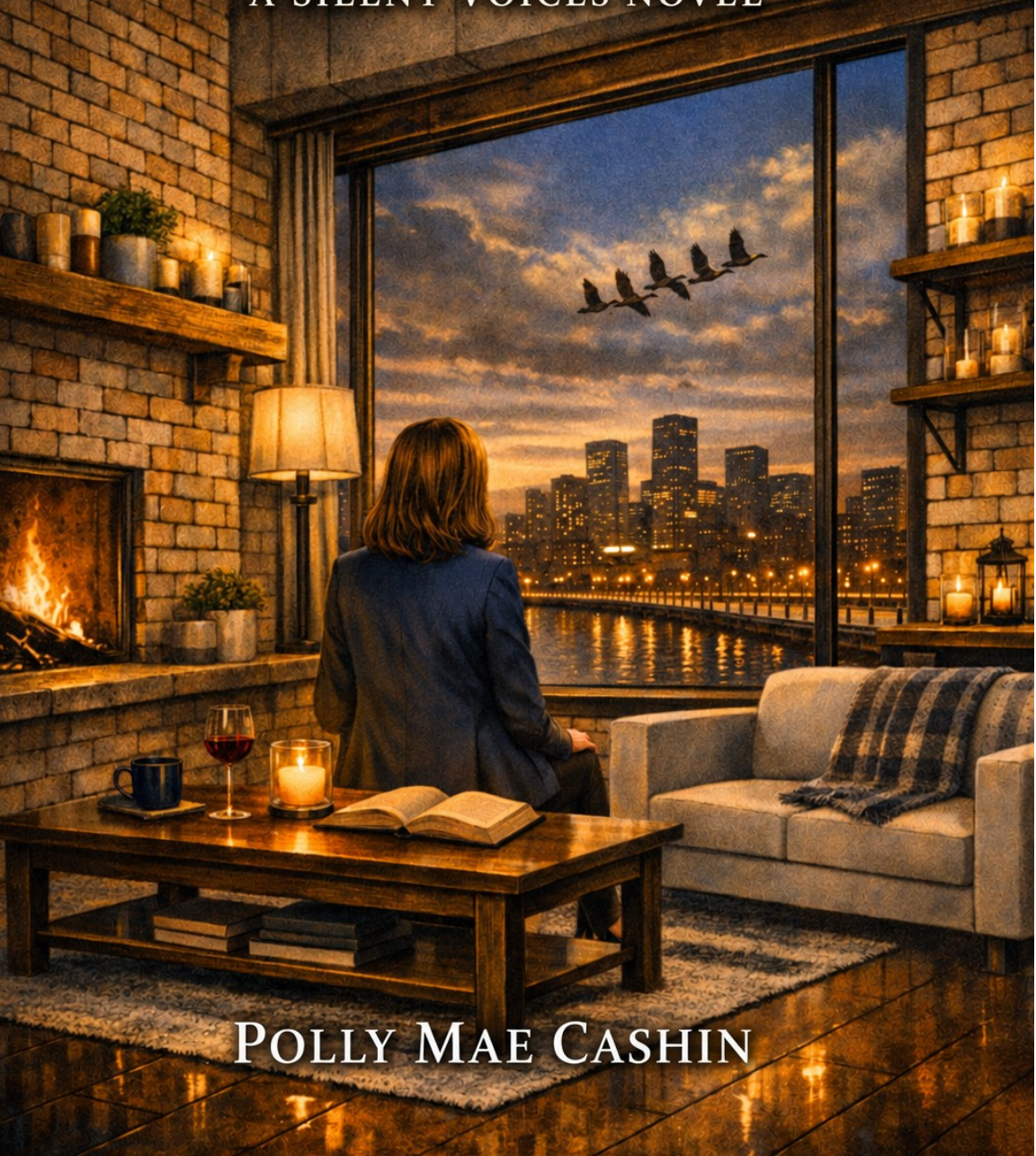


Among All the Other Voices

A SILENT VOICES NOVEL



POLLY MAE CASHIN

Among All the Other Voices

A Silent Voices Novel

A Second-Generation Story

By Polly Mae Cashin

A novel by Polly Mae Cashin

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Chapter 1 | Broken

*The ground beneath your feet
Isn't really dirt.
It's yesterday...
becoming tomorrow.*

☛ SEED ☛

Marina: The Loft

Marina couldn't sleep.

It was worse than usual.

The conversation resumed as if it had only been waiting for her to wake.

Ten minutes here. Twenty minutes there.

The voice controlled her thoughts.

