

I Ordered for You

By Kate Simon

Chapter One

It was one of those beautiful spring days that seems exclusive to Manhattan. The sun was shining, the air was crisp and clean, and all the beautiful people of the city seemed just a bit more beautiful. They were out and about, showing off the latest styles in perfect venue, the many open air sections of the very many cafes of the city. Today, Maggie would join them.

Margaret Warren, as she was known by the fans of *'All My Tomorrows'* was, Lorelei Sinclair, the matriarch of a beloved clan of troublemakers. Maggie Warren Smitrovich as she was known to her luncheon partner was an actress, unabashed urbanite and full time best friend. Glancing at her watch told her Sara would already be scanning the menu.

A few pedestrians caught her attention. Two women looked at her, smiled, and then giggled to each other. A well-tailored man in his late thirties gave an appreciative look and smiled. "Closet fan," she thought. "Probably watches on his computer during lunch." Soaps had their share of out-there, convention going fans but they also had a large number of fans who Tivo'd the show to watch in secret. She smiled at the memory of the last campaign function she'd attended. The Lieutenant Governor smiled politely when introduced to her by the party chairman, then leaned in and whispered, "You shouldn't trust Chase."

She allowed herself briefly to think the man pushing toward the crosswalk might be noticing her, just her. Her North Atlantic complexion and ice blue eyes combined with shoulder length blonde hair and a trim, petite figure made that a possibility. The trades always commented on how good she looked...for her age. God, she hated that.

She favored the man with a smile. His smile widened as he nodded an acknowledgement and moved passed her on the busy street. Maggie shook her head and laughed. "Closet fan," she repeated to herself.

"Over here," Sara waved.

Maggie threaded her way through the restaurant entrance and back out to the sidewalk table where her friend sat. Sara Flynn had moved to the city only two years ago but had embraced city life with both hands. Sara knew more great clubs and restaurants than Maggie did even though she'd lived in the city for nearly thirty years.

"Sit, sit," Sara pointed to the chair wedged next to the small divider that separated the tables from the parade of people walking down Columbus Avenue. "I ordered for you. They have the BEST chicken salad in the city."

Maggie laughed, "Every place you suggest has the best *something*."

"Of course," Sara replied. "What would be the point if they didn't?"

Sara had always had an endless supply of optimism. It was one of the things loved about her friend. They'd met when Maggie was a still struggling actress and she'd come upon a unique ad in the trades.

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Tired of recited the same lines every actress in her age group knew by heart, she called, slightly hesitant since the number was in Jersey. Not 'just outside the city' Jersey but square in the heart of tract homes and PTA Jersey.

Sara had asked for a photo of Maggie, talked to her about what she was looking for in a monologue and where to find the best lo mien in the city. Two weeks and two hundred dollars later Maggie had a monologue that was funny, touching and memorable enough to get several call backs, including one for *'All My Tomorrows'*. Fast forward twenty years and Maggie was a mainstay of the soap opera world.

"Hey Miss Warren," said a tall, impossibly good-looking young man, holding two plates of food.

"Hello," said Maggie in the tone she used for all those hellos to people she may or may not know.

"You don't remember me. I auditioned for the role of Chase. I was really nervous but you were great to me."

Maggie flashed on the young man's audition, sweaty, stumbling and very endearing. "Yes, I remember. Mark Callahan, isn't it?"

The man flushed with pride. "Yes, yes it is."

"You were very good, Mark.." What she didn't tell him was he'd had the part until the producers discovered Sawyer Brown was leaving *'The Strykers'*. A quick rewrite turned the twenty-something character to a thirty-something. Before anyone knew it, Sawyer Brown was starring in *'All My Tomorrows'* and Mark Callahan was serving chicken salad.

Mark placed the dishes in front of them. “Thank you, Miss Warren. If you need anything just let me know.” He retreated to a clutch of servers, no doubt telling them how the famous lady eating the chicken salad said he was the next James Dean.

“You know you made his year,” Sara laughed and took a bite of the flaky croissant holding the alleged best chicken salad.

“I really do remember him. He was good. He just needs some experience.” Maggie took a bite of the sandwich. Sara was of course correct. The salad had just the right balance of chicken, dressing, onion and a seasoning she didn’t recognize. “Oh, this is delicious.”

“Told you,” Sara said triumphantly.

She smiled as she watched Sara tuck a stray curl behind her ear as she bit into her latest *best* something. No one she knew enjoyed food as much as Sara. Always a new dish, a new restaurant and each time, yummy noises and smiles. No one enjoyed life as much as Sara Flynn.

Where not too much had changed for Maggie since she’d won the role of Lorelei Sinclair, everything had changed for Sara. Ten years ago Sara’s advertising executive husband left her for a younger woman. Instead of losing herself in pain, she buried herself in work, stringing many of her favorite monologues into a fast and funny play about life as a New York actor. The play, ‘*The Boards*’, cast with many of the original actors the monologues had been written for, was going into the fifth year of its run. Maggie had been offered a role, but her commitment to ‘*Tomorrows*’ precluded her accepting. At least that’s what she’d told the producers... and herself. Optioned by a big movie studio, the play and was now in preproduction for a fall release, just in time for the Oscars.

The biggest change of all came when Sara left the last vestiges of suburban life behind and rented a loft in Manhattan. The loft, Sara insisted, was the residence of all self-respecting writers.

So here she sat, the suburban housewife morphed to the urban playwright. Her deep auburn hair and hazel eyes announced her Irish heritage. Her normally fair complexion looked a bit more pale than usual. That was most likely due to her maddening habit of burning her personal candle at both ends. Her smile was bright as she savored the meal and she dabbed her linen napkin to her lips.

“You look tired.” Maggie said. “Out late?”

Sara paused mid bite. “No, I was working and lost track of time. So what’s on the agenda for today? Back to the studio?”

“Just to run lines. I have an important scene with Chase this week. Sawyer wants to run through it again.”

Sara made a yummy noise and Maggie knew it wasn’t over the chicken.

“Sawyer Brown. Ahh, the stuff that dreams are made of. You should invite him to join us at *Soleil*. I can always change the reservation. I’ll scout up a fourth so I won’t be odd man out.”

Maggie laughed. “Sawyer is a colleague, not a love interest.”

“He could be.”

“He plays my son-in-law!”

“But he’s not, is he?”

“Enough Sara,” Maggie commanded, exasperated but not really angry with her friend. “You know I don’t date.”

“You should.”

“Been there, done that, got the T-shirt, don’t need to do it again.”

“You’re a beautiful, exciting woman. You don’t need to be alone.” Sara’s eyes were usually filled with a boundless optimism but now it seemed to have been replaced by something just out of reach. Something Maggie had seen there before. Something Sara had steadfastly refused to discuss.

“Ask him. It will be fun.”

Maggie sighed and laughed. “You’re really a pain in the ass.”

Sara smiled and lifted her Mimosa. “But you love me anyway.”

She lifted her Mimosa and touched Sara’s glass. “Yeah, I do.”

The very handsome Mark returned to their table. “Would you like some dessert, ladies?”

“No thank you, Mark. Just the check,” replied Maggie. Mark handed her a check in a leather folder. Sara snatched it from her hands.

“I’ve got this.”

“Sara, you really must stop this. I make a comfortable living. I can pick up a check now and then.”

Sara handed the folder to Mark. “Tell you what. You pick up the check tonight.”

“Fine. What time?”

“Eight O’clock. I’ll pick you up.”

Chapter Two

Maggie entered the rehearsal room to find Sawyer Brown stretched out in a folding chair, a script propped open on the nearby table. She took a minute to admire God's handiwork, and Sawyer Brown was definitely some of his finest efforts. Six feet two inches of perfectly honed muscle, his washboard abs were featured every time the producers needed a ratings spike. Levi's and an NYPD t-shirt never looked so good. Maggie suddenly felt underdressed in her designer silk shell and slacks.

He was muttering to himself, running lines from the emotional scene. He looked up and caught Maggie staring. She flushed with embarrassment but he just smiled. God, what a smile.

"Maggie. Thanks for coming."

"No problem. This is an important scene. I could use the run-through."

"Who are you kidding, Maggie? I'd bet you've already got the scene down cold. You're just taking pity on me."

Maggie laughed. "You don't need my pity, Sawyer. An Emmy and how many Soap Opera Digest awards?"

"That only proves I have a great publicist."

She threw up her hands. "Okay, Okay, I give up. Let's get to work. We only have the room for an hour."

Maggie shook her hair out of its tight ponytail and stretched a bit, physically loosening herself for the scene. Taking a position at the end of the table she looked over to see a rather odd look on his face.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Uh, huh,” he muttered. He straightened himself, squared his shoulders and Maggie saw Chase Foster appear. This is why he’d won that Emmy.

“Well Chase, you’ve really screwed it up this time.”

“The deal with Hiroshi will go through.”

