
Chapter 1

Oh, Dad, what have you done?

Saffron Sinclair stared at her father in complete disbelief. Maybe she had heard him incorrectly. Maybe she was having a very strange nightmarish-kind of dream right this minute and was not really in their little kitchen with the yellow polka dot curtains and turquoise chairs her mother had loved so much. This could not be happening.

“You did what?” she asked again. She needed her father to repeat the warped thing he had just uttered seconds ago so he could follow it with a *just kidding* laugh.

“Red, it’s okay. It needed to be done. It’s the only way out and finally we’ll be free of all these dark clouds hanging over our heads. Dad did the only thing he could do.”

Saffron turned her head in the direction of her sister, Marigold, a picture of perfection with her sunshine blonde hair pulled into a neat bun and her brown eyes wide and innocent. Dressed in a pale pink sweater and tweed knee-length skirt, she looked fragile and sweet. She hugged an orange coffee mug between her fingers as was her custom and Saffron felt the

familiar surge of protectiveness she always felt for her twenty-two-year-old sister who was a year older than Saffron.

“Are you serious?” Saffron cried. “Goldy, what Dad did is unthinkable low and I can’t believe... I can’t believe you’re okay with this.” She swung her attention back to her father, the real culprit here, not Marigold. “Dad, you have to give them the money back.”

“You know I can’t do that. You don’t go back on your word with those types of men.” Alan Sinclair lowered his head and fiddled with the paint peeling off the yellow wooden kitchen table. A moment of guilt washed over her as he bowed his head, ageing right before her eyes.

Ugh! How could everything be so fucking unfair? How did they end up here with this mess on their heads? Oh, yes. Her mother passed away five years ago from cancer and to keep their struggling family restaurant afloat, her father had taken out loans against everything they owned—which was meager to start off with. And when he poured everything into the restaurant only to have it fail epically, his frustration had caused him to revert to a habit he had kicked fifteen years ago. Gambling.

He’d stopped caring about his daughters, and the restaurant. He gambled away money they didn’t have and played with really bad people who had broken their windows in the middle of night, and then his wrists because he hadn’t paid them back yet.

When that happened three months ago, he had confided in his daughters, weeping at the stupid mistakes he had made, the shady business deals he had been threatened into doing, and the kind of people he had become involved with. He had begged their forgiveness. Saffron and Marigold had done so immediately. But Saffron knew that without her mother there to set their father straight, he would be the man he’d been when they were so much younger. He would lie, cheat, and steal for his gambling habit.

Saffron came up with a plan to simply leave New York alto-

gether and start all over again somewhere else. Anywhere else. But her father had told them they would never be safe. Those thugs he associated with would find them, and hurt them. And then there were the banks who would be after him, too.

What a mess.

Marigold had to drop out of school where she'd been studying for a prestigious degree in art because there were no more funds to pay for her education. Saffron had to work three jobs as a waitress just to feed them now. They were going to lose the house to the banks, just as they had the restaurant. And now possibly their lives were at stake, too.

But her father had loved her mother, and losing the house meant losing her all over again. He just hadn't been the same since her death and Saffron couldn't blame him. That was when he'd told them everything, when the house was going to be taken from them and with his wrists in casts after the crime thug had broken them. He'd wept pitifully then.

Saffron paced the floor, biting her lips and shaking her head every five seconds. She really had to stop asking how they'd gotten to this point—it happened the moment her mother died, their lives had gone downhill with no hope at all.

But there must be a way for her to stop this from happening and still save their house and pay off the thugs her father owed. Panic at her hopelessness and helplessness tormented her. She usually excelled at being resourceful and came up with solutions quickly.

“I don't mind, Red,” Marigold said softly. “It could have been worse. I met them and even though I wasn't sure which one it was going to be, they looked handsome and decent. I think I can do this.”

“What? Marigold, a few months ago you were studying art, you were going to be a famous painter, and now suddenly you're all on board with this? Are you serious?”

“We don’t have a choice,” she murmured. “And Dad wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t agreed to it.”

“It was a life or death situation, pumpkin,” Alan said, looking at Saffron pleadingly. “Do you think this is easy for me?”