Sometimes the voice was convincing, charming—even appealing. It vowed happiness but led her to the kind of pleasure that left her empty.

It wasn't her conscience speaking, although it echoed the same regrets. It was more like an uninvited trespasser.

Taunting Marina all her life, it branded her with names that hurt. Critical. Insulting. Shaming. She knew that voice within her well. She just didn't know how to control it.

Marina pulled the feather-filled comforter closer around her neck and watched as shadows disturbed the moonlight.

Her heart pounded. Her thoughts muddled.

Caught in a loop of constant internal chatter, she couldn't help but replay conversations in her head—analyzing every word, every tone of voice, every facial expression.

She couldn't shake the feeling that everyone was waiting for her to mess up.

Marina was a chameleon. She adjusted without thinking, changing to fit the expectations of those around her until she no longer knew which parts of herself were real and which had been borrowed.

Opinions, judgment, doubts, and excuses rattled around in her head every moment of every day—sometimes loud, sometimes quiet.

But the voices were always there.

She couldn't help but feel like an imposter—like she didn't deserve to be where she was.

She considered telling Michael about the voices. But Marina didn't know what to call them. Was it her depression again? Anxiety? Maybe a little residual guilt?

All the other voices were louder than her own, and she'd mistaken volume for truth for so long she no longer knew the difference.

Michael could console her, but the comfort of her husband was not what she wanted.

A counselor once told her that she might compulsively need to recreate abandonment, and Marina felt like she had to keep her heart protected.

She'd laughed at the idea then.

Tonight...

it didn't seem so ridiculous.

Marina learned early in life not to allow herself to be vulnerable. When you grow up in an unpredictable home filled with mixed messages, erratic emotions, and physical threats to your safety, you learn to be careful.

She believed that if Michael—or anybody else, for that matter—really knew her, they probably wouldn't want her around.

But Michael's love for her seemed almost unconditional. His devotion to her was clear to everyone—except Marina.

Tonight, the pain of Marina's past came calling. Just after midnight, she awoke. Her heart raced as she lay in bed—eyes darting around the room.

The nightmare returned, haunting her with the memory of her brother still alive, just out of reach. The same helplessness she felt as a child returned to plague her. Despite her fierce efforts, she couldn't break through to save him; her father was an impenetrable barrier in her way.

It was no secret Marina hated her father. She blamed him for what happened. Marina's silence toward him was her way of punishing him.

He was the kind of authority figure that frightened everyone. But Marina was different. She refused to admit that anything could hurt her, denying the way her father's criticism chipped away at her self-worth.

Somewhere along the line, she'd learned to put her emotions on mute.

Marina knew that sometimes it was best to feel nothing. It was the only way to manage the massive deprivation resulting from her father's abandonment. At first, controlling her emotions helped her survive. Later, she tried to control everything else too.

Marina lay awake in her four-poster bed and burrowed closer to Michael.

She watched the clock and waited for sleep.

It did not come.

Michael reached over and patted Marina. He murmured something and resumed his steady breathing. His hand rested on her breast.

But, despite Michael's considerate and loving nature, Marina sometimes found their marriage suffocating. She couldn't explain why she needed to push him away.

It was as if Marina somehow knew that Michael would eventually leave her, but lately, she entertained the idea of going first. And whether it was a conscious decision or not, the idea of ending things with Michael was beginning to seem like the only way to avoid the inevitable pain of being left behind.

A draft crept in through the oversized loft window. Marina slipped out of bed, put on her fleece robe, and went downstairs. She crumpled yesterday's newspaper and added more kindling over the embers in the hearth, hoping to take the chill out of the room.

She found Rascal on their new leather sofa and snuggled beside the cat—covering herself with a plush throw. He purred as Marina patted his silky calico coat.

The leftover wine from dinner was on the coffee table beside her. She picked up the bottle, took a long drink, and stared into the flames as they faded. Her thoughts began to blur as she gave in to the despair strengthened by the Chardonnay.

As the embers burned down, the room grew colder. Her eyes fixated on the clock, ticking away the minutes until dawn. Marina knew she had to sleep, but every creak and rustle made her wonder what waited in the shadows.

The familiar darkness settled over her thoughts as she drifted toward sleep. She recognized it before she surrendered to it—and then it followed her into her dreams.

Marina: The Loft

The sunlight assaulted Marina's eyes way too early for a Saturday morning. Her head pounded, and Marina remembered why she didn't usually drink.

As she waited for her thoughts to clear, she stared at the exposed wooden beams overhead. The restored brewery still wore its original brick walls and weathered timbers, giving the loft a character that couldn't be manufactured.