“I don’t see how. The feds are investigating, Hiroshi’s ready to bolt.” Maggie came within inches. “My daughter never should have married you. I told her you were a loser and you continue to prove me right.”

Sawyer glared down at her. “Fortunately your daughter doesn’t listen to you any more than I do.”

“She’ll have to when they cart you off to prison.”

Sawyer stepped closer. “I’m not finished yet,” he growled.

Maggie moved in. “Neither am I,” she threatened.

Sawyer’s hand flew to her face, cupping her cheek. Everything slowed except her heart. He bent towards her. His lips covered hers, softly, carefully. The sensation was electric. He pulled back as slowly as he moved in.

“That’s not in the script,” she whispered.

“It’s in mine.” He touched her lips again with the same electric response. He ran his fingers through her hair. “I’ve wanted to do that since I first met you. I’d apologize, but I’m not sorry.” He smiled. Damn that smile.

“I’m old enough to be...”

He brushed his thumb over her lips. “I’ve want to do that for so long. I may not have handled it very well, but I’m not sorry.”

“Sawyer, I...”

“John.”

“What?”

“My name is John. John Brown, plain, ordinary John Brown. Sawyer is a fantasy of my agent. He said it would look better on a marquee.” He laughed a bit as he continued to stroke her cheek, as if he needed to touch her. “I think I’d like it if you called me John.”

Maggie couldn’t help but smile. “There is nothing plain or ordinary about you, Sawy...John.”

“I want to see you. Have dinner with me tonight. I promise to take it slow.”

“Ahhh...I can’t I have plans.”

“Tomorrow night. There’s this great place in the village, brand new. You’ll love it.”

“John, how would it look? You’re the show’s pin-up boy and I play your mother.”

“Mother-in-law and I don’t give a damn how it looks.” He kissed her again, this time with a passion she hadn’t experienced in years. Even more stunning, she felt a flaring fire that was completely her own.

“One date,” he murmured in her ear. “Let’s see where it takes us.”

She looked up into his beautiful blue eyes. He was Sawyer Brown, the heartthrob of millions of women and he was holding her, kissing her. No, this wasn’t Sawyer. This

was John, a very nice man who'd just asked her to dinner. "I'll think about it," she whispered.

He touched his lips to hers. "That's all I can ask." The door opened and in popped Juliet Simmons, show ingénue and resident pain in the ass. She played Taylor Sinclair Foster, Maggie's daughter and John's wife. Darling of every soap mag in town, Juliet worked the system. Publicists, personal appearances, talk shows, the girl was determined to be a star. The hell of it was, Juliet was a good actor and she had the potential to be a great one if she'd work more on craft and less on crap.

"Hey, Sawyer. The girl from Soap Opera Weekly is here. We have an interview."

John moved back quickly and her body responded to his absence. "Damn, I forgot."

Maggie forced calm into her voice despite her pounding heart. "That's okay. I think we're done here." She moved toward the door until John grabbed her arm.

"Are we done?"

Maggie smiled. "Until tomorrow."

Chapter Three

The taxi stopped in front of '*Soliel*' the latest and greatest of Sara's discoveries. Apparently she wasn't the only one judging by the paparazzi standing outside. Flashes went off as they shouted to Maggie and Sara. They beamed their best red carpet smiles and pushed through the crowd.

"Name?" asked the blasé host.

"Flynn," stated Sara with the certainty that having your name in lights three blocks away could bring, even when the lights proclaimed written by and not starring. The host suddenly discovered a wealth of manners.

"Oh, Miss Flynn, of course. I have your table right here."

He showed them to an excellent table, far enough away from the crowd to be out of the crush, but not so far that they couldn't enjoy the show that was the jockeying for position in a hot New York restaurant.

Sara ordered a Cosmo and an apple martini and then made a quick apology to the grinning Maggie. "Sorry, force of habit. I promise not to take over the menu."

Maggie set the heavy linen napkin in her lap. "Thank you."

"But...I'm told they have mushroom ravioli to die for."

"I don't like mushrooms."

“Oh you should...” Sara looked down. “Sorry, I’m bad.”

Maggie laughed. “No you’re incorrigible. And yes, I love you anyway.”

The waiter returned with their drinks and Maggie took a deep swallow. “Oh, good. They didn’t skimp on the vodka.” She set her drink down and looked up to see Sara still poised to take a sip and staring at her. “What?”

“What’s up?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You sip gently, like the true lady you are, then set your drink down carefully. Margaret Warren does NOT swill. So I ask again... What...is...up?”

“I did not swill.”

“You swilled. Tell me what happened.”

“Damn you.”

“Yeah, yeah, intuitive Irish bitch. We’ll get to that later. Tell me or you’ll never see your entrée.”

“He kissed me.”

Sara’s eyes lit with expectation. “Who kissed you?”

“Sawyer Brown.”

“I take it the kiss wasn’t in the script.”

Maggie shook her head. “He said he wants to see me. He asked me out.”

“When?” Her question sounded like a kid asking when Santa was arriving.

“For tonight. I told him I had plans.”

Sara’s mouth dropped open. “You told abs of steel Sawyer Brown you were busy...for me! Are you mad, girl?”

“I don’t want to date anyone, Sara. You know that.”

“Sawyer Brown isn’t just anyone. He’s freaking gorgeous.”

“He’s not just a pin-up. He’s a really nice guy who likes opera, and the Giants and has a marked weakness for bear claws.” Maggie looked at Sara and realized she’d been caught. “I’ve worked with the guy for nearly a year. Of course I know things about him.”

“Uh-huh,” Sara smiled as she flipped through her menu.

“Oh, stop it Sara. I dated for decades! I don’t want to go through the whole drama again. I’m too old for all that nonsense.”

She thumped her menu on the perfectly designed plate. “Maggie, that’s bull. You aren’t too old for anything. You are a beautiful, intelligent woman and obviously this Sawyer Brown can see that.”

“John.”

“What?”

Maggie found herself smiling, again. “Sawyer’s his stage name. He asked me to call him John.”

“Too old? Yeah, right.”

“Are you telling me you’d want to go through all that again, after George?” Maggie opened her menu, hoping to find something to derail Sara’s current train of thought.

“My asshole ex left me for his secretary. His secretary for Christ sake! I don’t think I would have minded nearly as much if it hadn’t been so cliché.”

Maggie gave her friend an indulgent, disbelieving look as she attempted to sip, not swill.

“Our marriage died years before he wandered off with Missy.”

Maggie fought not to shoot her drink out her nose. “Missy? You never mentioned a Missy.”

“Yeah, obviously named after the family cat.” Sara sighed and reached for her drink. “Look, you’ve heard my sorry story for the last ten years. Even I’m sick of it, and we’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you and Sawyer.”

“There is no *‘me and Sawyer’*. And *let’s* talk about you. You’re always trying to throw me to the dating wolves but you’re not willing to be the bait. You haven’t had a date since you came to the city.”

Sara looked at her and did something wicked, something unfathomable and nearly unforgivable. She smiled.

Maggie nearly dropped her martini. “What?!! Are you kidding me? You’ve met someone and you didn’t tell me? What kind of best friend are you? You dish on everyone we know but you don’t tell me you’re dating? Who, What, Where, all the pertinent W’s, GIVE!” she shouted.

Sara sipped her Cosmo and looked off into the crowd, as if this unknown someone was about to walk by.

“I’m not...dating. I know someone.”

“What does that mean, you know someone?”

“We just see each other occasionally. A weekend here, a dinner there, when we can mesh schedules.”

“Do I get to meet him?”

“No,” she said with shocking finality.

“Why?” Maggie’s voice wavered.

“He’s not part of this,” she said gesturing toward the crowd. “He’s not in the business. He’s not a holdover from Jersey or a friend of the family. He’s just...mine.”

“I don’t understand,” Maggie said.

“What he and I have isn’t related to any other part of my life. I don’t owe gratitude to anyone for the introduction. I don’t have to drag him to industry gatherings or Sunday brunch in the Village with friends.”

“I thought you liked our brunches?” She knew she sounded ridiculous, but she truly didn’t know what else to say.

Sara smiled and reached for Maggie’s hand. “Oh, honey, I do. I love our brunches and our friends and our parties. But Jim...” She stopped, as if speaking even his first name was tantamount to revealing a state secret. “He has his life and I have mine and occasionally they intersect for some wonderful moments together.”

“Those weekends writing upstate?” Maggie asked.

“Not always alone,” Sara laughed. “Not always writing.”

“Can you at least tell me how you met?”

Sara looked like she was asked to broadcast her ATM code.

“Just so I can tell if he’s worthy of my best friend.”

Sara sighed, fortified herself with another sip of the bright pink cocktail. “It was at the Barnes and Noble, downtown. I was browsing, as usual and I saw him staring at me. I thought he was looking at someone behind me so I turned around.” She laughed at the memory. “I actually turned around. When I turned back he was smiling and he came up to me. He told me I had beautiful eyes.”

Maggie tried to stifle a snort, unsuccessfully.

