cold box inside. I'll go get it. You can tell me some more long stories while we eat."

She wasn't going to tell him anything else about her life, her family. Keep it light, she decided. All on the surface. But he had a way, and somehow between the lobster salad and the medallions of beef, she let him in.

"I wonder how a girl from Savannah aims for the FBI and trains to talk people off ledges, for instance, then circles back to the local police. Did you play cops with your Barbies?"

"I didn't much like Barbies, really. All that blond hair, those big breasts."

"Which is why I loved them." He laughed when she only blinked at him. "What? You figure Malibu Barbie isn't going to start a ten-year-old boy thinking?"

"I do now. Unfortunately."

"So if it wasn't Barbies, what started you on the road? G.I. Joe?"

"Joe's a soldier. It was Dave McVee."

"Dave McVee? I must've missed him during my action-figure stage."

"He's a person and, though he's a hero, has never been a toy—that I'm aware of."

"Ah." He refilled their glasses and enjoyed the way the lights played over that porcelain skin, those clever cat's eyes. "High-school crush? First love?"

"Neither. Hero, first and last. He saved us."

When she said nothing more, Duncan shook his head. "You know you can't leave it there."

"No, I suppose I can't. My father was killed when my mother was pregnant with Carter. My younger brother."

"That's rough." He laid his hand over hers. "Seriously rough. How old were you?"

"Four, nearly five. I remember him, a little. But I remember more it broke something in Mama that took a long time to heal, and it never healed all the way. I know now, being a trained observer who's educated in psychology, that his death likely laid the groundwork for her agoraphobia. She had to go out to work, had to haul us around. No choice at all. But for years she kept mostly to herself."

"She had a choice," Duncan disagreed. "She chose to do what needed to be done to take care of her family."

"Yes, you're right. And she did take care. Then she met this man. She met Reuben. He'd come by, fix things for her. Little household things. I could see, being a girl of almost twelve, the flirt was on between them. It was odd, but my father'd been gone a long time, and it was nice, too, to see her get all flushed and foolish."

"You wanted her to be happy."

"I did. He was nice to us, at first Reuben was awful nice to us. Playing catch with Carter out in the yard, bringing us candy, taking Mama out to the movies and such."

"But he didn't stay nice. I can hear it," Duncan said when she looked at him. "I can hear it in your voice."

"No, he didn't stay nice. They'd slept together. I'm not sure how I knew it, even then. But she opened herself up enough, after all those years, to be with him that way."

"And that's when it changed?"

"Yeah. He got possessive, proprietary, critical. He'd pick on us, all three of us really, but make it like a joke. Carter, especially Carter got the digs. Boy couldn't find his ass with both hands, ha ha ha. A man never grew balls reading books. And so on. He started coming over every night, expecting Mama to have dinner hot on the table, shoo us off so he could grope her. She wouldn't, and he'd get pissy. Started drinking a lot. I expect he always did, but he drank more at the house than he had at first.

"And this is terrible dinner conversation."

"I'd like to hear the rest. My father drank more than his share, so I know what it's like. Finish it off."

"All right. One day he came by when Mama was still at work. It was just Carter and me. He'd been drinking, and he popped open another beer, then a second one and pushed it at Carter. Told him it was time he learned to drink like a man. Carter didn't want it. God, he was only seven. Carter told him to go away, leave him alone, and Reuben smacked him, right in the face, for sass. Well, I sassed him then, you can believe it."

The old rage bubbled straight up. "I told him to get the hell out of our house, to keep his fat hands off my brother. Well, he smacked me, too. And that's when Mama came in. I'll tell you something, Duncan, up to that point I loved her. She worked so hard, she did her best. But I never thought she had any backbone. Not until she walked in and saw me and Carter on the floor and that son of a bitch standing over us taking off his belt."

She paused a moment, took a sip of wine. "He was going to use it on us, going to teach us a lesson. Mama lit into him like ball lightning. Of course, he was twice her size, and drunk, so he knocked her clear across the room. She was screaming at him to get out, to stay away from her babies, and I told Carter to run, to run to the neighbor's, call the police.

When I was sure he'd gotten far enough away, I started screaming, too, saying the police were coming. Reuben called me and Mama names I wasn't yet acquainted with, but he went."

"You kept your head." His hand gripped hers on the table now, a solid link. "You were smart."

"I was scared. I wanted the police because the police are supposed to help. They came, and they talked to my mother. I don't want to say they talked her out of filing charges, but they didn't encourage it. They took his name, said they'd go talk to him. They probably did. I don't know all that happened, just some. I know he went by her work, apologized to her. I know he came by the house with flowers, but she wouldn't let him in. I'd see him sitting outside in his car, just sitting there watching the house. And once, at least once that I saw, he grabbed her when she was outside, tried to pull her into his car. I called the police again then, and some of the neighbors came out, so he took off again. And Mama, she took out a restraining order. That's what they told her she should do."

"They didn't arrest him."