She mentally rearranged the loft, imagining where the Pasori from the gallery down the block would hang.

The tallest wall. A single spotlight. It would balance the room perfectly.

Marina's life did seem better in the daylight. The fears that stalked her through the night rarely survived the morning. So, she nudged Rascal away from her face and got off the sofa. She carefully folded the throw and headed toward the kitchen.

The gleaming white marble countertops reflected the morning light. Not a fingerprint marked the polished stainless-steel appliances. Fresh flowers stood perfectly centered on the island, their stems trimmed to the same height. Marina smiled. At least one room in her life was exactly as it should be.

She went to the cupboard and grabbed the aspirin bottle. Then, she pushed the button on the Keurig to brew a strong cup—thinking that if she must have one, coffee was probably one of the better addictions.

Marina slightly opened the time-honored window over the kitchen sink to invite the crisp and refreshing October air.

It felt good to finally settle into their new home in downtown Minneapolis with all its culture, wealth, and entertainment.

Sure, it took longer than expected. They spent almost five years renting that dull apartment before they paid off the wedding and saved the down payment for the loft. But life now looked how Marina James thought her happily-ever-after life should look.

She was just waiting for her feelings to catch up with her circumstances.

Marina was proud that she was finally learning to run her own life. Years of counseling and the right antidepressant had convinced her she didn't have to repeat her childhood.

If she worked hard enough, planned carefully enough, and stayed one step ahead of disappointment, maybe she could finally build a life that felt safe.

Looking from the outside, Marina had everything she'd spent years trying to build. The loft. The career. A husband who adored her. Soon, she hoped, a baby.

She'd collected everything she once believed would finally quiet the voice. But, it hadn't. Every disappointment conspired against her, denying her the one thing she truly desired.

Peace.

She couldn't explain why her mind always expected the worst.

Every lie she believed branded her a little deeper.

Marina picked up the stack of mail from the kitchen counter and crossed the living room to sit in the nook under the bay window. From her perch, she had a view that spanned the entire street length, and she watched the hustle and bustle of city life unfold below her.

The crisp blue sky stretched as far as the eye could see, its color unbroken by clouds. The sunshine bathed the city below in a warm glow, and the buildings sparkled in the light.

The crisp blue sky stretched over Minneapolis, the buildings sparkling in the morning light.

Below her, people hurried along the sidewalks, each headed somewhere.

Marina loved the city's constant movement. There was always somewhere else to go. Something else to do.

As she sat there, sifting through the mail, she felt grateful for the opportunity to live in such an incredible place. But then, there was that nagging wisp of anxiety again, the kind that could escalate to a full-blown assault.

Marina sorted her mail and organized her bills by date. She furiously attacked the statements, sorting them into neat piles as she churned with frustration. It was clear to Marina that they needed more money to accommodate the lifestyle she wanted.

Michael always seemed content with his lot in life, never pushing himself to achieve more. Whenever she

tried to encourage him to work toward a promotion, he'd tell her there was no point—citing office politics and his lack of a college education as reasons he couldn't move up the ladder at work. Michael didn't understand the pressure she was under.

Marina longed for a partner who would stand by her side and fight for their future, not someone content to settle for mediocrity. The anxiety bubbled inside her like a pot boiling over, threatening to consume her completely. But, of course, she couldn't expect Michael to understand.

He'd never shared her competitive nature or ambition. Instead, he was more laid back. Of course, that made Michael attractive to her in the first place, and she loved him for that. But for some reason, his easygoing style was becoming more irritating to her lately.

Marina was a woman of many talents, but before working at Opulent, her career success had always eluded her. She'd tried everything, from taking courses to networking, but nothing seemed to work. Then, she started working for Barbara and with her mentoring, Marina discovered the power of personal branding.

Barbara taught Marina how to shape the way other people saw her. The more intentional she became about her image, the more opportunities followed. Soon people admired the confident, polished woman Marina had learned to present to the world.

Everyone believed the brand. Marina didn't.

There was a war of words in her head all the time. Beneath her confident exterior, a sense of unease gnawed at her. The constant battle of self-doubt convinced her she was an impostor who didn't deserve her achievements.

Today, the continued uncertainty about the restructuring at work and the lack of financial stability it caused weighed heavily on her mind.

Marina quietly stood in her closet, pondering what to wear. She wanted to look casual yet stylish, which would befit a young professional woman on her day off. She picked out a pair of high-waisted skinny jeans that hugged her curves in all the right places, pairing them with a light blue, off-the-shoulder sweater. The cashmere accentuated her slender neck and delicate collarbones.