“I laughed too. He said he would have mentioned my stellar ass, but he thought he lead off with my eyes and work his way down to my other features. Then I really laughed. So we had coffee in the café and just talked, for two hours. It was amazing to talk to this man who didn’t know me, my history, my life...and thought I had a stellar ass.”

“Sara, that’s nice...”

“Yeah, I know,” Sara cut her off. “Nice but coffee and paperbacks don’t make for a spectacular opening act.”

“So I take it there is spectacular somewhere in this story?” said Maggie. To her utter amazement, Sara blushed. An actual schoolgirl blush.

“The entire time we were talking he was stroking the top of my hand, very lightly. It was as if he needed to touch me, to keep contact. Then with the most adorable look on his face, he picked up my hand and kissed my palm, very tenderly.” Sara sighed and blushed, again. “It’s hokey, corny, my editor would have cut the scene in a heartbeat. Maggs, I love you but you’re going to have to trust me on this. He’s a wonderful man and the relationship is everything we want it to be. This is something just for us.”

Sara ordered another round. “Don’t think I don’t remember we were talking about Sawyer Brown. You’re obviously considering seeing him. This could be an amazing, pulse pounding, wonderfully wild experience.”

“It could be a total disaster,” Maggie replied.

“It could be,” Sara answered. “And that would be wonderful.”

Maggie set down her martini. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Sara tasted her freshened Cosmo and then looked at her friend with misted eyes. “When we remember our lives we remember the spectacular highs and the disastrous lows. The stuff in the middle is forgotten. It may be time to add a few highlights to your life. All I’m saying is don’t dismiss the possibility.”

Maggie swilled, an unabashed, indisputable swill. “*Sawyer Brown, Dating Sawyer Brown, No, not possible.*” Then she saw the look on Sara’s face. It was the unquestioning support of her best friend. The love.

“You know, it’s not like trying mushroom ravioli,” Maggie said.

“I know,” Sara said with a slightly evil smile.

“I’ll consider it.”

Sara toasted her with the last of her drink. “That’s my girl.”

Dinner was excellent, just as Sara had promised. So were the cocktails, the appetizers, and most of all the sinful, practically illegal chocolate cheesecake. It was a warm night and they’d chosen to walk off a few calories before heading to the new jazz club that Sara swore featured the next Diana Krall.

“How did you get in? I heard the waiting list was months,” Maggie asked.

“A few orchestra seats for a Broadway show go a long way in this town.”

“You’re shameless,” Maggie laughed.

“When it comes to the endless search for the perfect mushroom ravioli, absolutely!”

“I’d ask what you’re going to do when the show isn’t running anymore but after five years...” She stopped in mid-step, sensing Sara wasn’t behind her. Maggie turned to see her ten paces back frozen in place and pale as linen. “Sara?”

“Damn,” Sara whispered as she dropped straight to her knees.

“Sara!” Maggie screamed and flew to her side just in time to catch her before she collapsed on the pavement.

Chapter Four

“Miss Warren, I’m sorry, family only in I.C.U.” A pretty young nurse looked at her with the sympathy reserved for the deranged and distraught.

Which is exactly what she was.

Four hours in the waiting room and they wouldn’t tell her anything. One minute she and Sara were walking down the street debating the virtues of the perfect pasta and the next minute Sara was on the ground, white as a ghost and unconscious. She had no clue what was wrong. It could be food poisoning but Maggie didn’t think bad mushrooms would hit that fast or that hard. She’d had to threaten violence just to ride in the ambulance. Separated from Sara at the ER entrance, she hadn’t seen her or heard a word about her condition since and that was four *freaking* hours ago! Enough was enough. She moved in closer, standing toe to toe with the nurse.

“I want to see Sara Flynn...now,” she said with a steely determination that made the girl flinch.

“I really am sorry, but they’re very strict, family only.”

“I’m her family.” Maggie’s voice softened. “I’m all she has.”

“Ms. Warren?” A tall, dark haired man approached. His white lab coat told her now she had some hope of getting an answer.

“I’m Maggie Warren. How’s Sara?”

“She wants to see you. I’ll take you to her.”

“It’s about time,” she muttered.

“I beg your pardon?” asked the doctor.

“Nothing. Where are we going?” she asked as the doctor hit the elevator button.

“Sara’s been moved to a room,” he replied as he carefully studying the lights on the panel.

“You’re admitting her? What for?”

“Sara will explain.”

The brief ride took them to the fourth floor. The doctor led them past rooms where each patient lay silently, attached to multiple IV’s. “Where the hell did they put her?” she thought.

Maggie stopped cold. This was a room, a real room. There were paintings, and flowers and a view of the park. It wasn’t a typical ER cubicle with a rickety gurney and screaming patients behind the next curtain. Even Sara’s status as a successful playwright shouldn’t have rated this kind of service for a stomach bug. The Pope wouldn’t have rated this kind of service.

The view was spectacular. The sun hadn’t yet risen and the city was at its glittering best. But the view of this room included IV units and wires and gauges and dials that showed blinking waves and numbers. None of the machines were making a sound.

Sara was looking out the window at the city. If it weren’t for her pallor, she’d think nothing of telling her to get her lazy ass out of bed and stop scaring the hell out of her. But

Sara was attached to all of those silent machines, and Maggie had never been more frightened in her entire life.

Sara turned to face her and it was all Maggie could do not to gasp. She was pale, horribly pale. This couldn't be her vibrant friend. This was all a monstrous nightmare and she would wake soon. She had to.

"Hey," Sara said.

"Hey yourself." Maggie took Sara's hand in hers. "What's going on?"

Sara winced and the doctor moved in to check her vitals. He had *that* face. The one she'd played to dozens of times in hospital scenes. *That* face was never good.

"Tell me," was all Maggie could manage.

"This is Steve Lewis, my doctor." He nodded and continued looking at various screens on the quiet machines. Maggie pulled a chair next to her bed as Sara struggled for the words.

"I have cancer, stage 4." Sara gave a small laugh. "Sounds like blocking direction, doesn't it? Cancer, you go to stage four, a little to the left if you please." She stroked Maggie's hand. "When I was diagnosed they gave me a year. That was two years ago."

Maggie's heart thudded in her chest.

"Believe me, I've looked into everything. Steve is my third oncologist. Everyone else told me to go home and die. Steve had therapies that let me live my life."

"There must be something else we can do?" She saw the look of hopelessness on his face before he glanced down at Sara.

"What? What is it? There's something, isn't it? Surgery?"

"If I'd survived the surgery it would have at best given me a few more months."

“But a few more months...”

“Those extra months would have been wasted recovering from the surgery.”

Tears ran free and hot from Maggie’s eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you to spend the last two years looking at me the way you’re looking at me now. I didn’t expect it to happen like this. It’s going to be hard enough on you without...” Sara inhaled sharply.

In one of those moments of clarity that are so rare in life Maggie knew what she needed to do. “Well it’s not exactly a cakewalk for you, is it?” She even managed to smile.

Sara laughed. A deep, from her soul laugh. She threaded her fingers through Maggie’s and held her hand to her chest.

“I left instructions. My lawyer...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle everything.”

“Yes, you will,” Sara said and Maggie saw pride in her eyes. She grimaced and clenched Maggie’s hand and the silent doctor moved close. Sara looked up at him and whispered, “Don’t let it hurt.”

He nodded, pulled a syringe from his pocket and injected it into the line. The smile returned to her face.

“Now that’s what I’m talking about. Throw that in a martini glass and you have a party.” Sara looked at Maggie and whispered, “I love you.”

Twenty minutes later the machines stopped blinking.

Chapter Five

The sun had risen hours ago. Maggie didn't know how long she'd been staring out the window of her apartment. She barely remembered the cab ride home. What she did remember, all she could remember, was holding Sara's hand until it grew cold. The doctor finally pulled her away offering her sedatives and a cab ride, in that order. She'd only taken him up on the cab.

So here she was, sitting on her couch staring at the same courtyard she'd looked at for nearly twenty years. The script she'd been reading before she'd left for dinner was where she'd left it on the coffee table. Her walking shoes were still at the door. Everything she saw, in her apartment, out the window, was exactly as it had been when she'd left for dinner twelve hours ago. How was that possible? How could an apartment in the heart of the upper west side be so bloody quiet?

She should have known. Two years and she should have realized something was wrong. Her absences, days, sometimes weeks at a time. Those times Sara blamed fatigue on late nights writing. She'd actually envied Sara's ability to eat and not gain any weight. If she'd been paying attention she would have known, should have known.

She felt muffled, wrapped tight in an invisible blanket. Sights and sounds were muted. She barely heard the knock at the door.

“Maggie, open up. Please open up. I know you’re in there. Please.”

She opened the door to find John standing in the doorway, his face lined with worry.

“Are you okay?”

She suddenly realized she’d had an early call today and she’d completely forgotten.

“Oh God, I never called in! Ed must be furious.”