"I think they may have put him in holding for a few hours, and they gave him a stern talking-to. So a few nights later, he got liquored up, got his gun, and he broke into the house. He hit Mama so hard she still has a little scar here." Phoebe traced her fingers over her cheek. "He held the gun to her head, and he told me and Carter to go around, lock all the doors, the windows, close the curtains. We were all going to sit ourselves down, have a long talk."

"He kept us in there almost twelve hours. The police came, after a couple hours, I think. Reuben shot a few holes in the wall for sport, and the neighbors called the police. He yelled out he'd kill us all if they tried coming in. The brats first. Pretty soon, the police shut off the power. It was August, it was hot. Then Dave got him on the phone and kept him talking."

"He talked him into letting you go?"

"He kept him talking. That's the first rule. As long as Reuben was talking to Dave, he wasn't killing us. He would have; I could see it. Carter and me. Maybe not Mama because he'd gotten it into his head she belonged to him. But Dave got him talking about fishing. A long conversation about fishing, and kept us alive. But after a while, Reuben

got himself worked up again. He was going to hurt Carter, I could feel it. So I distracted him, the way Dave had with the fishing. Between one thing and another, I got into the bathroom, unlocked the window in there, and I told Carter—bullied Carter—into going in first chance, getting out that way.”

“You got your brother out,” Duncan murmured.

“Reuben had a serious hard-on for Carter. He was going to hurt him.”

She told him then about fixing the meal, the sleeping pills. And of sitting in the hospital while they stitched up her mother’s face, talking to Dave.

“He kept my family alive.”

“And you got them out. Twelve years old.”

“I wouldn’t have had a family to get out if it hadn’t been for Dave. We moved into Cousin Bess’s house after that, the house on Jones Street. Dave kept in touch. Lots of longer stories in all of that, but Dave talked to me about hostage and crisis negotiation. He thought I’d have a knack for it, and the perspective of what it’s like on the other side. I wanted to please him, and it sounded exciting. So I trained, and I found out he was right. I have a knack for it.”

She lifted her glass, half toast. “It’s no lottery ticket, but it put me where I am.”

“What happened to Reuben?”

“He died in prison. Pissed someone off enough for that someone to shove a shiv into him multiple times. As a moral woman, as an officer of the law, I’m obliged to deplore that sort of thing. I went out and bought a bottle of champagne, not quite up to these standards, but a very decent bottle. I enjoyed every drop of it.”

“Glad to hear it.” He gave her hand a quick squeeze. “You’ve had an interesting life, Phoebe.”

“Interesting?”

“Well, you can’t claim to have lived in the rut of routine.”

She laughed. “No, I don’t suppose I can.”

“I’ve got some insight now on why I saw that purpose in you when you walked into Suicide Joe’s apartment. And you have the sexiest green eyes.”

She watched him with them as she sipped her champagne. “If you

think because I've bared my soul, more or less, and have had several glasses of this lovely champagne, I'm going to slide down into the cabin and have wild sex with you, you're mistaken."

"Can we negotiate? Any other kind of sex a possibility?"

"I don't think so, but thanks all the same."

"How about a walk along the river where I can kiss you in the moonlight?"

"We can start with the walk."

He rose, took her hand. And as she came to her feet, he simply cupped the back of her neck to draw her mouth to his.

Warm lips and cool air, a hard body and a gentle touch. She gave in, gave up to the moment. Her fingers twined with his and curled tight as she leaned in for more.

He could feel the strength of her under the soft, soft skin. It was that, he knew, that had pulled at him from the first moment. Those contrasts, those complexities. There was nothing simple, nothing ordinary about her.

Yet he thought this could be simple—this one thing—this slowly building heat between them.

So the long, long kiss spun out, hinting of a spark that might flash at any moment, while the deck swayed gently under their feet, and the air blew soft over the water.

She brought her hand to his chest, kept it there a moment as his heart thumped beneath her palm. Then she used it to ease him back.

"Someone else has quite a knack," she commented.

"I've been practicing religiously since I was twelve." He brought the hand on his chest up, to rub his lips over the knuckles. "I've developed a few variations, if you'd like me to demonstrate."

"I think that was enough of a demonstration for right now. We discussed a walk."

"Probably best to save the variations. I'm not sure you're ready."

"Oh really? Don't think you can use that kind of maneuver on me. I'm a cop."

He stepped off, onto the pier, held out a hand for hers. "Variation Seven's been known to cause temporary unconsciousness."

“That’s a straight dare.” She stepped from boat to dock. “And I haven’t taken a dare since I was seven. We’re walking, Mr. Swift.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

As they walked, she angled her head to study his face. “Variation Seven?”

“I’m required by law to give the previous warning before use. Now that you’ve been warned, I’m in the clear.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Her laugh floated over the water. And her face, bright with it, filled the field glasses.

He dug into the takeout bag for his fries as he watched her, watched them. And he considered how quick and easy it would be if he had that face of hers in the crosshairs of a rifle scope.

Bang!

Too quick, too easy.

But before much longer, she wouldn’t be laughing.