Marina prided herself on her meticulous preparation and impeccable appearance, believing that presentation was crucial for success. Unfortunately, her hair was a mess. So, she messaged her sister to see if a slot was open at the salon—hoping Sophie would see the text this time. Unlike Marina, it sometimes took Sophie hours to reply, and Marina didn't have extra time to waste.

Marina jerked up the zipper on her jeans and tugged to adjust her sweater. She grabbed the pile of clothes Michael had carelessly left on the floor by the bedside and sighed.

Last night in bed was just okay. She was ovulating, and Michael thoroughly enjoyed himself, but the thrill of

sex with Michael was gone. Instead, he was starting to bore her, and she couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed between them. Michael's relaxed approach to life and playfulness was refreshing when they first met, but now it only aggravated her.

As she thought about college, a brief memory of a handsome frat boy flashed in Marina's mind, causing her heart to skip a beat. But she quickly scolded herself. That was not who she was or what she stood for. Instead, Marina was committed to making things work with Michael—even if it meant putting in more effort than Michael did.

Marina stood for a minute and glanced back at the mirror, debating whether to change her outfit. Just then, the chime of a text message demanded her attention.

"I've got an opening at 10:30. Does that work?"

"On my way," Marina replied to her sister.

Marina quickly scribbled a note on their faux-vintage chalkboard for Michael, knowing he would likely be up soon. As she stepped back to survey the effect of her purposefully placed décor, Marina couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. Focusing on these small details was her way of avoiding more significant issues. But the cozy atmosphere of their modern yet comfortable space put her at ease.

She turned to leave and saw Michael's bedroom boxes stacked haphazardly at the bottom of the stairs. The disorder bothered her deeply, and Marina couldn't help

but feel a twinge of annoyance towards her husband's lack of attention. She chastised herself for her obsessive tendencies and resolved to try to focus on the bigger picture.

Marina heard Michael stirring in the main suite. Rascal jumped off his perch on the back of the couch and slipped to his hidden sanctuary behind it. Marina wished she, too, had a refuge. But her frustration with Michael and stress about work were relentless.

Marina grabbed her makeup bag from her purse and stood at the mirror over the thick oak mantel for one last check before heading out the door.

Her hand was already on the doorknob when she paused. Without thinking, she walked back into the kitchen and checked the stove. The burners were cold. Of course they were. She frowned, unable to remember what had made her turn around.

Something old stirred at the edge of her awareness.

The cold ashes in the fireplace caught her attention, and with them came a familiar pressure she couldn't yet name.

Despite her warm cashmere sweater, Marina felt an unexplainable chill. She paused and surveyed the loft.

Something was wrong.

She couldn't tell whether something really was wrong or whether her mind had simply learned to expect that it was.

Beside the fireplace, the peace lily drooped toward the cold ashes. Marina made a mental note that it needed water, though she'd watered it yesterday. She frowned, wondering if she'd missed something.

The thought faded almost as quickly as it came.

The familiar voice always found its way back. It had followed her out of childhood, patient enough to wait for a weak moment and practiced enough to sound true.

Under pressure, Marina always ended up back in the same place, listening to the same old fears as if they knew something she didn't. The endless conversations inside her head slowly drained her.

She scanned the room and spotted a tilted candle and an off-center lead crystal vase. She didn't remember deciding to fix it. Her hand simply reached for it.

Then Marina grabbed a black jacket, which she draped over her shoulders for an extra layer of style. She took one last look in the mirror and smiled. Marina was ready to take on the day, feeling confident and beautiful in her skin.

She grabbed her keys and walked out the heavy mahogany door to meet Sophie.

Sophie: The Drive

Sophie drove down University Avenue, dodging Metro Transit buses. Her head pounded, and the smell of alcohol lingered in her nose. Every movement of the car

made her feel like she would vomit, and Sophie's world blurred in a nauseating haze.

She took a swig of the bitter gas station coffee, which burned as she tried to wash down the stale caramel roll. The glare of the sun through the windshield only added to her discomfort.

Halfway through the turn onto Fourth Street, her cell rang. One-handedly dumping the junk in her purse on the passenger seat, she dug for her phone. Then, she changed lanes and cut off a pickup behind her. The driver honked, and Sophie gave him the finger. She had no time for small men in big trucks today.

She saw there were several missed calls from Carl. At first, she wouldn't answer—but when he called again, she did. She'd had enough.

"Why are you still calling me?" she demanded.