John brushed her arm. “We heard about Sara. Ed understands.”

“How?”

John scooped up the newspaper lying at her doorstep. Her heart sank. At the bottom of the paper was a photo of Maggie and Sara taken last night at *Soliel*. Big block letters under the picture read ‘Broadway Playwright’s Sudden Death at 50.’ Her knees buckled but before she could fall John scooped her into his arms and a damn of tears broke. He sat, still holding her tightly in his arms. He kissed her forehead and rocked her gently until everything in her was gone and she could do nothing else but sleep.

Her head was pounding. God, was it a hangover? She’d never felt so tired. She shifted and realized she was on the couch, covered by the afghan Sara had made her for Christmas.

Sara.

“Sara!” She bolted upright and the pain made her vision blur. It was dark out the window. How long had it been?

“Hi.”

Maggie turned to see John coming to her from the kitchen with a glass of water and the aspirin bottle. "I thought it would be best to leave you sleep."

"What time is it?"

"About seven." John sat next to her on the couch and handed her the glass and two aspirin.

"You've been here all this time?" She took the pills. The cold water felt like glory on her throat.

John smiled, "I was fine. You've great taste in books. I got three-quarters of the way through the new James Patterson."

"The show?"

"You're on emergency leave. Call Ed when you're up to it."

"And you?" Maggie filmed two or three days a week at best. John's storylines however were front burner. His schedule was brutal.

"I took a couple of days. Ed owes me a favor."

Maggie couldn't help but smile. Ed La Mont was their executive producer and considered himself the omniscient lord of all he surveyed. Maggie had some pull with him due to her longevity with the show. But no one had more pull with 'Lord' La Mont than Sawyer Brown. John was the undisputed star of the show. The moment he signed his contract the sagging ratings of the long-running soap shot straight to number one. He was a daytime superstar. It was only a matter of time and his contract before he moved to nighttime or the movies.

"I'm glad you're here," she said.

“Me too.” He picked up a note from the coffee table. You got a call while you were sleeping. Sara’s lawyer. She wants you to call her.”

“That was fast.”

“I thought it was best not to wake you. I hope you don’t mind.”

She shook her head and sipped the water.

“Are you able to tell me what happened? The paper didn’t say.” It felt so good when he took her hand in his..

“It’s ok. It’ll probably be all over Entertainment Tonight soon enough.” She clasped his hand just a bit tighter. “It was cancer. She’d been sick for two years.”

“She looked so good when she visited the set. I would’ve never guessed,” said John.

Maggie sagged back in the cushion. “Neither did I.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She never told me.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. She said she didn’t want to upset me, but how could I not be?” She said more to herself than to John. She gripped his arm as much for strength as anything else. “I didn’t see it coming. I should have. She was my best friend.”

“I’m guessing she loved you as much as you loved her.”

“What? Well...yes.”

“Wouldn’t you do anything to protect someone you love?”

“Yes, but...”

“It sounds like that’s what she did.”

“She should have told me.”

“Could you have changed anything?”

“No.”

“Would you have been less upset now if she’d said something?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Well...”

“It sounds like Sara spared you two years of pain.”

“She shouldn’t have had to go through it alone.”

“She didn’t.”

She looked at him skeptically.

“She had you.”

Maggie rested her head on John’s shoulder.

Chapter Six

The Manhattan office of attorney Jennifer Peterson was small but well appointed. A comfortable couch faced the oak desk of the receptionist, a young girl with fair skin and dark eyes. Tastefully dressed in a crisp white blouse and black pencil skirt, a wilder spirit was indicated by the small pink gauges in her ears.

On the matching credenza were current copies *Newsweek*, *Time* and *People*. Sara would most likely be mentioned in the next issues of all three. Short paragraphs in the *Newsmakers* sections of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Maybe a full page in *People*, with the black and white photo reserved for the departed.

The intercom buzzed and the receptionist glanced up. “You can go in now.”

Maggie walked into the inner office to see a slightly older version of the receptionist. The same fair skin and dark eyes were framed by rich brown curls. Maggie glanced at the wall for diplomas to assure herself this young woman was an attorney.

“Hello Ms. Warren. I’m Jennifer Peterson. Would you like anything?”

“No, thank you. You’re receptionist already offered.”

“Good. My regular girl is off today. Shaye’s helping me out today. She has the day off from school.”

“You’re sister looks just like you.”

The attorney laughed. "Daughter."

"Excuse me?"

"She's sixteen."

Maggie glanced back at the door. "I took her for twenty. Either I'm getting old or you were a very young mother."

She favored Maggie with a warm smile. "I had her when I was in college." Her smile dimmed and she indicated a leather arm chair. "Why don't we get started?" She opened a blue file and began flipping pages. "Ms. Flynn made sure everything was in order before..." She glanced down and Maggie thought she saw the woman's eyes mist over. She cleared her throat and continued. "She had no immediate family. Aside from a few charitable contributions and one other bequest you are Ms. Flynn's primary beneficiary."

"What?"

"There's the loft."

"She rented that...didn't she?"

"She owned it outright. Current market value is five million."

Maggie gasped.

"There are various investments which are to be transferred to you. Portfolio value as of close of business yesterday was twelve million, four hundred and fifty two thousand five hundred and forty two dollars.

The pounding Maggie heard was either her heart or a jackhammer in the street below.

“There’s also the matter of intellectual property. She assigned all rights to “*The Boards*”, both theatrical and movie rights as well as all royalties from her work as Emily O’Hara and any future royalties based on her work.”

Maggie was numb. Impossible numbers were flying around in her head. She’d never known. With every moment that passed Sara seemed more and more like a stranger. In the buzz that was her brain a name flew to the front of her thoughts. “Emily O’Hara? Why do I know that name?”

“Emily O’Hara has been on the New York Times Best Seller’s list five times in the last ten years.”

Before Maggie could ask, the lawyer handed her a copy from her bookcase. The cover was graced by a beautiful red-haired woman in an emerald green Victorian gown.

“The Irish Heart?”

“Romance novels. Sara called them what people actually read versus what they thought they should read.

Maggie flipped the book to the back and saw a black and white photo of a woman who looked familiar, but was definitely not her friend.

“That’s Sara’s mother.”

Maggie returned the book and sighed. “There really must be some mistake. This can’t be right.”

“There’s no mistake, Ms. Warren. Sara left you the bulk of her estate.”

“Call me Maggie.” An absurdly normal response in an outrageous situation.

“I’m Jennifer.” She took a deep breath, as if bracing herself. “Including the estimated value of the intellectual property rights, the bequest is nearly twenty million dollars.”

Now Maggie needed bracing.

“She was a great writer, but still...are romance novels that...? How did she wind up so...?”

“Filthy rich?”

Maggie laughed. Absurdity also required laughter. “Yeah.”

“She did very well with the romance novels but...

“Not loft in Manhattan well?”

“Correct. There was an inheritance from her parents that was well invested. The play, her monologue business and of course the settlement.”

“Settlement?”

“Her divorce settlement. George Flynn came from money and made a boat load more in advertising but he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box.”

“No pre-nup?”

“Exactly. Sara took him to the cleaners.”

Maggie smiled. “Good for her.”

The lawyer’s voice changed. Her professionalism was tempered with softness. “I knew Sara Flynn most of my life. I grew up in the neighborhood in New Jersey where she lived with her husband. She was ‘that nice lady at the end of the block’. She always had the best Halloween candy. I remember the Christmas my Mom was really sick and things would have been pretty tough except for the boxes we found on our front porch, toys and

the makings for an entire Christmas dinner. I found out years later there was an envelope in the box containing several thousand dollars. We could never prove it was Sara, but we knew.

“Sounds like her.”

“There’s something else.” Jennifer pulled a small clear case from her desk and removed a DVD. “She left you a message.” She slipped it in her computer and turned the flat screen around to face Maggie. “Are you okay to see this now?”

“Yes,” she said not at all sure she was. “Go ahead, please.”

Jennifer clicked the mouse and there was Sara, smiling, just as she was at dinner, two nights ago.

“Hey there.” Sara glanced at her lap, and then back at the camera. “If you’re watching this then I’m dead and you’re really pissed.”

“No I’m not,” Maggie said to the screen more than a bit indignant.

“Yes you are,” Sara replied.

Maggie gasped.

Sara laughed. “Yeah, Yeah, I know. Damn intuitive Irish bitch. But you love me anyway.”

“Yeah, I do,” Maggie whispered.

“I really am sorry about not telling you about so many things. I could give you a million reasons for my glaring sins of omission but the bottom line is the Sara Flynn you knew was a creation. Like all my characters there had been many incarnations of Sara. The daughter, The wife.” She wrinkled her nose and waved a dismissive hand. “I didn’t like her very much. “The author was occasionally known as Emily,” she laughed. “Then there

was the friend. She was the person you knew. This was the Sara I'd worked the longest and hardest to create. This Sara was finally the person I most wanted to be. Once I had become fully her, I was loathe to carry any of the others with me. These past two years I was as happy as I'd ever been with my life."

