

## CHAPTER ONE

Waking up didn't end the nightmare. It just kept going. At first light, I bolted from sleep with a headache unlike anything I'd ever felt before. It pinned my head to the pillow and poked daggers into my eyes when I opened them. Easing myself out of bed, I hobbled to the bathroom and splashed water on my face. I'd have to work out how to shower when I had more time. My legs were bandaged from mid-calf to mid-thigh; pain stabbed at my knees when I moved them.

Back in my room, I pulled some loose-fitting black pants from a hanger. They would hide the bandages better than a skirt and tights. I found a silk shirt to dress them up, pulled my hair up into a ponytail, and smoothed concealer under my eyes to hide the dark circles that had gathered overnight. While I drank a cup of tea, I weighed the many advantages of going back to bed, but I knew I couldn't take any more time off work. I'd already missed the first two days of the week. My desk was probably sinking under the mass of paper that must have accumulated by now.

Dumping my cup in the sink, I made my way down three flights of stairs by clinging to the banisters, and limped through rain-slicked streets to the nearest Tube station. Every painful step reminded me of what had happened in Tuscany over the weekend. I joined the other commuters in a crowded carriage that smelled of damp wool. When a man pushed his way past me and swung his briefcase into my leg, I realized this would have been a good day to treat myself to a taxi.

Needlepoints of rain stung my face when I came out the Tube station. I walked as quickly as I could to reach the shelter of the office. Bradley Cohen, the architectural firm where I worked, resided in what must be one of the ugliest buildings in the city. Undoubtedly considered

the height of contemporary style when it was built in the 1960s, the four-story office block now cowered in the shadow of newer construction, as though ashamed of its metal window frames and weather-darkened aluminum siding. Still, the interior was elegant and comfortable, the lobby and offices filled with sleek blonde furniture from Sweden, while creamy plaster walls served as a backdrop for large and colorful paintings by several London artists.

Unable to face the stairs, I opted for the elevator, which was empty this early in the morning, but, just as the doors started to close, a beefy hand appeared between them and they slid open to reveal my boss, Alan Bradley. His perma-tan glowed orange in the florescent light, clashing with a pink Polo shirt that stretched tightly over his paunch and was tucked and belted into beige chinos. He wore his usual frown.

"You look frightful, Kate. Been out partying?"

He didn't wait for me to answer. "You young things have all the fun with your concerts and bar-hopping. I, on the other hand, have a house and garden to slave over, as if I don't have enough to do at the office."

I doubted that Alan did his own housework or gardening. He was co-owner of Bradley Cohen, and his Tudor-style mansion in Surrey was more than large enough to accommodate a nanny, a housekeeper, and probably a gardener too.

"Poor you," I said, summoning up a smile. Staying on Alan's good side would make the rest of the week less stressful. "I'm going to get some coffee. Do you want one?"

"You were out yesterday, weren't you? And Monday too, come to think of it." He followed me into the kitchen, where I poured two cups of coffee and gave him one. I edged my way past him to rummage in the fridge for milk or cream, hoping he would tire of asking about my absence.

"No milk," I said, handing him a packet of nondairy creamer.

"This bloody stuff tastes like petrol," he said. "Now can you explain to me why you missed two days of work?"

"She had an accident," came a voice from the door. It was Josh. "Hit and run," he said. "Who'd think something like that could happen in idyllic Tuscany?"

A quick jolt of guilt made my cheeks feel warm. There was, I realized, a big difference between telling the truth and being honest. I had, in fact, been in Tuscany and there had been a car. That part was true. But I couldn't tell anyone what had really happened; no one would believe me. Josh came into the kitchen, took the small sachet of powder from my hands and finished opening it for me.

"Well, I hope you find the driver," said Alan, tipping more creamer into his mug. "So that you can sue him for lost wages."

I leaned against the counter and tried to slow my breathing. Everything hurt, my hair needed washing, and I couldn't remember if I'd put on any mascara. I was sure I looked hideous. Of course Josh wouldn't say anything; he was far too considerate for that.

He grinned, undaunted by Alan's sardonic humor. When he smiled, his eyes, which were the color of sea glass, crinkled at the corners. I envied his ability to make light of our boss's acerbic manner; Alan often made me feel off balance, as though I'd done something wrong or was about to commit some terrible blunder. Which, of course, I had, by taking days off at a time when the team was working frantically for our prestigious new client.

"You two should be at your desks preparing for the Montgomery meeting," Alan said, when he'd adjusted his coffee to the color he wanted. "I'll see you in the conference room at three. Don't be late."

"Have a nice day, Alan," I muttered once he was out of earshot.

"Are you sure you should be here?" Josh asked. "Shouldn't you be resting?" He had a faint Scottish accent that I loved, with its rolling 'r's and flowing vowels. "Thanks for texting me, by the way. I'd been worrying about where you were. Did you fly in last night?"