"Are you okay, Soph?" Carl asked in a composed voice.

"I'm fine," she answered abruptly. "I'm just fine!"

"I got your message. It sounded like you were crying. I was worried when I couldn't get a hold of you."

Sophie snapped back at him, "I'm fine."

"Olivia called me too. She was afraid."

Sophie didn't know how to respond. She didn't remember calling him. *Who else did I text? What other friendship did I ruin?*

She stared at the phone in disbelief. The familiar knot settled in her stomach. Coffee. Hangover. Panic. Shame. She already knew how this morning would go.

The shame made her want a drink.

The drink guaranteed more shame tomorrow.

Somehow, tomorrow always felt far enough away to ignore.

Her marriage to Carl had become another casualty of the battles she kept leaving before they were over. As of last Monday, they were no longer married. She knew Carl didn't want the divorce, but Sophie had to escape. He treated her better than she treated herself, and she couldn't tolerate it any longer.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Carl.

"No," replied Sophie.

"I'm here if you change your mind, Sweets."

"Whatever, Carl. Quit calling me Sweets. That's annoying."

"Okay then, Soph. If that's how this will go, I'll drop it. But I'd like to pick up Olivia this afternoon. Will that work?" Carl asked. "I thought we'd go bowling or something. She can stay all weekend, and I'll bring her to school Monday morning."

Sophie curtly reminded him. "I don't have to let you see her."

"Come on, Soph," he pleaded. "I'm the only father she's ever known. She called me last night crying—again. She was lonesome. She asked me to get her. I tried to get a

hold of you to see if I could pick her up, and when I couldn't, I promised her I'd try to set something up soon."

Sophie knew she picked the bottle over Olivia. But Sophie didn't know how to change that. She felt helpless and alone, trapped in a cycle of disappointment and regret. But Sophie didn't want to feel the pain without her vodka. She needed it to keep her sanity.

Carl continued to plead with her, and Sophie's resolve began to weaken. Sophie considered his offer. But then she felt a wave of guilt wash over her. "No, Carl. I told her we'd buy a present for Katie's birthday party."

"I can take her to find something," he offered.

Sophie knew she needed to be there for her daughter. "No. I promised," she said firmly.

"Sophie?" said Carl, his tone filled with worry.

She couldn't hear all Carl was saying with the phone reception fading in and out. But she wasn't concerned with what she missed. Finally, the call dropped, and she turned off her phone.

Carl never yelled. Never threatened. Never disappeared for days. Somehow that steadiness unsettled Sophie more than chaos ever had.

She didn't want to be alone. On the one hand, she craved his stability and safety. Yet, on the other hand, she couldn't stand to be around him.

No amount of love could outweigh the story Sophie had rehearsed about herself for years. She'd repeated it until it sounded like memory instead of opinion. And

with every lie she embraced, something inside of her died.

Sophie pulled into the strip mall parking lot and grabbed a spot near the salon entrance. She lit a cigarette and sat in the car—not ready to face Marina. Memories of their childhood flooded her mind, memories of a father who was always drunk, unpredictable and abusive.

Growing up in such an environment left its mark on Sophie. As she grew older, she drifted toward relationships with men who were just like her father—men who would hurt her, men who would punish her.

As the years went by, Sophie found herself spiraling deeper and deeper into her self-destructive behaviors. She drank too much, said things she didn't mean and made choices that left her ashamed. But there was one thing that kept her going and kept her from giving up entirely—her daughter, Olivia.

Sophie loved Olivia more than anything in the world, and she didn't want her daughter to end up like her, to suffer the same pain and trauma that she'd endured. But sometimes, when she looked at Olivia, she saw herself—with the same haunted look in her daughter's eyes that she'd seen in her own reflection so many times.

Every morning she promised herself today would be different. By evening, the same familiar ache returned, and without realizing it, she reached for the same familiar relief.

The promises always felt sincere. By nightfall, the path she'd walked a hundred times seemed like the only one she could still see.

The first swallow loosened the knot in her chest. For a few blessed moments, everything inside her went quiet.

The bottle never solved anything. It simply postpones tomorrow. Somehow, tomorrow always agreed to wait.

Michael: The Loft

Michael woke up to a relaxed and sunny Saturday morning. He stretched his limbs and let out a contented sigh. He reached for Marina, but she wasn't there. Michael figured she'd probably moved to the couch during another of her sleepless nights.

He was the kind of man up before the sun, ready to face the day with a sense of purpose and loyalty toward his crew. He was doing his best to keep up, but it seemed like there was always another deadline to meet, another problem to fix. The demands were becoming more and more unreasonable, and Michael couldn't help but feel a sense of exhaustion wash over him.