Sara sighed and shook her head. "God has a strange gift for irony. There were a thousand times I was going to tell you about my prognosis but it all came back to what good would it do? It might have made me feel better momentarily but it would have made you feel permanently lousy and I couldn't carry that with me."

Sara continued. "There's one last detail to get out of the way. I'm going to ask you a favor. I want a wake. A good old raucous Irish wake. Hire a great hall and a chef for excellent food. The alcohol should be free flowing. Invite everyone we know and everyone we don't know. Tell bawdy stories about me," Sara held up a cautionary finger. "But don't let anyone say I've been lost or passed on. Sounds like you've simply misplaced me or I went on a road trip and I'll be back when I run out of Pringles."

Maggie couldn't help but laugh.

"Have a cosmo for me and have fun!" Sara pointed at Maggie. "I'll be there, I'll know."

Sara averted her gaze from the screen. "I imagine you're more than a bit surprised about the money."

Maggie huffed, "You think?!"

"Now, don't get angry," Sara replied.

"How do you do that?" Maggie gasped.

“I’ve known you for twenty years and I know you’re confused and angry about all of this. I would be to. Maggs, it is what it is and I want you to make the best of it.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that? You’re dead and I’m alone.” She argued with the screen as naturally as she had with Sara only days ago.

“I want you to take the money and run. I didn’t leave you a portfolio of stocks and bonds. I left you options. Buy beautiful a Picasso and hang it in the john,” Sara laughed. Travel and take a young lover with you when you do.”

Maggie couldn’t help but giggle. “Will you never give up?”

Sara threw up her hands. “Hey, you can’t blame me for trying.”

She saw Sara struggle to control the tears glistening in her eyes.

“Maggie, you were the best friend I could have ever hoped for. You were my strength, one of the very few people in this life I could count on absolutely. Just being around you brightened every day of my life.”

Sara stiffened her back and forced a smile. “I want you to be happy. On the days you can’t do it for yourself, do it for me. Have fun! Life is too exciting not too. If you fall the money will cushion your butt when you hit the ground.” She leaned forward in her chair. “Take a chance, Maggs.”

Her shoulders grew warm and felt what might have been mistaken for a kiss on the top of her head.

Sara whispered to the camera. “I’ll be there. I’ll know.” Sara smiled one last time the kissed two fingers and reached them toward her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Maggie stared at the screen until it turned blue.

Chapter Seven

Financial documents are written by aliens. She was firmly convinced of that. She'd always had her agent and the lawyers at his firm to interpret her contracts. These were a whole different animal. Trying to read her new portfolio was practically impossible. The highlights seemed to include mutual funds, stocks, and a share of a property near Columbus Circle. Then there were the papers concerning the play, the new movie, and the romance novels.

Romance novels? There was so much she hadn't known about her friend. When she thought back to the last two years, two years of raucous, rowdy, bordering on illegal antics of her best friend, she realized Sara had been trying to squeeze every inch of life she could into every moment. Her heart clenched knowing she'd never realized how little time Sara had left.

Shaking the memory from her head she forced herself to look at one more prospectus. She'd never needed a personal attorney but she was in way over her head and she knew it. She'd just resolved to call Jennifer back in the morning to retain her services when there was a knock at the door.

"John?" He was standing at the door with a large brown shopping bag.

"When was the last time you ate?"

“Well I...”

“Just as I suspected,” he replied as he barreled past her. Setting the bag on her dining room table he began to pull out covered foil containers. “We need silver.”

Maggie was still standing at the open door. “Excuse me?”

He peeled of the cardboard cover of one of the containers and the heavenly scent of marinara filled the room. “Take out from that place on the corner.”

She closed the door and retrieved silverware from its drawer. “This is very nice of you.”

“Not really. If I were really nice, I’d cook my stir fry for you but I’m too hungry to chop veg.” He pointed to the table. “Sit. Eat.” He commanded.

“Yes, sir,” she laughed. She glanced around the opened containers and back up at John. “Garlic knots?” she asked.

John dug deep into the bag and pulled out another foil container.

“Gimme!” she cried as she snatched it from his hand. Ripping the cardboard from its foil grip Maggie inhaled the rich, delicious, mouthwatering scent of her favorite indulgence in the world, Maxim Markofsky’s garlic knots. She popped one in her mouth before setting the container back on the table, next to her seat, of course.

“What?” she asked at John’s dopey grin.

“He insisted I take extra. I thought it was because he was the fan but now I see he knew his audience.”

“Maxim probably figured they were for me.” It never struck her as strange that her favorite Italian restaurant was run by a Russian émigré who came to the Upper West Side by way of Tuscany. This was New York City, the land of Chinese-Cuban fusion. A Russian

chef who swore in fluent Italian was barely a blip on the oddball radar. She sighed in delight as the garlic scent filled her along with another bite of heaven.

“Maxim’s garlic knots are my own personal kryptonite. I am powerless against them.” She pushed the container towards him. “Here, have some.”

John hesitated, as if she’d asked him to stick his head in a lion’s mouth. A really hungry lion. “If you don’t I guarantee I will eat every last one and Ed Lamont will hate you.”

“Why would Ed hate me?”

“Because I won’t be able to fit into my wardrobe for a week.”

“Glasses?” John asked.

Maggie stopped spooning pasta on plates to see him holding a bottle of Merlot. Her smile widened. This was a very nice man.

Garlic knots devoured, Containers tossed and silver washed, they sat on the couch sipping the last of the wine.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“We both had to eat.”

“No. Thank you. This is the first time I’ve relaxed since,” she sighed. “Since Sara died.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

His thumb stroked the back of her hand. She’d never realized what a singularly erotic gesture it was. It felt so natural to lean in and kiss him. A tender, gentle kiss. She

pulled the glass from his hand and set it next to hers on the coffee table. He smiled and her heart stopped for a beat. Tonight, she would stop running.

He cupped her head in his hand and pulled her close. The kiss deepened, tongues did battle and everyone could win this particular war.

Chapter Eight

Maggie gasped.

Lisa Greenwood was a genius. A dyed-in-the wool genius. Normally she directed her brilliance at *'All My Tomorrows'* as head of art direction. Lisa was responsible for everything that turned the soundstages of a Manhattan studio into the homes, offices and occasional crime scene of the suburban Connecticut hometown of the Sinclair family.

Over the course of the last forty-eight hours she had turned the grand ballroom of the Marquis Hotel into old Dublin.

Lisa had come to pay her respects to Maggie and found her hunched over lists of guests, venues, bands and looking like hell. She hadn't known where to begin.

"Maggie, let me do this for you."

"I couldn't."

"It's what I do."

Tears welled. "I shouldn't. She asked me. I'm supposed to."

"And you are. I'll only be acting on your wishes."

After forty-five minutes and several shots of Jameson's finest, Lisa had a plan, the lists, and the number of Sara's attorney. Two days later and she was staring at a setting fit for a queen. A fun-loving queen.

Maggie hadn't even noticed her approach.

"What do you think?" asked Lisa in a tone worthy of a cathedral, not the enormous pub she now found herself in.

"I think Ed doesn't pay you enough."

Lisa exploded with laughter and just as quickly covered her mouth. "Aw, geez, I'm sorry."

Maggie touched the young woman's arm. "Don't be. That's the point of this. That's how she wanted it." She glanced around at the heavy oak bar with brass rail where three bartenders were arranging cases of bottles. Comfortable chairs and intimate tables covered in obviously fine Irish linen had been placed around the room. Tuxedoed servers were putting the finishing touches on a buffet large enough to serve the entire island. Beautiful flowers were arranged in what she was sure were Waterford vases. A small band was tuning up, each of whom looked like they just flown in from the mother country. It was going to be grand.

"How did you do all of this so fast?" she asked in her own cathedral-worthy tone.

"I didn't do it alone, of course. Jennifer was great."

Lisa waved her arm to a young woman speaking to the band. She turned and recognized Sara's attorney.

"How are you doing?" asked Jennifer as she extended her hand.

"Okay, I think." Maggie motioned around the room. "How?"

"Once you had Lisa get in touch with me it wasn't difficult."

"It's amazing what you can accomplish when you say 'money's no object'," Lisa offered.

“Look at all that liquor,” said Maggie with a groan. “We’re going to send people out of here high as kites.”

“We thought of that. Actually, Juliet did. She talked management into reserving a floor of rooms in addition to the rooms for the California people. That should be enough to care for the well and truly hammered. She’s also arranged for a hospitality suite. Guests will be given the information when they arrive.”

“Juliet did this?”

“She made the phone calls.”

“Phone calls?”

“To the guests, the vetted ones anyway.”

“Juliet,” she repeated. “Simmons?” She held her hand up to her shoulder. “About so high, blonde.”

Lisa smiled. “I was working at the studio. She saw the lists and offered to help.”

