

CHAPTER 1



CHARLIE

I'D ENTERED THE BREAKFAST DINER AND EXITED THROUGH THE BACK TO LOSE THE THIN man tailing me. It would have been exhilarating if there wasn't so much on the line.

After all the turns I'd taken, I didn't think I'd been followed. A casual look both ways yielded only, a lady and child, a teenage couple, and a woman with grocery bags.

I passed through the store's door and looked around.

The girl behind the counter glanced up. Her look said she didn't judge me to be from this part of town. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to purchase a mobile—sorry, a cell phone."

She pointed to my right and smiled. "Over here."

I followed her to the counter display.

"You're British?" she asked.

I nodded. "London, nearabouts. Is that okay?" The accent gave me away.

"Sure, so long as you have American money." She stroked stray hair behind her ear. "Calling home?"

“Me mum.” Already I was making more of an impression than I cared to. Memorable would be bad.

“A lot of people like this one.” She pointed out a simple smartphone.

“If you say so. I’ll also need a card—let’s say fifty dollars.”

That earned me a smile as she pulled the box from under the glass.

She totaled it up, and I paid with bills instead of my card.

“Would you mind if I unboxed it and set it up here?”

She shrugged. “Be two dollars for the trash.”

I reached for my wallet again.

“Just kidding ya.” She laughed and handed me scissors. “Here.”

Ten minutes later, I walked out with the phantom mobile in one pocket and the charger in the other.

A block away, I dialed Dad’s number.

It went to voicemail.

“Dad, it’s Charlie,” I said. “I’ve picked up a fresh mobile for security. Call me back on this number when you get the message.”

Twenty minutes later, I exited through the front door of the same breakfast diner as before with a growling stomach and turned right.

After two blocks, I spotted Thin Man again. Skipping the meal had been worth it to procure the mobile without alerting him. Now I had an advantage that whoever he worked for wasn’t aware of.



DANIELLE

MY PHONE RANG AS I WALKED UP TO THE CONFERENCE ROOM FOR DADDY’S WEEKLY company staff meeting. It was my brother, John calling.

“For once you have your mobile on you,” he said.

He’d switched to calling a cell phone a *mobile* in deference to our London office-mates. He’d even picked up the accent of a local, mostly.

“Hey, big brother, find any cute babes out there?”

He’d been gone over a week now on the latest acquisition Dad was pursuing.

“Very funny, Dani. I need you to talk to Dad about calling off this deal.”

"You're the one he listens to."

"I'm serious. This doesn't feel right, and I think we shouldn't do it, but he's ignoring me."

I ducked in the empty copy room and closed the door. "What's the problem? And what can I do about it? He didn't want me to go along with you on this anyway." Actually Dad hadn't let me participate in any of our merger deals—yet.

"This negotiation process smells to high heaven, and I don't trust them. Maybe you can ask Dad a few questions and get him thinking about it. This time his only focus is on winning. It's not like him."

The last time I'd asked Dad if I could join John on one of these, his answers had ranged between "*it's rather technical*" and "*you're needed here.*" But I knew my time would come if I kept at it. I was only a year younger than John.

"Okay, if you think it will help," I said.

He sucked in a loud breath. "This feels wrong, so I appreciate the help."

"The staff meeting's about to start. I'll talk to him after that."

"Thanks." We hung up.

When I entered the conference room, Dad hadn't arrived yet, and my brother John's normal seat on Dad's right was empty, so I claimed the power chair.

The room quickly filled, with the other arrivals electing to sit farther from my end of the table, probably to avoid the occasional lightning bolts that emanated from Dad when he was displeased.

Dad arrived promptly at ten and started the meeting.



AFTER THE MEETING, I MADE A CUP OF TEA BEFORE HEADING TO DAD'S OFFICE.

He looked up with the phone to his ear as I reached the door.

When he finished the call, I entered and closed the door behind me. "Are you sure this deal John's working on is worth the worry and effort?"

Dad nodded with a knowing smirk. "He talked to you too."

I laid out my brother's message plainly. "John has a bad feeling about this one."