And then there were the guys on the line. They were a high-maintenance bunch, always complaining about something or filing grievances. It was like they didn't understand the pressures Michael was under and the responsibility he carried on his shoulders.

To make matters worse, there were rumors of cutbacks, of layoffs that could happen at any moment.

Morale was low, and tensions were running high. Michael knew that he had to keep his team productive, no matter what. He spent long hours at the plant, doing everything he could to keep things running smoothly.

He had never been particularly fond of unions, but he knew that he needed their support if he was going to keep his job and his team afloat. Negotiations were ongoing, and the pressure was mounting.

Michael was ready to take a well-earned break and get to know their new neighborhood. He would slowly wake Marina with the smell of coffee. They'd relax for a while, make love again and decide what to do with their day. Maybe they could walk by the gallery, and he'd surprise her by going in and buying the painting she'd been admiring. Whenever something felt uncertain between them, Michael's mind immediately began searching for a way to make it better.

They couldn't afford the painting, really—but she wanted it. He could always find some extra overtime to cover the strain on their budget. He'd put away his last two boxes after breakfast. He knew how much they bothered Marina, even if she hadn't said anything—yet.

Michael walked across the main bedroom suite past the large Jacuzzi tub surrounded by subway tile and stepped into the large glass shower. His life was nothing like this when he was growing up. Michael James was a simple kind of guy and didn't need a fancy shower to get clean or designer sheets to sleep well. It was clear to him,

even if it wasn't clear to her, that this house was more than they could afford.

But Marina set her heart on buying the loft, so Michael agreed. However, it bothered him that it took both incomes to qualify for the loan. He wanted to offer his wife the security she deserved. As soon as he could, he would find a better way to provide for his family—give her the option to stay home when they had a baby—but only if she wanted to. Maybe then she'd feel better.

Michael dried off with the perfectly folded luxury towel and found his clean but worn-out boxers. He could get one more wear before they went into the rag pile. Michael pulled on his most comfortable jeans and a white T-shirt. He started down the loft staircase. At the bottom was the last box marked for the bedroom. He dumped it over and dug through the pile for a match to his rogue sock.

Michael knew moving and the extra pressure at work stressed Marina. It felt like she constantly pushed him away, and Michael needed her to reassure him that everything was okay between them. No matter how hard Michael tried, she always seemed upset. He packed the boxes as carefully as he could, only for her to come along and rearrange everything to her liking. He would work tirelessly to get everything done quickly, only to be met with her impatience and frustration.

It was beginning to wear on him. He was starting to resent Marina's constant nitpicking and criticism.

Although Marina didn't see it or appreciate it, Michael was always thinking of her—encouraging his wife when she needed it. He never tried to manipulate her with guilt. Michael cared about the tiniest little thing in Marina's life and how she felt about it. Whenever Marina was hurting, Michael's mind immediately began searching for something he could do to make it better.

Michael knew he had married up. All the guys told him. So, it was nothing short of a miracle that Marina had accepted his marriage proposal.

He and Marina had hung out with the same group in high school. It was a small town, so she didn't have much choice. The day Marina Holden invited him to go out in her dad's fishing boat had settled it for him. Michael knew she was the one. From then on, he never doubted it for a minute.

They headed to the sand bar off Moose Island for a swim. Michael would never forget how she looked when she got into that boat in her cutoff jeans. Michael had the image forever stamped on his brain. He'd never forget her determination when she yanked on the cord and started the Evinrude all by herself.

To Michael, every other girl paled in comparison. He could see there was something special about Marina Holden. All the boys knew it and wanted to be with her. But for some crazy reason, Marina picked him. They dated for the better portion of their senior year until she left for college.

It was painful when she left for the University of Minnesota, two hours away in Minneapolis. But Marina said she was determined to get away from all the pain in her family. Although he knew she'd do well in college, Michael feared for her safety. She was naïve about the city. He'd heard stories from the guys that had been there. Michael wanted to protect her from life's realities. But she wasn't interested in his help. She wanted her independence.

At one point, Michael thought he'd lost Marina to a smooth-talking frat boy that came to the university from New York—and he almost did. His heart broke when Sophie told him Marina was in love with that other guy. Thank goodness they broke it off right before graduation, and Marina returned to their hometown of McGregor.

Sophie was renting a small apartment then, so the two girls moved in together to save expenses. It was evident to Michael that Marina had come home from college as a different person. She was depressed and anxious. He tried to help. However, her emotional armor was securely intact, and she demanded her space from Michael. So, he left her alone for the better part of a year.