Yes, she did. With the amount of money at stake, Saffron did think it was easy for her father. But guilt quickly washed over her. She knew under normal circumstances her father wouldn’t willingly do what he had, right? But still, it wasn’t in her nature to just go and accept things because they happened and they couldn’t be changed. She was never going to be as complacent or passive as her sister.

Marigold never threw a tantrum or got upset or said a bad word. She was happy to help at any expense to herself and that’s why Saffron had taken on the role of her protector or else everyone would walk all over her. Like her father was doing right now.

But she knew her sister better than she knew herself and the only joy Marigold ever experienced and was selfish about was her art. She was a stunning artist, her talent took Saffron’s breath away, and now she had given it up because their father had made some selfish, stupid-ass decisions. Saffron knew without her art, Marigold could easily lapse into depression. That was never going to happen. Neither was this cockamamie deal her father had struck up to help them out of their fix.

“They were going to hurt Dad, Red. More seriously this time. But because of the deal Dad made, he’s paid off Thunder Montgomery in full and we can now pay off all our other loans. It’s a small price for me to pay really,” Marigold said quietly, staring into her coffee. “Thunder Montgomery threatened to take us as payment for Dad’s debts.”

Thunder Montgomery! Let him, Saffron thought. Never had she wanted to put a bullet into a man more than the thug who was ruining their lives. Make that six bullets. One for each of his balls and two each for both his heads.

“But why Marigold, Dad? She can’t handle this... this... You know that.” She couldn’t even bring herself to say it out loud. The whole thing was ludicrous. “Why didn’t you call me instead of Marigold?”

“Because Marigold will do this quietly. And she came no questions asked. My life was at stake and if I’d called you, you would have given me a lecture first and I might have been killed. She came and she agreed to it and she was approved of, so to speak.”

“Approved of?” Saffron cried. It stung a little that her father had that little faith in her. In a life or death situation, nothing would have stopped her. If nothing else, she would have gone there specifically to knock her knee into Montgomery and tell him to go and find a proper job and leave them the hell alone. “And I would have put up a fight, right, even though it was the right thing to do. To fight this. Not to just accept it. We could have come up with other solutions.”

“Marigold understands how much we needed the money and I wouldn’t have done this if she’d said no. What kind of a father do you think I am? I would never force my daughter to do something she doesn’t want to.”

“You don’t even know the man you’re dealing with, Dad. He could be a serial killer.”

“He’s very rich,” her father said.

“Oh, right. That automatically makes him a saint.”

Saffron threw her head back and dragged her hands through her hair. She couldn’t let Marigold do this no matter how much of a knight her father thought this guy was just because he was rich. It would ruin Marigold’s whole life. She was meant to be a famous artist. Marry someone who would adore the crap out of her. Someone established and smart, who knew how to take care of her and would ensure she would never have money problems. Someone who would protect her like Saffron had done her whole life.

This deal her father had made with the devil himself was not something Marigold would be able to walk away from when it was over. She would become involved, entangled, and that might lead to a lifetime of misery for her.

No. She couldn't let Marigold do this.

"You didn't ask me if I wanted to do this, Dad. So, it's unfair. You and Mom were all about being fair when it came to the two of us. I want to do this."

"Saffron," her father sighed.

"Is Marigold's name specifically written on that deal you made with him?"

"No, not really," her father answered. "But—"

"Then it doesn't matter which Sinclair daughter he gets, does it?" They might be sisters, but maybe what her father meant was Marigold didn't have pitch-black hair streaked with red, and tattoos on her ankles and wrists plus the ones her father didn't know about on the rest of her body. Marigold didn't have multiple ear piercings, or wear rings on all her fingers and two of her toes. Marigold didn't wear tattered jeans and thigh-high boots, or short plaid skirts. Her mother always said Marigold was Gold—subtle and serene. And Saffron was Red—fiery and unapologetic. Their mother had said they were perfect shades together even if they were complete opposites in looks and personalities.

"So, fair is fair. We'll settle this the way we settle everything. Toss a coin." Saffron could take Marigold's place. Her life was going nowhere very slowly and she had nothing to lose, and at least she had the emotional strength to see this through and come out of it just fine.