He steepled his hands and nodded. "This is a difficult one."

"Maybe I could go out and help him. Two heads are better than one." The saying was one of his favorites.

"He has it handled for now. I have faith in him."

JESSICA ROYER OCKEN

I stood and walked to the door. With my hand on the handle, I turned. "If you have complete faith in him..." I opened the door. "Why ignore his advice to drop this one?"

The door closed behind me before he had a chance to answer. John's message had been reinforced, and Dad could stew on his own words.

CHAPTER 2



DANIELLE

ALICIA'S BROW ROSE AS SHE SIPPED HER TEA. "DO YOU THINK HE'S GOING TO ASK YOU at dinner tonight?" That was not a question I'd expected this morning from my third stepmother.

We got along well, but Alicia was every bit a busybody and definitely of the a-woman-should-get-married-and-prioritize-the-home camp. She graded each of my boyfriends on her own marriage-material scale.

Gerald had rated highly in her eyes as stable and reliable.

I put my tea down. It was hard to fault her for those observations; he was both of those things. "We're not at that stage."

"Sometimes they can surprise you."

I turned the page of the newspaper. "Uh-huh." I wasn't in a hurry to get on the marriage train. Things were comfortable as they were, and Daddy was beginning to take me seriously at the company.

My phone rang. "Speak of the devil."

"Hi," I answered as I rose from the table.

"Hey, Sugarplum. I missed you."

I walked to the window. "Miss you too." I hadn't seen Gerald since he left for Paris last week.

"Don't forget dinner tonight at Dunbar's."

I checked my watch. Luckily I had just enough time to get ready and make it. "Right, Dunbar's."

"See you at seven, Sugarplum."

I let out a relieved breath. "Okay, see you there." I hadn't remembered the time, and he usually liked to eat at six when we went out.

Alicia eyed me. "Forget again?"

I shrugged. "We set it up over a week ago."

"What does that tell you?"

"That I need to set better reminders on my phone."

She shook her head. "No—that he scheduled a dinner ahead of time at a very expensive restaurant?"

It *was* a little out of character for Gerald. Our normal dinners were at simple, local places without crowds or leather-bound menus. "It's probably because he forgot our anniversary." We'd been going out for just over a year now.

I hadn't said anything about it until two days later.

"It seems like just yesterday you accepted my first invitation to a date, Sugarplum," he'd said. A sweet thought, two days late.

"You should dress up," Alicia said.

"I always do."

Daddy strode in. "Always do what?" He leaned over to give me a kiss on the top of my head. "Good morning, Precious."

"I always dress appropriately," I answered.

Daddy leaned over and traded a brief kiss on the lips with Alicia. "And a double good morning to you, Darling."

A blush actually rose in Alicia's cheeks. They were sweet together.

When Natalia had become stepmother number two ten years ago, I'd learned to accept that one of Dad's faults was his inability to make a marriage last.

Alicia was wife number four, having replaced Natalia almost five years ago.

Daddy's taste in women had always been good. While the stereotypical replacement wife was a pretty young thing who was dumb as a rock, none of his had been. Like Alicia, the others had been gorgeous, but also smart and very nice as well. Somehow Daddy always picked nice women—so nice, in fact, that we all

got together at the holidays. Why it never worked long term for him was one of the mysteries of the universe.

Faults be damned, he was my daddy, and I was his little Precious—and apparently doomed to stay that in his mind.



MY CAB PULLED UP IN FRONT OF DUNBAR'S A FEW MINUTES BEFORE SEVEN.

Inside I waited against the wall when I didn't see my boyfriend anywhere.

Gerald arrived ten minutes later. "There you are, Sugarplum."

I smiled and leaned in for my peck on the cheek.

"You look beautiful tonight," he said.

"Thank you." I followed him to the maître d's podium.

We were shown to a table near a window looking onto the back courtyard.

The waiter was on us immediately, and Gerald sent him away with an order for a bottle of cabernet.

"How was your trip to Paris?" I asked.