Fortunately, Michael was unwilling to accept defeat. So, after things settled down, Michael gently pursued her again. It took him another year to persuade Marina, but she finally softened and returned to his side. Being with Marina still felt like coming home.

Marina was good for him. She made him want to succeed. Michael knew the man he wanted to be in her eyes—the kind that protected and provided. And when they had children, he'd be the father who would shelter them from the storms of life. Michael wanted to share wisdom about why pet goldfish die and why boys sometimes break young girls' hearts. He loved the thought of being a father and would parent the right way. Unlike his father, Michael would never leave his wife and newborn baby for another woman. He knew for sure. Or at least he thought so.

Even after five years of marriage, Michael still felt an ache for Marina that never disappeared. He would never give up on her. To Michael, it was more than just the physical passion or the companionship they shared. He was committed to making a daily choice to love her no matter what. He knew how her family dynamics had wounded her. Michael believed the wounds of Marina's childhood didn't have to shape the rest of her life. He didn't know how healing happened, only that he hadn't stopped hoping it could.

He held on to that hope; it got him through the difficult times with her. Michael knew Marina needed him to be patient with her healing. And that's what he intended to do, no matter how long it took.

Michael wished Marina would cut back on her hours. Finishing up her master's degree, moving downtown and all the pressure from work had been too much stress.

He'd tried to reason with her—kept reminding her that she was salaried, and the extra hours didn't pay. But it didn't do any good. She wasn't listening to him much these days.

Michael walked into the kitchen and heard only the hum of the refrigerator. He noticed the empty coffee cup in the sink and went to the living room. Michael saw the neatly folded blankets on the ottoman, along with the note on the chalkboard.

Before he'd even finished reading the note, Michael was already making a plan. Flowers. The gallery. Lunch downtown. If something was wrong, surely there had to be something he could do to make it right.

It would set the mood for the rest of the day. Marina loved gifts, and Michael wanted her to know how much he loved her.

Last night when they were in bed, she'd seemed preoccupied—focused on something else—like she was bored. He couldn't help questioning if she wanted someone else. He'd always wondered if she got over the guy she met in college. She'd never really told Michael who ended their relationship. He just assumed it was Marina. The idea of her being close to another man—her flawless naked body coupled with someone else—made him crazy.

His chest tightened before he realized he'd started imagining her with someone else again.

Marina had been quiet before. Usually, it meant she was tired. Lately, though, Michael's mind filled the silence with other explanations before she ever spoke.

Michael planned to stay optimistic about the situation, or it would swallow them both. But he felt helpless and frustrated, unsure how to support his wife as she dealt with infertility's emotional ups and downs. Every month, they eagerly awaited the news of a positive pregnancy test, only to be disappointed time and time again. With each passing month, their hopes of starting a family grew dimmer and the pressure to conceive mounted. Michael would take more time in the bedroom tonight. He'd give her the special attention he wanted her to have.

Sophie: The Salon

Sophie spotted her little sister near the salon entrance. She pressed the manual lock on her yellow Focus and walked to meet Marina. She found her sister checking in at the veneered reception desk. Sophie knew this type of salon was not her first choice. But Sophie rented a chair here, and out of loyalty, this was where Marina got her hair done.

"Hey, Rina." Sophie breezed past her sister with a *sorry I'm late* smile as she shrugged off her jacket. "I'll grab us some coffee. We're over there."

Marina nodded and smiled. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead.

Sophie returned with a coffee for her sister—with just the right amount of vanilla cream. Marina set her phone to vibrate and tossed it into her purse. Sophie wrapped a towel around Marina's neck, draped the black nylon cape around her shoulders and snapped the collar.

“So, what are we doing today?” Sophie asked.

“I'm thinking a few foils and a trim—nothing drastic—revive the cut, so it looks fresh. The new CEO starts Monday. I want to look sharp when I meet him. This time, take it easy on the lowlights. Not too chunky, so I look more professional.”

Sophie rolled her eyes, still slightly irritated from her encounter with the pickup truck and Carl. She wasn't sure why Marina fussed. If she looked more like Marina, she'd be much happier.

“So, did they finally sell Opulent?”

“Yes, and I'm exhausted from all the extra work,” Marina said. “Every time I turn around, they want another report—another presentation. And they just transferred someone new to my team. I've gotta train her this week, and I already can't keep up with everything. Besides that, Michael is stressing me out.”

“What could Michael possibly be doing wrong now? You gotta cut that guy some slack, Rina.”

