

TIME FOR CHANGE



PIPPA GREATHOUSE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2011

Sadie hitched her shorts over her slim hips and checked them in the mirror. Sure, they were a little short but she liked the way Troy couldn't keep his eyes off her when she wore them.

She tied a pale blue blouse around her midriff but decided against it. That was too much skin, even for Troy's benefit. Less than a week before Christmas, and the weather was as warm as summer. It might be the last day she could wear an outfit like this.

The phone rang and she reached for it, but only succeeded knocking it off and under the bed.

"Dammit!" Scrambling to her knees, she leaned down, waiting for it to ring again. The blue light flashed, and she dived under the bed as far as she could to grab it, grumbling. Troy?

"I swear; he'd better not be canceling on me again." She glanced at the number.

It was Amy. Thank God.

She hit the button, tucking the phone under her chin as she put one foot up on the bed, fastening her boot.

“Hey, girlfriend.”

“Hi, Sadie. You’re panting.”

“I just crawled out from under the bed with the phone. What’s up?”

“Ah. Mom invited you to come to Bloomfield for the weekend.” She chuckled. “Course, you realize you’ll have to watch your mouth.”

“Funny. Please tell your mom thank you, I’d love to come, but Troy is supposed to go to the Christmas party with me at the college tonight, to mingle with the department heads.”

“If he doesn’t stand you up again. If he does, you have my permission to call him any name you want. What are you wearing?”

“Now? The tan shorts and a matching t-shirt. Tonight, the slinky little black dress.”

“Well, if he doesn’t give you anything you want after seeing you in that, he’s just plain weird.”

Sadie laughed. “I’ll pass the message along. You’re a good friend.”

“Lord knows, I try. If he doesn’t show, I’ll personally come over and beat him to a pulp. Not even his own mother will recognize him until he whines.”

Sadie’s mouth tightened into a flat line. “Amy.”

“I know. Sorry, Sadie. It’s just that I think you deserve better than someone like Troy Thomas. Well, anyway, let me know if you want to come and we’ll plan a great weekend.”

“Thanks, and tell your mom hi. I really appreciate it. I’ll give you a call later.” She ended the conversation with a poke at the phone and turned toward the mirror for a last look.

She frowned at her long curly hair, wondering if it would ever decide exactly what color it wanted to be. It was a golden blonde mixed with darker streaks that sometimes appeared more red than gold. She was trim enough. She reached for the lipstick in a pale

peach. Smoothing it on, she paused to give her face a glance. Her skin was the same fair color as her mother's had been. Her light sea-green eyes, she had inherited from her father. Her nose was too short for her liking, but not too bad, and her lips were full. Her friends often told her that her biggest fault was her language. Amy affectionately labeled her as having a 'potty mouth,' and she couldn't help but admit she had a tendency to say what she thought; Troy had told her the profanity she spewed sounded as if it came out of the mouth of a baby bunny rabbit, not entirely the effect she had been striving for.

She turned, looking up at the small painting that hung on the wall of her bedroom. It was a portrait of her fifth great grandmother, Sadie Malinda Camron, for whom she'd been named. The likeness had always hung in the dining room at home before her parents had been killed. As a child, she had often looked at the other side, which had only 'Sadie Malinda Camron, 1804-1882,' scribbled on it. Nothing else. Her mother had often reminded her that she had not only inherited her ancestor's name, but her looks.

She leaned over to make sure her other boot was fastened, when she felt a rumbling in the floor and straightened. An earthquake? That was strange. She hadn't felt one of those in a long time. She stood up straight, wondering where Troy was. Had he felt it too?

Troy Thomas was a tall, muscled, blonde, vice-president of a growing corporation. He liked to accompany her to the university parties and receptions, but Sadie had suspected for a long time that it was to meet other executives of the school more than to spend time with her. But that was okay. Wasn't it? Or was he using her?

A month ago, she would not have allowed herself to even think that. What was it that Troy wanted? Why could she not seem to please him? It had occurred to her that he might be seeing someone else. He had, on the surface, seemed like the perfect man for her. But when the surface layer was removed, he seemed shallow and self-centered. Deep down, she knew that Amy was absolutely right. She kept telling herself that he needed another chance; he, on the

other hand, kept throwing away every chance she offered. She was almost ready for a change.

Almost.

Tucking her phone into her pocket, she picked up her leather purse and hurried out the bedroom into the living room, taking a moment to glance around at the kitchen. Except for a glass sitting in the sink, it was clean. She thought briefly about packing a suitcase to take to Amy's, in case Troy didn't show, and then decided against it. She would not allow herself to think that way.