Maggie stared in amazement. Juliet Simmons, selfish, self-absorbed, Juliet Simmons. Wow.

Her thoughts on how she’d underestimated her on-screen daughter were halted and she inhaled sharply. A beautiful, quirky eight by ten of Sara was perched on a table near the bar. An arrangement of every white rose in New York adorned with a Kelly green ribbon stood just behind the table.

During a traditional Irish wake the dearly departed would be present. A coffin would be in a corner, sometimes open, with mourners filing past in various stages of inebriation. This was one area of tradition Sara had specifically forbidden. “I don’t want

some grainy cell phone shot of me winding up on the cover of the *National Star!*” This was written and underlined on the papers delivered by her lawyer.

Maggie noted with satisfaction that the photo selection she’d agonized over had proven correct. However, there was one thing missing.

She walked to the bar and signaled a bartender.

“Yes, Ms. Warren?”

“A cosmo, please,” she asked and the man produced the perfectly chilled cocktail in a flash. She turned and placed the drink next to Sara’s picture. “Don’t swill,” she whispered. “It’s not lady-like.”

She turned her attention back to the clearly confused bartender. “What’s your name?”

“Mike, ma’am”

“Ever been to an Irish wake, Mike??”

“No ma’am.”

“Well, you’re in for an experience. There are two things I’d like you to do for me.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

She pointed to the drink she’d left next to Sara’s portrait. “First, you are to make sure this drink stays filled and chilled all night.”

“And the second, ma’am?”

Maggie smiled. “Stop calling me ma’am.”

Guests were due at five p.m. Her nerves caught up with her at four-forty-five. Was this what Sara wanted? Would people think she was being cavalier? Were there enough rooms for the Hollywood contingent?

A short whiskey appeared, carried by a very tall, very familiar friend.

“John.” She couldn’t remember ever being so genuinely glad to see someone.

He handed her the drink and smiled. “You looked like you could use this.”

“You have NO idea,” she replied as she sipped the gloriously smooth Irish blend.

“Feel better?” he asked.

“God, yes.” She hadn’t had the chance to talk to John since he’d left her apartment yesterday morning. Come to think of it they hadn’t really talked the night before. She smiled at the memory of his tall frame in the door, smiling, sleepy and late for his early morning call.

John sipped his drink then almost in a whisper said, “I want to say just the right thing here. I guess I’m at a loss with out the writers.” She smiled as he reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I don’t know how to make this better for you.”

At this moment her feelings for John were swirling in between her sorrow and she didn’t know what would happen when the dust settled. Maggie looked up into those famous cornflower blue eyes and thought if she could fall in love it would be very nice John Brown would be there to catch her. “I’m very glad you’re here.” She pulled him towards her for a gentle kiss.

“Sara really liked you.”

He shot her a bemused look. “She did?”

“Yeah, she did. She thought you were yummy.”

John laughed. “Yummy, huh? Not a bad review.”

“And she was a harsh critic.” John smiled and then nodded toward the door. Ed Lamont was standing there with the wife whose name she never could remember. “Let me get them settled before you say hello. He’s jarring enough on a good day.”

Maggie smiled and sipped her drink. “Yummy?” she thought. Did I just tell John he was yummy? Oh, Christ!” She finished off the two fingers of whiskey and went to the bar for what should have been a whole hand, but wasn’t. “I’ll tell him it was the grief.”

“Yeah, right.”

Maggie whirled on the bartender. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry?” said the second bartender she’d confused today.

She glared at Sara’s picture.

Neither she nor Sara had family. It may have been one of the reason’s they’d become so close. What they did have was their New York family. A group of people who’d bonded over jazz bars, martinis and SAG meetings. Maggie’s soap family had come en masse. John leaned down and whispered something into Ed’s ear. Her guess was an admonishment to behave himself and not try to cull any guest stars from the mourners.

Ed clasped her hand. “Margaret. I am SO sorry. Sara was a real talent. She’ll be missed.” Maggie smiled to herself. Ed didn’t acknowledge any work outside the soap world. It was his twenty-four-seven universe. She was sure Ed had never seen her play or read any of her books. He may have heard her monologues during an audition, but they

were never credited. He had no idea if Sara had been the next Oscar Wilde or a complete hack. But still, he stood here with a pasted on smile. Maggie leaned in to kiss his cheek.

“Thank you, Ed. I really appreciate your being here.”

A slim hand slipped into hers. “I’m really sorry about Sara,” said Juliet. Her long blonde hair was pulled into a smooth ponytail. She wore a tasteful black suit and low heels. Her makeup was subtle to the point of invisible. No fan would ever recognize her.

She clasped her hand tight. “Juliet. Thank you so much for all your help. Lisa told me...”

“You’re welcome,” she replied with a soft smile. That was it. *“You’re welcome.”* No showy display of false grief for a woman she barely knew. Just a simple expression of respect for Maggie’s loss. She pulled Juliet into her arms and whispered, “Thank you.”

Friends, colleagues, dignitaries, all stopped to extend their sympathies. The guest book would be a who’s who of the New York social scene. Maggie had just finished greeting the governor, a pompous ass, who’d never miss a photo op. Little did he know that she’d seen to it that privacy screens and curtains would block every angle from the piranhas outside.

“Maggie?”

A familiar-looking tall man with shaggy brown hair and a baby face extended his hand. “I’m Jack Rowe.”

That explained familiar. This was the wunderkind producer-director of the movie version of *‘The Boards’*. Back-to-back superhero blockbusters made Jack Rowe an

unlikely choice for the character-driven story but he'd campaigned heavily for it both with the studio and with Sara.

Jack and members of the production were part of the guests from California who'd flown out for the wake. The rest were actors transplanted to LA from New York after successful runs on stage, each and every one had been monologue clients of Sara's. What started as a business deal had bloomed into long and loyal friendships.

Jack grasped her hand. "Maggie, I can't tell you how sad I am over Sara. She was so much...fun."

"Yes she was."

"We had no idea."

"No one did." She wasn't about to admit to him, neither did she.

"I was going to contact you soon. I need to talk to you about the film," he said.

Maggie hesitated. She didn't think things had moved fast enough for Rowe to find out about inheriting Sara's interest in the movie.

"Ed Katz is your agent, yes?"

"Yes, he is," she replied still unsure where he was headed.

"I'll call and set up a meeting. I'll be in town till the end of the week." He shook her hand and moved on, as if the meeting was already set in stone.

By any standard this was a great party. Most people came in expecting a staid memorial service. They'd probably thought they would make the rounds and leave. It hadn't taken long for them to change their minds.

Alcohol was flowing, people were laughing. Stories were shared and quite a few people were flirting as if they were at a night club instead of a wake. Sara would have been thrilled.

Then she saw him. He was in the middle of the crowd but apart from it. She'd never met him or seen a picture, but she knew.

Jim.

Very tall, about six foot three, with silver hair and carefully groomed goatee, he wore an elegantly tailored charcoal suit and tie. Carrying a long stemmed red rose, he walked to Sara's picture, kissed the petals and placed it on the table. He lifted his glass to her and sipped. Maggie saw tears glistening in his eyes.

"Jim?" He turned to face her. "I'm Maggie."

"Yes, I know."

"You and Sara... We should talk."

They found a table in what was the only quiet corner of the ballroom. "I'm sorry I didn't contact you. All I knew was 'Jim'."

"Jennifer called me." They glanced over to see her sipping a white wine and being chatted up by a very persistent Broadway actor.

"It all happened so quickly, there was no time..."

"It's okay. We both knew this was the way it was going to go."

"She told me how you two met, but she didn't tell me any details about..."

"And you're really mad," Jim said.

"Why does everyone know how mad I am at Sara?" she huffed. "Of course I'm not mad. She was my best friend."

“Of course you’re mad,” he replied with an annoyingly familiar certainty. “She knew you would be but she thought it would be better than letting you suffer with her.”

“Tell me,” she said softly.

Jim took a sip of his whiskey. “We had this house on Lake Huron. Great place. Lots of windows, terrific view, big deck. On the weekends she was feeling good we would take the boat out and I would fish and she would read.” Jim laughed. “She couldn’t bare sticking bait on a hook. Even worse was taking fish off the hook. But she went with me because she knew I loved it.”

He drifted off to a place that Maggie thought must have been beautiful.

“We would eat on the deck and drink wine and watch the sunset. Those weekends were perfect.”

“When she wasn’t feeling good?” Maggie asked.

“I’d hold her head while she vomited from the treatments. Sometimes I would take her to the local hospital. We’d made sure the cabin was near a good facility. Doctor Lewis would come up from the city.” He steeled himself with another sip of whiskey.

“When she wasn’t feeling well I would I’d make her some green tea and bundle her up and carry her out onto the deck. She loved the lake. We both did.”

“I wanted to do so much more but there wasn’t anything else to be done. She kept saying *‘It is what it is’*. All I could do was love her. It was all she’d let me do. She said it was enough.” He sighed, as if weary done to his bones. “She was a frustrating woman.”