"Good. Well, as good as a trip to Paris can be."

"I thought you liked the city."

"The city, yes, the people not so much. The day clerk at the hotel didn't speak a word of English. You'd think with all the tourist business they get he'd spend a few minutes learning the most rudimentary phrases."

We'd been over this before, and at least part of the problem revolved around Gerald not wanting to make the effort to learn any French.

He shook his head. "I'm staying at a different hotel on my next trip."

The wine arrived, and after pouring, he raised his glass to me. "To the most beautiful girl in this restaurant."

I blushed and raised my glass to his.

He talked about Paris, and we ordered our meals.

The conversation came back to my work a bit while we ate.

"How is John?"

Asking about my siblings was one of Gerald's nicer qualities.

"In the States," I told him. "Working on an acquisition."

He cut a piece of his meat. "Hawker?"

"I'm not sure." I shouldn't have let it slip earlier.

Gerald's brows creased. "Sugarplum, you can tell me anything."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does too matter. You should be able to tell me anything and everything."

I nodded. "You're right." This wasn't worth the argument.

"And Mark and Esther?"

I recounted what I knew about my other brother and sister. It felt good to have a man who cared about my family.

A little while later, I cut the last of my fish and looked up.

Oh my fucking God.

Gerald had a box in his hand. As our eyes met, he opened it. "Sugarplum, I want you to take this ring, and take my name."

Blinking back the tears that formed, I looked at the ring that sat in the box and didn't know what to say.

He hadn't asked a question. He shoved the box toward me.

The room had become quiet, and I could feel the stares of those at neighboring tables.

Gerald urged the box toward me again. "Go ahead, take it."

I sniffled and accepted it.

Polite clapping began from the nearby tables.

Our waiter arrived with a bottle of champagne.

Somehow Alicia had been right about tonight.

"Try it on," Gerald said. "I hope I got the sizing right."

I pulled the diamond solitaire from its box and slid it onto my ring finger. It was a little tight, but I got it on.

"It looks perfect on you," he said. "I was thinking next summer. What do you think?"

I nodded on autopilot. Summer was always a good time for a wedding.

The waiter poured flutes of champagne for us.

I couldn't hold back my tears. I was engaged. I'd looked forward to this moment since I was a little girl. I had the man and the ring, and I was fucking engaged. I'd reached another one of my life's goals, and it had snuck up on me.

"Don't cry, Sugarplum."

I wiped under my eyes with my napkin. "I'm sorry, I'm just so happy."

How had Alicia seen this coming and I'd missed it?

"To a long life together," he said, lifting his glass.

I emptied half my flute. This was all happening so fast.

*CHARLIE*

THIS AFTERNOON, I WAS DONE BEING PASSIVE.

Downstairs in the fitness center, I dialed Bill Covington's number on my spare mobile. This room wouldn't likely be bugged.

"Hello?" the voice from years ago answered.

"Bill, this is Charlie Blakewell. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure, hold on a second." He spoke to someone else on his end. "Can you give me a minute? Family business. Thanks." The sound of a door closing came through the phone. "Yes, cuz, what can I do for you?" We were cousins, but it was a connection only a few people knew.

I walked toward the window. "I'm in a bit of a bind, and I need your help."

"Sure. Anything for family. What can I do?"

I breathed easier. Calling him had been taking a chance, and I'd hoped he would help. "I'm in Boston, and I need someone who can check for bugs."

"I've got a top-notch firm out here, but for resources there, you should ask Vincent Benson. He's in your town."

I wasn't keen on involving anyone outside the family. "I'm not sure—"

"Don't worry. The Bensons are close friends of the family. I'll send you his contact info. He owes me. Tell him you're a friend of mine, and he'll fix you up with someone you can trust."

I looked out the window. Somewhere out there was the enemy. "Thanks, Bill. I appreciate it."

"No thanks necessary. It's what we do for family."

We rang off after I assured him he could count on me for anything he needed in the UK.

The contact information for Vincent Benson arrived a moment later, and after calling him, I had a commitment for a visit from his chief of security within the hour.