She shook her head and hurried toward the front door, grabbing her keys from the little glass bowl and taking the stairs two at a time down to the ground floor. Her parents, when they had passed away three years ago in a car wreck, had left her enough money to finish her classes at the university. She had taken the small two-room upstairs apartment because it was less expensive than the dormitory on campus.

The little Beetle answered her with a high-pitched squeal when she turned the key, before kicking in and starting. She hoped it would keep working until she was out of school. This was her last year, so Sadie was watching her finances carefully. But she was fully aware they were dwindling. One more semester, and she would be out of funds. But by then, she should be able to support herself teaching science or doing research. She had already been contacted by the heads of several schools in the area about teaching and by two of the medical centers in town.

But as if to reassure her, the car's engine finally roared to life, and she backed out of the driveway. Traffic in Cape Girardeau was heavy on Fridays, and this one was no different.

As usual, the stoplight at Kingshighway and William caught her.

Sadie's mind wandered as she waited. She had awakened this morning with a lingering dream. A tall man, with dark eyes and curly dark hair that spilled over his forehead, was leaning over her. The sensation that she was cherished had remained in the air, almost tangibly. His gaze down at her was chiseled and stern, yet

she still seemed to feel that he cared deeply about her. It was not the first time that dream had occurred.

“Odd,” she said softly to herself. How had she managed to feel cared for and loved, when he had not even been smiling? His face had, in fact, been quite forbidding. How could those two things go together? She would adore having someone like that to care for her. She tried mentally putting Troy into that picture.

No. The thought of Troy was like forcing a square peg into a round hole. She couldn’t make him fit.

Still, Troy was here and in her life. She pulled out her cell phone and brought up the text screen, looking for one from him. She was fifteen minutes early; that was good. Troy hated to be kept waiting. She looked for his car up and down the street, but there was no sign of it. He could have walked; his building was only two blocks away. But Troy never walked anywhere when he could drive his new BMW, instead.

Terri, the owner of the coffee shop, smiled at her as she entered. “Can I get you something, Sadie? Or are you meeting someone?”

“Supposedly, Troy,” she said, grinning. “If he doesn’t show in a few minutes, I’ll go ahead and order a latte.”

“We still have pumpkin spice, if you’re interested.” Terri’s ever-present smile was welcoming. “It’s so popular, we kept it on for another month.”

“Good!” Sadie looked around the shop, which was a bit empty today. Mid-terms were over, at last, and students had begun going home for Christmas. But it was hard to even think of a white Christmas when it was in the seventies outside. Picking out Troy’s favorite booth, she sat down to wait. Wishing she had brought her laptop with her did no good; it was at home. Instead, she checked her cell phone again, to see if there was a text from him.

Nothing.

Finally, she looked up to see Terri, and she forced a smile.

“I’ll have that latte now. Thanks.”

“Sure, Sadie. Bring it right out.”

She waited until Terri had gone before she picked up her phone again and sent a message.

"I'm here at the coffee shop, holding your favorite booth."

She waited. Another moment passed. Finally, it buzzed.

"Can't right now. Busy."

Her mouth flattened.

"I rearranged my whole day. I wish you had told me."

"My time is important."

And hers wasn't? She seethed inside. Tears pricked behind her eyes. She waited, in silence. The server brought her the latte, and Sadie made an effort at a smile, fully aware that it did not show in her eyes. Finally, she picked the phone back up.

"Are we still going to the Christmas party tonight?"

"I doubt it."

Her heart began to pound with hurt and anger.

"Troy, we talked about this just a few days ago."

"Something has come up. Can't be helped. Sorry."

She stared at the phone. *Was he seeing someone else?*

You're better off, she told herself, remembering something that had happened the week before. Her fingertips brushed the fading bruise on her cheek, a bruise she'd tried to cover with makeup that morning. Last week, she and Troy had been at a cocktail party at the Dean of Chemistry's sprawling riverside estate. The heat and the noise of the party had triggered a migraine the minute she walked in the door, and she had insisted on going home. Because he'd driven her there, Troy had to leave with her. All the way across town, he'd stayed tight-lipped and silent. It was only when the door of her apartment closed, he grabbed her from behind.

"You ruined my night, you little bitch," he said, smacking her hard across the face and sending her to the floor. Then he'd turned and left her there. She had climbed into bed with her head pounding even worse and feeling more alone than ever. The next day, he'd been remorseful, more loving than she'd ever seen him. He arrived at her apartment with a dozen red roses before taking

her to dinner at Antonio's downtown. He'd begged her forgiveness with the charm of a silver-tongued devil. And she'd bought it. The humiliating thing was that it wasn't the first time.

Oh, yes, she did remember.

Perhaps he was backing out of their relationship. Fine. She would back out, too. She would do what she should have done a month ago.