Maggie smiled. “She certainly was.”

He smiled. “You know she left me that damn cabin. I thought she just rented it.” He looked off into that beautiful place again. “God, I’m going to miss her.”

He finished the last of his drink and looked up at Maggie, fully returned to the reality of the day. She covered his hand with hers. "I know just what you mean."

Maggie was sitting at a table being forced by John to eat something, again. He'd brought her a plate with twice the food she'd have eaten on a normal day.

He took a bite and made an appreciative groan. "Oh, this is fantastic."

Sara picked at her lobster salad. "We hired Al Krauss from the Food Channel. Or rather we tried to hire him. Apparently he's seen *The Boards* five times."

John took another bite. "Oh my God, this is amazing." He speared a piece of pasta and held it out to her. "You have to try this."

"What is it?"

"Mushroom ravioli."

It started as a snicker. It became a chuckle. It quickly turned into a full out roaring laugh. Tears flowed down Maggie's face. People were beginning to stare, convinced she'd completely lost her grip. She looked straight up and shouted "You never give up!"

John leaned close and whispered, "Are you okay?"

Maggie dabbed at her face as the tidal wave subsided. "Yes, I'm fine." She leaned toward the fork John hadn't thought to put down and finally tasted mushroom ravioli. The pasta was as light as the wine sauce. The mushroom had an almost nutty taste. It was delicious. Damn her.

Maggie started laughing again.

Chapter Nine

Cell phones on mute, television off, newspapers and magazines all face down and peace reigned, at least for a little while. Last night John saw her to her door and then to her bed. He'd helped her out of the black shift which she promptly threw in the trash. His body next to her was a salve to her aching soul. He held her close, kissed her forehead while she cried what she knew were her final tears.

She'd slept until noon, stirring only briefly as John left at five a.m. to make his morning call. Now she sipped a lovely tea she'd found at a little shop on the West Side. The soothing heat filled her along with the memory. It had been the one *'best of'* she'd found.

It was time to let the world back in. She reached for her cell and flipped it on. The screen showed fourteen messages, five from her agent. Nothing in their dealings was usually desperate enough for that many calls in one day. Maybe Ed Lamont decided not to be such a prince about her leave of absence after all.

"Fred, what's up?" asked Maggie.

Fred Katz had been Maggie's agent for nearly ten years. Fred's balding, five-foot five inch frame was not served by the fact that he was fifty pounds overweight and was famous for his hideously loud sport coats. He reminded Maggie of a '68 Voltzwagon. Fred was loud, obnoxious and pushy as hell. In other words, he was the perfect agent. Recommended by the actor playing her then-husband, Fred had negotiated her one of the

more solid contracts in daytime. Fred might not be someone she'd invite to dinner, but she'd come to appreciate his dogged determination on behalf of his clients.

“Maggie, sweetie, I'm devastated I couldn't be there yesterday. It was unavoidable. You know how it is.”

“Of course, Fred. I understand.” Maggie smiled to herself. The only thing that devastated Fred was a missed commission check.

“What's so urgent?”

“Jack Rowe, he called, twice. He wants to meet with you.”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“He was at the wake.” Maggie noticed a pause of surprise.

“He wants to see you today!”

“Today? Oh Fred, I really don't think so. I'm exhausted from...”

“This is Jack- Frickin-Rowe, for Christ's sake. He's called, himself, twice!” Fred gasped as if the concept of this man dialing his own phone was a miraculous occurrence, something akin to finding a free parking space in Manhattan.

Ten more minutes of verbal foot dragging and Maggie had agreed to meet Jack-Frickin-Rowe for lunch.

An hour later, Maggie found herself at the same bistro, at the same table and about to order that same damn chicken salad. It really was great chicken salad.

She'd been seated by the same waiter. "Aw geez, Ms. Warren, I'm so sorry about Ms. Flynn. I saw it in the paper."

"Thank you, Mark."

He smiled, "She seemed like a nice lady. Good tipper."

The young man's smile dissolved as he turned several shades of pale. Soap actors were an every day occurrence. The occasional b-lister movie star would wander in from a shoot. But the sight of Jack-Frickin-Rowe walking toward her table had frozen the waiter in his tracks.

"Maggie, so good of you to see me," Jack said as he leaned in for a two cheek kiss.

The poor boy was still rooted to the floor. Maggie nodded at him as if frozen waiter was the specialty of the house. "Jack, this is Mark Callahan. I've worked with him on my show."

Jack showed himself to be a good sport and extended his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Mark."

"It's very nice to meet you, sir."

"Call me, Jack,"

"Mark, could you please get us some ice teas?" Maggie asked.

"Ice teas?" he replied as if he were repeating a new language. Then the damn broke, reality flooded in and the young actor realized he was babbling in front of the most important producer in Hollywood. "Ice teas! Yes, ma'am. Right away."

Maggie laughed. "That was nice of you. Of course, he'll never get our order right."

“If he remembers to take it,” said Jack. “Did you really work with him?”

“I stretched. He was up for the part of Chase Foster. He was very good.”

“But Sawyer Brown was better?”

“Yes. You follow soaps?”

“I manage to catch an episode on occasion,” he said. “I was going to have this conversation with you next month but my schedule has pushed the shooting schedule up. We start exterior shoots in six weeks.”

Mark brought the ice teas and menus. Jack smiled at the quivering waiter as he splashed ice tea on the sleeve of his thousand dollar suit. Jack-Frickin-Rowe just went up a notch from demanding producer to potential nice guy. Maggie would reserve judgment.

“Part of Sara’s deal was that you be offered ‘*Claire*’.” He smiled. “After all, ‘*Claire*’ was written for you.”

“Jack, I’m flattered but ‘*Claire*’ was twenty years ago.”

“She rewrote it.”

“What?”

“She rewrote it, for you. She would only sign if we offered you the part.”

“And if I turn it down?”

“Then we go with the original. This version, this ‘*Claire*’, she’s all you. No one else could play her.” He reached into the soft-leather, oh-so-California, man-bag and pulled out a script. . I know this is a bit out of the loop, but Sara was very specific.”

Maggie nodded. “Of course she was.”

“I’ll be at the Ritz-Carleton the rest of the week. We can firm things up before I have to get back to the coast.”

“You’re awfully sure of yourself.”

He gave his head a guilty little tilt. “Sorry. I do that.” He reached for her hand in a move that would have been disingenuous in anyone else. “All I’m asking is for you to read it.” He smiled and sat back in his chair. “Don’t let my boyish good-looks fool you. I’m a selfish, evil bastard and I’ll do what it takes to get you to say yes.”

Maggie laughed. “I don’t believe it.”

“That I’m a selfish, evil bastard?”

“No. That you’d admit to it.”

“Oh, really?” he grinned. He held out his arm and pushed up the arm of his tea-stained suit coat to reveal what appeared to be monogrammed gold cufflinks. She squinted a bit to make out the letters. S. E. B.

Maggie looked the most powerful producer in the business square in the eye and burst out laughing.

Chapter Ten

Claire was her. Jack-Frickin-Rowe was right. *Claire* as she'd originally written was a late-twenties "only a matter of time before I'm a superstar" optimist. This *Claire* had spent the intervening years doing commercials and voice-over work. This *Claire* was tired and on the verge of giving up.

This was Maggie's part and she knew it. They say that every actor has one part that could make a career. Maggie had thought it was *Loralei Sinclair*. She was known by every daytime viewer who'd turned on a set in the last twenty years. She got good tables at restaurants, not the best, but definitely good. She had good friends and a happy, comfortable life. At least she did.

Until Sara had left her this one last legacy.

She didn't have to look at the caller id to know who it was. "Hi, Fred."

Fred dispensed with the amenities. "So?"

"The chicken salad is the best in the city. You should try it." She stifled a snicker.

"You're killing me here!"

Maggie took pity on Fred's blood pressure. "He offered me *Claire*."

"*Claire*? In what? I heard he's planning a new disaster pic with Joss Baldwin."

Leave it to Fred. There were times he took his low-rent persona too seriously. “No Fred, *Claire*, from “*The Boards*.”

“You mean that thing you did twenty years ago?”

“No, Fred. That thing I did twenty years ago that’s been playing on Broadway for the last five years.”

“It’s a character piece, sweetheart. And for you, it *was* twenty years ago.”

Four hours ago Fred couldn’t wait for this meeting. Now he wanted her to take a pass. Maggie had a feeling a very big shoe was about to hit the floor.

“It’s been rewritten. For me,” she was getting pissed. She wasn’t about to tell him the real reason Rowe had come to her first.

“Sweetheart, I know the play. You dra...took me opening week. A bunch of characters all moaning about their lives.”

Fred seemed to be in denial about the dynamics of soap opera.

“Translate that to the big screen and you’ve got maybe ten minutes of face time in a ninety minute movie.”

“I want to do it.”

“Sweetheart, you’re a big star. You deserve better.”