BEN MURDOCH ARRIVED FORTY MINUTES LATER WITH A FINGER TO HIS LIPS AND A CARD that read:

Hallway—close the door behind you

I did.

Vincent Benson's director of security looked the part: small eyes, a head of hair—if you could call it that—trimmed to a quarter inch, and a scar through one eyebrow.

Once the door was closed, Ben introduced his helper, Milosh Nikolic, who carried a small suitcase.

"Keycard," Ben said, obviously a man of few words.

I handed it over.

"Make yourself scarce. I'll text you when we're done."

After wandering down and out to the street, I purchased a cup of Earl Grey from the nearby Starbucks.

The text he'd promised arrived before the tea was cool enough for my first sip.

When I returned, Milosh carried the aluminum suitcase same as before, and Ben had a sheet of paper in his hand.

"No video, but three audio devices," he told me, pointing to one of several red Xs on his hand-drawn map of my hotel unit. "One under the nightstand to the left of the bed." He moved to the next X in the suite. "One next to the couch, here, and another under the desk." He looked up. "How do you want to proceed?"

"Pardon?"

"We can either remove them, which I don't recommend because it alerts the other side." This was all a game to him. "Or just feed them what you want, and only say the rest outside in the open."

He handed me the piece of paper and a business card. "Mr. Benson said anything you need. Call me any time, day or night."

They were gone a second after I thanked them, and I owed my cousin Bill thanks as well.

I slid the cardkey in, reentered my suite, and put the paper down. I looked over at the hotel phone I'd used to call Dad on the desk. A listening device there explained a lot.



I LEFT THE NEXT MEETING WITH THE HAWKER PEOPLE LATE IN THE DAY, AND THE situation had been bad.

I dialed Dad on my secret mobile once I reached the street.

When he answered, I gave him the bad news. "Whoever the third bidder is just upped the stakes ten percent."

I'd already increased our bid to the maximum Dad said we could afford. This would put us out of the running, and I'd be coming back empty-handed.

"That's not good," he said.

"You said we couldn't afford more, so do you want me to withdraw or keep our offer in play to see if the other guy fails somehow?"

He sighed audibly through the phone. "I don't want to let this one go, and there is one other alternative. I'll be in touch tomorrow morning."

"What other alternative?" I dreaded that he might suggest additional borrowing.

"I'll have to make a call or two. I'll let you know."

We rang off, and I decided on some exercise in the fitness center followed by a late dinner.

CHAPTER 3



CHARLIE

DAD'S CALL CAME THE NEXT MORNING BEFORE I MADE IT TO BREAKFAST.

"We're going to do this as a collaboration," he said.

I stopped walking and leaned against the wall to listen. We didn't do joint ventures.

"I don't understand." I'd expected him to say something about increased leverage, maybe allowing them to maintain board seats and a minority position, or perhaps making some of the purchase price contingent.

"I was right about Wentworth," Dad said.

I dreaded what he might say next. Losing to them would put Dad in a bad mood for a month.

"I talked with Jarrod, and he and I have agreed that this deal is too big for either of us alone, so we're going to do it together—and screw whoever that third bidder is."

His sentence blew up my whole understanding of the dynamics here. Our families had once been close, even vacationing together, but all that had changed, and we'd been fierce rivals for over a decade now.

"I'm not sure I heard you correctly," I ventured. Nothing could have surprised

me more than to be working *with* instead of *against* the Wentworths.

Dad laughed. "Yes, I surprised him as well when I suggested it. But it's time to heal the rift. Neither of us wants to pass on this deal, and this is the only way to get it done. You and his son, John, are going to put together a joint offer."

"But—"

"No arguments. Jarrod and I agreed. I'll leave it to you two to work out the details together." He gave me John Wentworth's mobile number.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. Just get this done."



BY THREE IN THE AFTERNOON, I HADN'T HEARD BACK FROM WENTWORTH. WHEN I called the Hawker people to tell them I needed a one-day delay to put together another proposal, I didn't tell them how different it would be.