"That's fine. I won't ask again. Ever."

As soon as she'd sent it, however, a dark familiar chill crept over her, as it had so many times before. It had begun when she was a child of eight, this feeling of needing to belong to someone. Her father had gotten a new job, and her parents had explained to her that it would require quite a bit of travel abroad. Sadie had assumed that her mother would stay at home with her; but it didn't happen that way. A few weeks later, her mother and father had left her at home with an aunt, who made sure that she did all her schoolwork and made it to classes on time. Aunt Shirley had always been there when Sadie needed her, but she had not been a very affectionate person and Sadie's loneliness had increased.

That her parents had adored each other was obvious to everyone they knew. But an eight-year-old Sadie left at home watched them leave regularly, feeling as though she did not matter anymore. When her father had decided to retire, she was a senior in college, still hoping to find the closeness she had longed for. That was when she had lost them forever. A drunk driver had crossed the center-line over the crest of a hill, and just like that, they were gone.

Sadie was determined to be strong. Outside, she exuded a funny, witty and carefree demeanor, with sparkling eyes and a big smile. No one knew the inside, except Amy, who had tried her best to include Sadie in her own family circle. And Sadie had managed to hide the vulnerability that had stayed with her. Now, she had begun to wonder if it would ever go away.

She realized she was staring out the window, lost temporarily in

her past, and moved her gaze inside. Glancing up at the TV screen on the wall, she sipped her latte without tasting it. The newscasters were announcing several small earthquakes that had occurred just this morning.

“This was the date, two hundred years ago, when the area just fifty-three miles south of Cape Girardeau, began experiencing the series of huge quakes we now refer to as the New Madrid Earthquakes. The first one hit at 2:15 a.m., with an aftershock later that morning at dawn. Today, seismologists are concerned; they have detected five small shakes this morning, registering from 2.5 to 4.0 on the moment magnitude scale. This is where the fault lies, as we know it.”

Sadie continued to stare at the TV. They pointed out the area highlighted in an angry orange color, showing the size and shape of the fault. She knew little about the New Madrid earthquakes that had caused such damage two hundred years earlier, aside from knowing the dates. Odd that earthquakes chose this day, two hundred years later, to happen again. But these certainly weren't like the original quakes. She had felt only one this morning.

The sudden sensation of longing and loneliness washed over her once again, acutely. She longed for the safety of someone's arms about her. Troy's? She shook her head.

No. She didn't think so.

Her phone buzzed again. Another text. She considered ignoring it but then decided it might possibly be Amy. She picked it up.

“You're being awfully pushy lately. I think it's time we had a talk about our relationship. Perhaps you should try to avoid being as annoying as you were last week at Dean Wright's home. I'm sure you remember what happened then.”

She stared at it, and her breath hitched. She did remember. The last time, she hadn't even known it was coming before he'd sent her flying to the floor. But he'd apologized profusely for it later. Now, he was threatening her?

Unconsciously, she brought her small hand to her cheek.

The Christmas party wasn't that important. She could go alone, but she would almost rather stay home. Her mouth became a straight line. Finally, she picked the phone up again. Determined not to use any foul language, she typed her reply.

"I think you're right. Perhaps it's best to put an end to our relationship. I just thought you liked to hang out with the department heads at the university, and several of them will be there tonight. Of course, you have other responsibilities. Don't give it a second thought. Goodbye, Troy. For good."

She slammed it down onto the table in front of her, face up. Troy would miss the sarcasm completely; she was sure of that.

When it buzzed again, she looked at it. The message was clear.

"Is this the one? I thought that was next week. I'll pick you up at five-thirty."

But Sadie was done. Done with the broken promises, done with dates when he didn't show, done with his unforeseen reactions to what she would say. Just done.

"No," she typed in. *"You won't. You are no longer invited. Have a nice life."* She promptly turned off the phone and put it into her pocket before he could respond.

The newscaster was announcing yet another quake when she set the tip and the payment on the table and walked toward the door. She was glad Terri had been busy in the back. There was no way she felt like smiling at the moment.

But as she began leaving, she felt the ground shake. She turned back to look inside at the shop. The employees were watching as the glassware and coffee mugs trembled on the shelves.

The earth wasn't the only thing trembling. Sadie was, too. Had she angered Troy? He was only two blocks away, and she looked around cautiously. She hurried to her little Bug, hoping to get out of town, in case he decided to come looking for her.

To her relief, the car started perfectly and roared away from the curb. She turned the radio on in hopes of finding some news.

She was blinking back tears, unable to avoid thinking of the way

Troy had taken the breakup of their relationship. Had he not thought she was serious? Did he really care so little?

As she pulled around the block, she looked up. The sky on the north side of town seemed almost black. Most storms came from the southwest. This was unusual.