"Red, no. I'll do this. I'm okay, really."

"Then let's just toss the coin and see what happens. You know what we always say—"

"If it's going to happen it will happen," Marigold finished. "But you always win," she added.

“Fair is fair. Get a coin.”

“Red.”

“Gold.”

Marigold got up from her seat and found a coin in an old cookie jar. Saffron did what she always did when they played this game and she needed to win. She put her hand behind her back and crossed her fingers. She had to win this time. Her sister’s life depended on it.

“Tails,” Marigold said. She always chose first. She flipped the coin, caught it and placed it over the back of her hand. She slowly lifted her other hand.

Heads.

When relief washed over Marigold’s face for a mere split second, Saffron knew she had made the right choice by insisting on the coin toss and then winning the game. Her sister was not cut out for this. Neither was Saffron, but she wasn’t one to go down meekly. The devil their father made the deal with had no idea who he was going to be dealing with when she arrived.

Marigold hugged her tightly. “Let’s do it again. Please,” she pleaded. It was just like her sister to push aside her true feelings and suffer through the things she hated. Well, that was over now.

“No way.” She pulled back from Marigold but still held on to her arms. “You are going back to school now that we have this money. And you are going to be a famous artist one day soon. Me, I’m going to clean up the last of Dad’s messes and everything will be okay.” She wiped Marigold’s tears and hugged her again then set her aside.

“And, Dad, I don’t care what you do with the rest of the money. I really don’t because I’m done with all this crap from you, but one million dollars goes to Marigold and you can’t touch it. I think it’s time you grew up, Dad. You have to take responsibility and you will soon have a clean slate to do it.”

Saffron’s guilt rose a notch at her digs at her father. She loved him more than her life and she had forgiven him the instant he

came clean about his gambling problem and the financial disaster he had sucked them into. He was still mourning the loss of their mother. But this cycle had to stop.

Still, she threw her arms around her father, who was still seated at the kitchen table.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I know it’s been hard.” She kissed the side of his forehead and he held on to her arms wrapped around him.

“I love you, Red.” She couldn’t mistake the tears in his voice. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being such a loser.”

“Oh, you’re no loser,” Saffron piped, giving him another smooch before she poured herself a glass of juice. “I have to say, you’re a genius. Well, except for the part where you picked the wrong daughter, but for the rest, you are a genius. You single-handedly now sold the *right* daughter off for a whopping three million dollars. We get to pay off stupid Montgomery, pay the banks, and this house becomes ours forever and we get to send Gold back to that fancy art school, and you’ll still have enough left over for a fancy retirement. We’re sorted for life. I’ll say cheers to that.”

Saffron didn’t want any of the money. She really didn’t need any for herself anyway.

She took a long sip of the juice. Now that she had saved her sister from god knew what, it would be up to her to finish the task. Suddenly a bundle of nerves settled in her tummy even though she put on a brave face and false bravado.

Marigold helped her pack quickly. Her father had made arrangements for Marigold to be picked up, probably in a limo, for all Saffron knew. And since Saffron had thwarted whatever plans had been made already, she decided to drive up there herself, a whole day earlier.

This was all happening very fast and Saffron was grateful for that, or she might do something totally uncharacteristic and break down in tears. She was, in reality, even less prepared and

worse equipped than Marigold if she were really honest with herself. But there was no turning back.

Within an hour she was bundled up into her I'm-on-my-death-bed car, her bags in the back seat and a lump in her throat as she waved goodbye to her family. She refused to cry. This was only going to be temporary, if she had any say in the matter. She had all the confidence in the world she would be making the return journey back home within days and they'd be three million bucks richer and without a single problem. As long as her father stayed in check. She might have said she was writing him off, but she'd never do that for real.

She just had to play this game right.

Using her phone's GPS and still getting lost, after two extra hours of driving around in circles, she finally embarked on the longest ass driveway to have ever been invented to what was a ridiculously massive house right on the mountain. It was like a cozy cabin on steroids. She whimpered as she clutched her steering wheel, her car groaning as it made its way up toward the house. The place was practically in the middle of the goddamn forest. No other life existed for acres and acres. All before her was private land. An entire forest for a backyard. Oh, fuck!