If Wentworth didn't get back to me by tomorrow, I'd know that Dad's idea had died the horrible death it deserved.



DANIELLE

NEAR THE END OF THE DAY, I WAS IN THE SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM, GOING OVER THE German market numbers with Carlson Gartner, who handled the western half of the continent, when Jenny burst in without a knock.

"I looked all over for you. Your mother needs you. She tried your mobile, but you didn't pick up," she panted.

It was odd for Alicia to call work, but it was true. I intentionally didn't have my phone on me so we wouldn't be disturbed. "I'll call her in..."

"Fifteen," Carlson said softly.

"Say fifteen minutes," I told Jenny.

"She said it's urgent," she insisted. "It's your brother."

I bolted for the door.

Slamming my office door shut behind me, I pulled up Alicia's contact. My

fingers shook as I punched *call*. “What’s happened?” I asked as soon as the ringing ceased.

“There you are. John has been in an accident. Your father is in the air on his way to Hong Kong.”

I collapsed onto my chair. “What happened?” She wouldn’t be calling unless John was hurt.

“Auto accident, in Boston.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’ll pull through, it appears, but he’s in serious condition right now. It seems he broke a lot of bones, probably going too fast.”

Alicia had always complained about how fast John drove.

“I’ll leave for the airport right now and be in touch with you as soon as I can,” I told her. I didn’t need to be asked. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Thank you. I’ll be waiting to hear—any time, day or night.”

I pulled my small, emergency roller bag from its temporary spot in the corner. It was always in my office for sudden, unscheduled trips. The bag contained enough for three days on the road, and had come in handy twice already.

“I’m on the way to Boston,” I told Jenny on my way out. “Pass any emergencies to Carlson.”

She nodded. “I’m sure he’ll pull through.”

“He better. He owes me money.” The joke was my only defense against crying.



MY PLANE ARRIVED JUST BEFORE ELEVEN IN THE EVENING BOSTON TIME.

Although I’d used my US passport to get through emigration, I flashed my UK one as I tried one more time to get past the nurse blocking my way at the hospital.

“Visiting hours ended at nine o’clock,” Nurse Leslie repeated.

“But Leslie, I couldn’t get here earlier. I just flew in from London.”

“The only exception is end-of-life care, and your brother is not in that situation. You can come back tomorrow morning at eight.”

Bureaucracy sucked.

“I’d like to see your supervisor.”

She rolled her eyes. “I *am* the supervisor on this shift. If you don’t turn around and let me get back to our patients, I’ll be forced to call security.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “No need. Please take good care of him.”

“We do that for all our patients.”

I turned rather than piss her off further. “Thank you, Leslie.”

Once downstairs, I called Alicia to give her the quick status, but I got voice mail.

“They won’t let me see him until tomorrow. I’ll call you after that.”

Then I sent her a text as well.

ME: Can’t see John until tomorrow - will call after I do

Then it was off to the hotel to check in and get some sleep, seeing as it was now five in the morning, London time.

CHAPTER 4



DANIELLE

THE NEXT MORNING, I RETURNED TO THE HOSPITAL JUST BEFORE EIGHT AFTER A RESTLESS night with little sleep, only some of which I could blame on jet lag.

Upstairs, I switched off my cell phone as the sign instructed.

Evil Nurse Leslie was gone, and in her place was a less frosty nurse by the name of Wendy.

When I entered the room, I had trouble swallowing the lump in my throat.

More machines than I'd ever seen beeped. Dozens of wires and hoses snaked their way to my brother, John. It was all a bit Frankenstein-like. A bruise covered one side of his face, but I couldn't see any of the rest of him.

I approached. "John, I came as quickly as I could." I reached for his hand.

"Don't," the nurse said and pulled me back. "He only just got to sleep and desperately needs the rest. He'll wake up soon enough, and you can talk to him then."

"Can I stay?" I asked.

She motioned to the chair in the corner. "Until the end of visiting hours, if you like."

I backed away from the bed. "What are his injuries?"