Great. A storm was all she needed.

Pulling out onto Broadway, she took the road up to Kingshighway and turned left then right again on William Street. She glanced up at the sky, frowning. If she took 74 and drove in haste to Bloomfield, perhaps she could outrun it.

She reached into her pocket, pulling out the phone, turning it on and hitting the speed dial button she'd saved for her friend.

"Are you coming?" Amy's friendly voice sounded extremely welcome.

Sadie could almost see Amy's large hazel eyes, filled with concern.

"I'm on my way."

A sigh at the other end sounded sad. "He didn't show." It wasn't even a question.

"I can't—" Sadie fought the cry that tried to escape. "Amy, I can't talk right now. There are some earthquakes."

"Yes. We feel them here, too. Be safe, Sadie. We'll be watching for you."

Sadie disconnected, thankful for Amy. She always understood.

The rain began to hit the windshield as she turned left on Mt. Auburn and followed it, past the Doctor's Park. The radio announcers had morphed into a solid state of anxiety now, and the sky in her rearview mirror had become even darker. By the time she reached Old Bloomfield Road and crossed over I-55, the rain had become a downpour. The curvy little road, usually a delight to travel, seemed uneven and unpredictable now.

"Well, hell," she whispered under her breath. She turned the radio off, to concentrate on the weather. The lights of the car behind her had come very close.

Her voice angry, she glared into the rear-view mirror at the car that was only a foot or two from her bumper. The driver had to be an idiot to follow this closely in a rainstorm.

“So, come in and introduce yourself, why don’t you, *you moron!*”

Setting her flashers and turning her wipers all the way up, she gasped repeatedly as the road seemed to rise and fall in front of her. Was it really the ground moving? Or was it just that the rain was coming down so hard she couldn’t see exactly where she was? It almost seemed unfamiliar, suddenly.

Sadie’s eyes widened, when she made the right onto 74 and looked to her left. The car was still behind her in the torrential downpour.

At least the road was slightly wider now. To the left was the low farmland, with the diversion channel in the distance. But the land that was usually just brown dirt all the way to the channel looked frothy and white, as if the channel had overflowed and was rapidly moving toward her. To the right, the ground rose almost steeply upward and then hit a plateau. She could barely see the beautiful white house that she had admired so often, on the top.

The road rose and fell, But the next time she looked to her left, she gasped once again. Flash floods? She looked for a driveway upward toward the higher ground. Finding it, she turned right and began to guide her little VW up the hill. The driveway was steep.

And then it wasn’t.

The house that had been at the top of the hill seemed just above her now.

Sadie’s eyes widened. What was happening? Was this another large earthquake, such as they had experienced two hundred years ago? She let out a cry as the Beetle swayed out of her control. The ground was shuddering in waves.

Struggling to maintain her steering, she shrieked in fear and held on to the wheel, praying the car would stay upright. The hill above her was steeper now, but her vision was so limited from the tears and the rain, it was impossible to tell.

She knew now that the warnings were right. She was sliding over inside the car, despite her seatbelt. It seemed to be hovering on the two right wheels, and she screamed as it began to roll over. A sudden jerk on the seatbelt caused it to let go, and Sadie was thrown violently to the other side of the car, crying out as her head hit the window. The door had flown open now, and she tried to find something to hold on to but couldn't. Feeling a sharp pain at her right temple, she moaned as things began to fade slowly away.



CONSCIOUSNESS CALLED TO HER. She heard shouts above her and tried to open her eyes, but it was difficult. When her eyes fluttered open for a few seconds, a fierce face hovered above hers. Dark brown eyes glittered down at her.

Was she still dreaming?

This was the face that had appeared to her that morning.

She heard the voice of a young woman, too, calling out, anxious and frightened.

Sadie closed her eyes again; she was extremely cold and soaked from the storm; that much she knew. Had she fallen out of the car? She shivered, chilled to the bone from wind and rain.

Arms, sliding under her body, lifted her suddenly, and she was held next to a warm chest. A deep male voice was the last thing she remembered hearing.

"I have you, young lady." It sounded familiar, as it said once more, "*I have you.*"

Comforted, she relaxed in the arms that held her, and faded out again, until there was nothing left but silence.



HER HEAD THROBBED WITH PAIN. Sadie struggled to open her eyes as she heard voices in the distance. She was warm now. That was all

she knew. She snuggled down deeper inside warm blankets. A hand rested on her forehead, and that same deep male voice spoke, but it was impossible to understand the words. Someone was trying to force a strange tasting liquid down her, and she fought it, until they stopped.

Sadie had no desire to awaken now. She only knew she was dry and warm and felt suddenly safer than she had in a long time.