What kind of a criminal was this guy? And he was a criminal, or he wouldn't have been at Montgomery's tables gambling, and he certainly wouldn't pay an old man for his twenty-one-year-old daughter. God help her. The only thing keeping her going was the thought that this could have been Marigold.

Chewing bubble gum nervously, she finally came to a stop—or rather her car huffed and puffed and said *no fucking farther*. She got out of the car, pulled her sunglasses onto her head and whistled. The house was just plain ludicrous. No one in their right mind needed that much space, like, ever.

Suddenly everything got that much more real. Oh boy.

The massive door opened. If there weren't any cameras around the property, then certainly the sound of her rust bucket

car alerted anyone who was home of her arrival. A man stepped out of the door, drying his hands on a towel. All six-feet-plus of him eyed her with a look of suspicion. His eyebrows drew together as he scrutinized her. She waved carelessly as if to say *Okay, hi, Mr. Suspicious, you don't bother me at all. Look all you like.*

“Yoo-hoo. I’m looking for Carter Blake? You him?” she shouted from the bottom of what could only be described as a flight of stairs leading to a pyramid—aka the mansion on the mountain.

The man stood with his hands on his hips, the towel dangling from his fingers as he continued to stare at her. Okay then. Stunned, much? Unperturbed, Saffron opened her passenger door and hurled out her bags—just two, she wasn’t planning on staying for too long—then made the journey up those stairs. Heaven help her, her sides were aching by the time she got half-way up. Her bags weren’t even that heavy but she wasn’t an exercise fanatic.

When she looked up, intent on sarcastically yelling she was fine hauling her bags up the demon-borne stairs, two other men had joined her welcoming party.

They all looked at her like she was a freak crawling up the stairs. And so they stood; one still with his hands on his hips, the suspicion in his eyes even more pronounced now that he had a close up view of her, another with his arms folded in a definite no-nonsense way while the third one stroked his jaw.

They were all massive. All about the same height, over six-foot and all super muscular. They looked like lumberjacks in their flannel checked shirts and jeans. Only, like the house behind, they looked larger than life, god-like even. Everything seemed so magnified to her. She wondered which one of them was Carter Blake and who the hell the other two were.

Dying of thirst—okay maybe that was an exaggeration, but she was very thirsty—she conquered the stairs and arrived at their feet. Oh hell, up close, they were freaking gorgeous. All

three so different and yet she couldn't decide who was sexiest, the most stunning.

She dropped her bags at her feet, about three steps below them, and wiped her forehead. Even though there was a definite chill in the air because winter was around the corner, she felt hot and sweaty and breathless. The panic that had been roiling inside her all the way over here, increased and filled her entire body. She worried she might puke all over their expensive shoes and their stone-tiled floor.

How on earth was she going to do this? She barely knew her way around sex. She had done it only once before even though everyone thought she was an expert. Okay, she gave off that impression because it went her with character and her style and it meant she could be someone else and not herself.

And that one time when she did have sex, it had been horrendous. So horrendous. Her boyfriend, a sexy popular football player, had been hot and heavy for her—only to penetrate her one second and pull out and flee the next. She never heard from him again. He left town.

Now she was left thinking there was something wrong with her. And wondering if she was a virgin or not. How fucked-up, right?

And here she was. Sold for sex.

She might have thought Marigold didn't have the emotional stamina to go through the whole crazy thing, but Marigold did have a steady boyfriend—she'd had two, actually, in total—and really she had more sex than Saffron led everyone to believe she herself did. God help her. She had to keep the reason for this endeavor in mind: her father's safety and him hopefully getting his life on track; Marigold going back to school, her future taken care of; her mother's beloved house never threatened with foreclosure ever again. Basically, a cushy future for her family. She just had to make sure this here didn't last too long.

"Who are you?" The guy stroking his jaw observed her with

curious intent, his brows, which looked soft and yet manly, settling in the center of his forehead as he frowned at her.

“Me? Why, I’m Saffron.” She held out her hand. Not one of them took it. “You know, Alan Sinclair’s daughter? I’m your baby-maker, the one you paid my father a cool three million dollars for? Now, which one of you guys is going to be my baby’s daddy?”