I felt myself blushing, and bent my head over my cup of coffee.

"Yes, and I'm okay," I said. "Just a bit sore. How was your weekend?"

"Fantastic. I went to the Chelsea game and then to that new comedy club on Marshall Street. We could go there together some time."

I nodded. "Some time, yeah."

"Well, we should get started on our presentation then, okay?"

"Of course."

I followed him to his office, kicking myself for my half-hearted response to his offer. It didn't take long for me to realize how much I had to catch up on, but I found it hard to concentrate. Even the feel of my pencil on paper, normally so soothing, wasn't enough to alleviate the throbbing in my head.

We ate sandwiches at our desks, and worked without a break until three o' clock rolled around. At least, once the meeting started, I could sit in a comfortable conference room chair and listen to Josh give the presentation we had prepared. He would outline the design concepts for the building, and propose a timeline. He was a good speaker, and all our clients adored him.

I took a seat at the conference table and watched the visitors file in, Peter Montgomery leading the way. Several minions in dark suits trailed after him. He was a well-known real estate developer, and had awarded our firm a major contract for a new commercial building in the City. He was an attractive man in his forties, but he looked as though he'd spent more time doing his

hair that morning than I had. When his liberally applied aftershave made me sneeze, Alan glared at me. I sank back into my chair, determined to be unnoticed for the rest of the afternoon.

Montgomery glanced at his Rolex. "My Financial Director will be joining us today, but she's running a little late, so let's get started."

Alan signaled to Josh to turn on the projector and pull down the blinds. A few minutes later, the door opened and a woman entered. At once, I recognized her.

"Rebecca!" I said. Everyone in the room looked at me. So much for my invisibility plan. Rebecca and I had gone to university together, sharing a dorm room for our first year. We'd been quite close for a while, but we had drifted apart by the time we graduated. She smiled and raised a hand in greeting before taking a seat.

In the semi-darkness, I tried to concentrate, but my thoughts kept veering off in the direction of Tuscany and what had happened there. The memory had kept me awake all night. My lack of sleep, the twilight room and the soft tone of Josh's voice were soporific. My eyelids drooped and I resorted to an old trick of using pain to keep myself awake, pushing the fingernails of one hand hard against the palm of the other.

Finally, Josh switched off the projector and pulled the blinds up, submerging the room in thin, grey light. I blinked myself fully awake. Montgomery was nodding his head, obviously happy with the designs that had been presented.

Rebecca asked a question about permits. I swiveled in my chair to look at her while Alan answered. When I breathed in sharply, Alan paused for a second, darting a quick look in my direction. I seemed to be acting like a magnet for his disapproval today. Picking up a pencil, I pretended to write notes on the paper in front of me, waiting for him to start talking again.

Head still lowered over my notepad, I raised my eyes to look at Rebecca and the air dancing over her head. It was very faint, barely visible, but it was definitely there, an unusual crown on her mane of red hair. It looked like heat rising in waves from hot asphalt.

When Josh nudged me with his elbow, I sat up straight, feeling everyone's eyes on me. Peter Montgomery looked at his Rolex while Alan glowered.

"When you're ready, Kate," he muttered. "Mr. Montgomery asked you a question."

Josh rescued me by repeating the question for me. I flipped through my notes and answered, even though I felt that all connections between my brain and my mouth had been severed. I described the lobby design, pointing out relevant points on the diagram spread out on the table. But my mind was on Rebecca and the odd visual hallucination I seemed to be having.

It seemed to take an age for the meeting to come to a close but, finally, everyone stood up and packed up their briefcases. Josh and Alan moved towards Rebecca to introduce themselves. Her striking hair, alabaster skin dusted with freckles, and wide green eyes had quite an impact on them, but she seemed oblivious. As soon as everyone had left, she threw her arms around me.

"Kate, it's so nice to see you again! I had no idea that you were working in London now. We'll have a great time working together on the project but let's meet for lunch and catch up? Are you free tomorrow? Even better, why don't you come for dinner? Tomorrow night, my place."

I wasn't sure I could face an evening out, but I'd always liked Rebecca and looked forward to getting to know her again. And perhaps if I spent some time with her, I could work out what that weird rippling air meant.

She gave me her address, we exchanged cell phone numbers, and I watched her walk away with Peter Montgomery and the rest of the team. A glance at my watch showed that it was

almost a decent time for me to leave too. We often worked late, and I certainly owed the company a couple of late nights to catch up on all the work I'd missed, but I was aching and tired. I needed an early night.

Back in my office, I collected my coat and bag, realizing I'd left my umbrella at home. The rain was beating against the windows like a feral animal, blurring the outline of the building opposite. The indistinct image vaguely resembled the strange undulations I had seen around Rebecca. I put my hand against the glass, grateful for the feel of its cold, solid mass. I had no idea what was happening to me, but I was scared.