“He has a broken left leg, pelvis, ribs, collarbone, and his left arm. Also he has a back problem you’ll need to talk with the doctor about.”

The bad scenarios running through my brain quickly gave way to worse ones. “A broken back?”

“It’s a disc issue, but as I said, you’ll need to discuss it with the doctor. From the condition of the car, they tell me he’s lucky to be alive.”

I wiped a tear from my eye. How could this be happening?

She moved to the door. “The doctor should be by in a half hour or so, and you can discuss the treatment options with him.”

“Will he be able to talk?”

“Yes, but he’ll have substantial pain.”

I waited in the corner and listened to the beeps and chirps from the machines.

Doctor Chen arrived even earlier than Wendy had predicted.

“He is stable this morning,” he said after examining the chart that hung on the end of John’s bed. “The good news is he doesn’t seem to have suffered any head trauma.”

“How long does he need to be here?” John hated hospitals and was convinced they were where people went to die.

“If he keeps on this track, probably another two days to be safe before we move him downstairs.” He laughed. “With as many broken bones as he suffered, he’ll be quite immobile and will need to be heavily medicated for a while. Luckily, no internal injuries means his prognosis for a full recovery is excellent.”

“And his back?”

“That is a question mark at this point. He could end up needing anything from physical therapy to spinal fusion. It will take time to evaluate.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

He shook his head. “Car accident is all I know. For more details you’d need to talk to the police with the accident report.”

John was still asleep when the doctor left.

I settled into the chair and reclined it to rest.



I WOKE TO ONE OF THE MACHINES BEEPING ANNOYINGLY.

“What the hell?” John said weakly.

I pulled my stiff body out of the chair, grasped my brother's hand, and squeezed. "John, I'm here. You're in the hospital."

He closed his eyes and opened them again. "Dani?"

"It's me."

The nurse rushed in.

"He just woke up," I told her.

She repositioned an apparatus on the end of his finger, and the noisy machine quieted. "You can't go yanking things off."

"I can't move my leg," my brother said.

"That's normal. You've had a nerve block. Otherwise, how is your pain level?"

"It hurts to breathe, but I've been worse."

A normal response from my brother.

"I can up the pain medication for you," she said.

"No. Move it down. I need a clear head."

"Your choice." After a minute of checking things, she stopped at the door on her way out. "If you pull anything else off, I'll be forced to tie you down."

John nodded. His breathing was irregular as he looked around the room.

"Do you remember anything about the accident?" I asked.

"They ran me off the road."

That brought me fully awake. "They what?"

"What day is it?"

"Thursday, but don't worry about that. You need to rest."

"Get my mobile. I have to call Dad."

"You need to rest—doctor's orders."

"My phone. The deal. I need to call Dad."

"It can wait."

"My fucking mobile. I need to call Dad."

"I'll call and tell him how you're doing."

"Now. I hope it's not too late."

Extracting my phone from my purse and powering it on revealed almost a dozen missed calls from Alicia and Dad.

I started by returning Dad's call.

After listening to my status update on John's condition, Dad asked to speak to him.

I put it on speaker.

"Did you get with young Blakewell yet?" Dad asked.

"No." John smiled in my direction. "Dani will have to deal with it."

"I'll send Ellis over," Dad said.

My father's words didn't surprise me.

John grunted out a breath. "I don't trust Ellis with this."

My heart sped up with John's words of support.

Dad hesitated. "I'm not sure—"

"I am," John said quickly.

Dad was quiet for a second. "Okay, until you're ready to get back into it." He was still reticent to give me a chance. "Precious, I have to go. John will fill you in."

A second later he was off the line.

"So what's going on?" I asked.

"We're going in together with the Blakewells to get this done."

My expression surely showed my surprise. "But Dad hates them."

"I had the same reaction, but he insists it's what he wants to do. You need to call and meet up with Charlie Blakewell right away. His number's in my mobile."

The lump in my throat threatened my breathing. "Charlie?"

"Yes, right away."

I hadn't seen Charlie Blakewell since the summer I was sixteen. I almost hadn't survived the crush I'd had on him.