“I’m doing it.”

“We haven’t seen contracts. They won’t be paying much. Rowe’s never done a film like this. And the filming will probably conflict with your schedule. I don’t know how much more understanding Ed Lamont is going to be.” Fred took a deep, impatient breath

“It’s not like she was family.”

If she could have reached through the phone and snatched out his vocal cords, Fred would finally, blessedly shut the hell up.

Maggie's calm was made of pure steel. "Fred, you don't seem to be listening. I'm doing it. I don't care what it takes to make this work, but I'm doing it."

Fred's voice softened to that fatherly tone used when speaking to small children and lost tourists. "Now Maggie, you have to understand. Your contract is up in three months. I've been working for you, like always, but these are tough times. Top tier actors like you are dropping left and right.

THUD.

That's what this was all about. The disaster pic would start filming in the summer, three months after she signed her new contract. The contract that would've had the clause that allowed her to make the movie, and would have, more importantly, secured his continued commission checks.

"I'm not signing." Maggie wasn't quite sure why she said it, but she was sure she meant it.

"What do you mean you're not signing?"

"We should give Ed enough of a heads up on this so they can write me out. I owe him that."

"Write you out? What the hell do you mean write you out?" Fred paused and she could almost see him try to calm himself. "Sweetheart, I know you want to do you're friend's play. We'll try to get Ed to work around it. There's no need to go crazy."

"You tell him or I will. Come to think of it, I will."

“For what?” All semblance of calm was gone from his voice. “You’re going to toss a twenty year career for ten minutes in a movie that might go right to video? Where the hell do you think you’re going to go then? Not a lot of work out there for aging soap actors.”

“We’re done, Fred.”

Maggie clicked off her cell along with her relationship with her agent and the job she’d had for decades.

Maggie held Jack off for two days before she’d finally agreed to meet him at his hotel. It wasn’t arrogance. She just didn’t want to appear like a cheap date. She would behave as if meeting with big time producers for major movie roles was something she did every day. She’d act.

“Maggie, come in,” Jeans and an Old-Navy t shirt made Jack look every day of his twenty nine years, damn him. If the bike messenger wardrobe was a surprise, his lack of staff was a shock.

“I thought you typical Hollywood-types never traveled without a staff of twenty.”

“I’m from Far Rockaway, the staff is scouting locations and I’ve never been a ‘typical type’ of anything.”

Maggie blushed at the slight dressing down, no matter how much she deserved it.

He motioned to the small conference table at the center of the not overly extravagant suite. “You’re not typical either.”

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t tell me the other day I was having lunch with the boss.”

He'd heard. Of course he had. It might take weeks for the legal papers to be processed for Sara's estate, but it only took the time one secretary needed to call one friend in low places for a man like Jack Rowe to find out.

"Jack, I'm no one's boss."

"Do you know why I begged to do this movie?" Like all powerful people, even young ones, he answered his own questions. "I saw '*The Boards*' when it opened. I was still a production assistant at Goldstar. I'd been living in New York for four years, beating down every door I could find. I saw the play and knew someone 'got it'. The rejection, the pain, the crappy temp jobs. Someone understood, really understood why we do it."

Maggie smiled. "We don't have a choice."

He smacked his hand on the table. "Exactly!"

"I've been seeing this movie in my head for five years. I thought if I didn't get it on film I'd never stop thinking about it."

"Sara said that about her writing."

Jack smiled. "After I secured the rights, I worked closely with Sara on the screenplay."

"You did?" It was unusual for a writer to be so closely involved in the film version of their work. Hollywood SOP was the writer sold their rights and prayed the film even vaguely resembled their original work.

"Together we were making sure both our visions of the work came together. She was happy with the last revision."

"A couple of actors I had to convince her of, but we came to agreement on most of the cast. The one actor we both instantly agreed on was you."

“You were right, Sara was right. I’ll do it.”

Jack sighed as he slumped against the wing back chair. “Thank God! Your *Claire* is going to take this film from a study of the industry to a film everyone can relate to.”

Maggie’s smile faltered. “I don’t know about that…”

“Maggie, everyone gets to that place, the place *Claire* is at. That place where we’re sick of who and what we are. Where we decide, are we going to keep going in a straight line or are we going to jump off the damn cliff and pray the shoot opens?”

“I need a drink,” she said, not know why the hell she’d said it. Maybe it was the feeling of free fall in her chest.

Jack laughed and walked over to a small stocked bar. He poured two fingers of what looked like whiskey and handed her the tumbler. “Will this do?”

Just a whiff told her it was a perfect single malt. “God, yes.” She replied as she took a healthy gulp.

Jack sat down and reached for a remote. There was one character we hadn’t found yet, *Charlie*.” *Charlie* was a comic thread that ran throughout the play. He was an office worker/actor who was desperate to get to his audition and get back to work before his boss fired him. *Charlie* finally finds his audition and gives a reading that brought even the toughest critics to tears. The original *Charlie*, Jeff Singer, was thoroughly ensconced in a red-hot film career.

“You’ll never get Jeff. He’s so busy filming I was surprised he took time off for the wake.”

“I know.”

“You asked?”

“I took a shot,” he shrugged. “Jeff said he would have loved to, but he’s got back-to-back films out of the country. I had auditions here the last few days. I think I’ve found our *Charlie*. Jack hit the remote and a fresh faced young man appeared, a very familiar young man.

“Hi, I’m Mark Callahan.”

Maggie looked at Jeff and he grinned. “Just watch.”

Mark was funny, sweet, handsome, charming, everything Charlie needed to be. But the reading. God, the reading. It was one of the most important moments of the play. Her heart pounded with nerves for her ice tea spilling waiter. Maggie watched until she heard the casting director say ‘Thank you’ through what she thought were choked-back tears.

“My God, “she whispered.

“He’s great, isn’t he?”

“He’s perfect.” She stared at Jack. “Why?”

“I could tell you liked the kid, you said he was good and I wanted you to like me. I put his name on the list. He was one of twenty *Charlie’s* we saw in the last two days.”

“He could have been terrible.”

“True, but you would have liked me for giving the kid a chance. I told you I’d do anything to get you to sign.”

“Yeah you did,” Maggie smiled.

“So what do you think? Should I make the kid an offer?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“You now have all Sara’s interests in the movie. I would have asked her. Now I’m asking you.”

Maggie smiled. Mark Callahan, server of the best chicken salad in New York, was going to be a movie star.

Chapter Eleven

“I’ll fly out on the 22nd. We’ll have all Christmas week together.” John tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“I know you’re busy. You do have that trial to deal with.”

“They’ll never prove a thing.”

“It was rather rude of you to push me off that bridge.”

“You set the feds on me! Talk about rude.” He smiled as he kissed the palm of her hand. “Besides, Ed insisted on it. This way you can return from the dead.”

She looked up into his beautiful eyes. “I’m not going to.”

“I know,” he whispered.

She knew what he wanted but she couldn’t say the words. Somehow it was understood that to speak the words might burst the bubble. Neither of them was ready to risk that yet..

The past three months had been a whirl of soap work, movie prep and reading massive amounts of contracts. Getting rid of Fred was a surprisingly difficult task, aided only by her now indispensable attorney and a suitcase of cash. The movie contract had been by comparison, a piece of cake. She was to be paid a small but respectable salary and a small but even more respectable percentage of the gross.

Getting out of her soap meant weeks of mad filming of a front burner story that would play out until February sweeps, culminating in Chase pitching Lorelei off the bridge into the depths of the dead and not so dead soap characters. John had insisted on a weekend at his place in Connecticut to make up for his heinous offence. She smiled. She hadn't had a weekend like that in years. Then she blushed.

“What?” he asked.

“I was just thinking of your poor grandma's antique settee.”

“I'll put the carpenter on speed dial if you promise to spend a few weeks with me after you wrap.”

Through all of the chaos, there was John. Kind, funny, sexy, peaceful John. Quick lunches between scenes, movie nights featuring Maxim's garlic knots and heated debates on who was better, Gary Cooper or Cary Grant. Sunday mornings sleeping in after not sleeping at all Saturday nights. He loved her, she was sure of it. And she loved him. She'd never met anyone like him and she knew for certain she never would again

“I promise.”

John smiled and her heart leapt. God she loved that smile. “I have to go.”

“I know.”

In twenty minutes she was getting on a flight to LA and her life would never be the same, with or without John.

“Hello Ms., Warren. Can I get you a cocktail? The flight attendant asked.

“Yes. Apple martini.”

“Of course,” the attendant replied as she moved among the few other passengers in first class.. She glanced out the window at clouds drifting by, drifting being a relative term when traveling several hundred miles an hour.

“Here you are, Ms. Warren.”

The attendant handed her a drink, frosted and pink, with a cherry. She took it from the girl and smiled. She looked up and whispered, “Very funny.”

Maggie sipped her cosmo and wondered where in LA she could find a decent mushroom ravioli.