

## Prologue

**Sophie rubbed the sleep from her eyes and stepped out of bed.** The creaking of the wooden floorboards didn't wake Daisy, her rescue calico, who was curled up on Sam's pillow and seemed to be in the midst of a glorious dream. Coffee was first on Sophie's agenda. She pulled her robe up over her shoulders, looped the belt, and gave Daisy a rub on the head, at which the cat stretched and jumped off the bed with a thud. Sophie touched the indent on Sam's pillow and lay back down, placing her head next to where his warm pillow lay, convincing herself that Sam had just gotten up to make breakfast, or had just left for work.

Time ticked on, and the pillow became cold and damp from the tears that now covered the case. Daisy became impatient and began to meow until Sophie sat up once again. "All right, I'm coming. You'll get your breakfast."

In the kitchen, she selected the strongest blend and watched the steaming liquid fill her owl mug. Feeling the warmth of the cup in her hands and tasting the creamy sweetness temporarily washed away the ache that was building deep inside, helping her to relax for just a moment before facing the reality of this dreadful day. *Just put one foot in front of the other, Sophie.* She could hear Sam whispering in her ear, "One step at a time, Soph. You can do this; I'm with you." *Easier said than done; one sip at a time is more like it.*

Sophie rubbed her finger around the rim of the cup, recalling when Sam had given it to her. With a glimmer in his eyes and a sheepish grin on his face, he'd handed her the mug and said, "Whooo loves you, baby?" *You do, Samuel Anderson, you do.*

"Happy Anniversary, Sam," she whispered as tears dripped into the hollow of her neck, dampening the worn terry cloth robe that had become her best friend. The air was suffocating and closing in around her—tightening her lungs and strangling her resolve to make it through the day. Daisy wrapped herself around Sophie's leg as she slid to the floor and sobbed. *I'm sorry, Sam.* Daisy stepped into her lap, then stood with her paws on Sophie's chest, looking into her eyes as if to say, "I'm here, it's going to be okay." Animals always seemed to know the perfect time to comfort their humans. She stroked Daisy's fur between the teardrops that moistened the cat's back.

At last, Sophie wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Daisy, we need to get moving. Time's a-wasting, and we have important things to do today." She picked Daisy up, stood, and nuzzled noses with the cat before setting her down and making her way back to her bedroom, with Daisy leading the way. Sophie opened the closet door and closed her eyes, deeply inhaling Sam's scent. She selected a sleeveless A-line dress

with a sweetheart neckline and an overlay of lace in Sam's favorite color, which matched the blue in her eyes. He'd called them pools that he wanted to dive into, but right now, they were nothing but drained and empty. She slipped on her heels and made her way back to the kitchen.

While Sophie waited for her dearest friend, Emily, to pick her up, she refilled her coffee and stared out the kitchen window, watching the carefree life fluttering around her bird feeders. In the distance sat the wrought iron love seat her mother had purchased for them a year ago. He'd placed it in numerous spots, never losing patience, until Sophie had been completely satisfied with its location. She recalled the many times they'd sat there listening to crickets and watching the moon reflecting on the water. She'd laid her head on his shoulder, and they'd talked about their future children running around catching lightning bugs. *Some things were never meant to be*, she thought sadly.

There was a hesitant knock at the kitchen door. Emily gently opened it, standing there with an unsure expression on her face and a hesitation that was completely out of character.

"Are you ready, Sophie?"

Sophie pushed the look of sympathy aside, set down her cup, and grabbed her purse, which she'd filled with tissues. "As ready as I'll ever be."

The church was about a five-minute drive along the shore road, but it seemed like an eternity. As she rode past the Simpsons' home, she could see the farmer's porch that Sam had built the previous summer. He'd spent hours drawing plans and tirelessly laboring in the heat until it had met his high standards. When he'd come home that day, Sophie couldn't wait for him to show her the finished project. She'd avoided looking until he was done because he enjoyed showing projects to her himself. He'd puffed out his chest, and with a broad grin, and stretched out his arms with a resounding "ta-da." Seeing his proud smile was what she'd lived for. What she wouldn't give to see it one more time. She swallowed the lump forming in her throat.

The sunlight hitting the windshield was a blessing, allowing her to wear her sunglasses, which would hide the tears that still flowed intermittently. Sophie took in the aroma of daffodils and white, pink, and purple hyacinth that lined the circular drive of the church entrance. It was quite fitting that purple hyacinths would be in bloom here, she thought as she recalled their meaning: *sorrow for a wrong committed*.

Emily glanced at Sophie and nodded. *It's time*. Sophie collected herself, straightening her dress, which she was sure most would deem inappropriate for the occasion. Her mother had reassured her that Sam would like it, and that was all that mattered. She wished more than anything that her mother could be with her, today of all days. A gathering of family, friends, and members of the community awaited her arrival. She was grateful that she had Emily. Sophie looked at her for support as Emily took her hand and gave it a squeeze. *One step at a time, Soph...one step at a time*.

Sophie wobbled as they made their way down the cobblestone walkway, and Emily embraced her a little tighter. They were greeted with sad eyes, a touch on the shoulder, and a shake of the head as they made their way into the church. Sophie's heart raced as she

walked down the center aisle, approaching her beloved. *One step at a time, I'm almost there.* Then, Emily guided her to the front row and she was able to take a seat.

How could it be that they had just been planning their tenth-anniversary getaway, and now she was facing the very same altar where they'd vowed to love one another until death, sitting amongst a sea of friends yet feeling utterly alone?

Music echoed off the cathedral ceiling, and Sophie felt the vibration in the pit of her stomach until Mr. Templeton got up to say a few words and others followed suit. She watched each person speak of her husband with words of tenderness and love. She could see their mouths moving, but she couldn't hear them. She was lost in her own thoughts, remembering walking down the aisle, surrounded by smiling faces as Sam waited for her at the altar, beaming with delight. He had been so handsome standing there with his boutonniere, rocking his feet from heel to toe. He always did that when he got excited, as if trying to resist the impulse to leap with joy—he took her breath away.

A slow, rhythmic strum of guitar strings snapped her back to the present. Within moments, a multitude of voices were singing "Amazing Grace." Sophie sat stoically looking straight ahead with her hands clasped on her lap. A soaked tissue was within her grasp, but there would be no more tears; she was empty and simply prayed that this day would soon be over and she'd wake up from this living nightmare called death.