“That's the problem. It's what Michael's NOT doing that's driving me crazy. Doesn't he see everything I'm doing for us? Why doesn't he help more?” exclaimed Marina.

Sophie couldn't help but notice the bags under Marina's eyes and the tension lines on her face. She set the comb on the tray and lightly massaged her sister's shoulders. Marina's muscles were knotted up like a ball of yarn. "You need to take some time for yourself," Sophie said softly.

Marina sighed, letting her head fall forward as Sophie massaged her shoulders. "I know," she said. "But I just can't seem to slow down. There's always something that I need to do."

"That's not healthy. You need to find a balance. You can't let yourself get back to that dark place like you were at after college."

Marina closed her eyes, letting out a deep breath. "Yeah, I know you're right," she said finally. "I should probably refill my prescription of Prozac."

"That's a good idea. And, it's been ages since you took a vacation. So, take some time off."

"I can't. I just took time off to move. Anyway, it's not a good time to be away," Marina explained. "With new leadership, staffing changes are bound to be made. I need to make sure my team is on task. Besides, I don't know if I want to spend more time with

Michael. He irritates me lately—a lot. So, we'd probably just fight."

"You sound more overwhelmed than you've been in a long time. Maybe it's hormones." Sophie smirked and

asked what only a sister could get away with asking. “Are you getting your period?”

“I hope not—that’s another thing. All this stress isn’t helping me get pregnant.”

Sophie looked at her younger sister, noticing the worried look in her eyes. She wanted to help Marina see that her life was great.

“Rina, I know things have been tough lately,” Sophie said gently, placing a comforting hand on Marina’s arm. “But you have to remember all the amazing things in your life. You have a wonderful husband who loves you. You have a great job, and so many people care about you. You’re doing well, and I’m so proud of you.”

“It’s just that I feel alone.” Marina sighed. “This is not how I envisioned married life. It’s like we’re on separate paths, and we’ve grown into different people. Or maybe I’ve grown up, and Michael still wants to be a kid. I’m worn out and disappointed at how things turned out.”

“What did you expect?” asked Sophie. It was hard to feel too much pity for Marina.

“I don’t know. But, somehow, I believed it would be different for us,” said Marina. “I thought getting away from Dad and building a normal life with Michael would somehow fill me up—make me feel whole.”

“You know what?” Sophie said, smiling at Marina. “Let’s do something fun tonight. We’ll go out for drinks and maybe catch a bite to eat. Whadayasay?”

She thought the better of her offer the instant she said it. Sophie didn't trust her ability to limit her drinks and didn't want to make a fool of herself in front of Marina.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm going to make a quick stop at the mall and then get home. I promised Michael we'd do something today."

"Sure. Maybe next week. You've got a lot going on right now. But remember Marina, Michael is a good man—one of the best. Don't lose sight of that."

She patted Marina on the shoulder. "I'm going to run and get your color mixed. I'll be right back."

Sophie disappeared into the back room for a few minutes and returned, clumsily attempting to steer her unyielding cart and armed with a stack of foils. Then, pulling a chunk of Marina's hair up, she parted it and fastened a portion with a clip.

Marina looked at Sophie and asked, "What's up with you and Carl? He called my cell looking for you last night. He was worried."

"I wish that man would just go away," groaned Sophie. She frowned and clipped the next foil too tightly. Marina winced and pulled away.

Sophie cringed. "Sorry."

Marina continued, "Olivia called me. She misses him something terrible, Soph."

"I know it's hard on her," agreed Sophie.

“Think about it, Soph. He’s always treated her like his own daughter. We both know what it’s like not to have a father around.”

Sophie shook her head in agreement. “But I can’t stand to be around Carl.”

“You two don’t make sense. Carl sure wants to be with you,” said Marina.

“I know. Irritating, isn’t it?”

“I don’t get it. Why is that irritating? When you guys were helping us move, he told me he still loves you. I wish you could have seen the look of compassion on his face. It just broke my heart to see how sad he is now,” admitted Marina.

Sophie wondered how her ex-husband could still love her after all she’d put him through. She imagined telling Marina everything. The missing hours. The men she barely remembered. The mornings she woke afraid to check her phone. But once spoken, the secrets would belong to more than Sophie, and she could not bear that.

They spent the next twenty minutes lost in silent deliberations. Marina paged through the latest celebrity gossip magazine. Sophie finished the last foil and put Marina under the drier.

When the timer pinged, Sophie said, “Come over to the sinks.” She put Marina’s head under the faucet and shampooed her naturally curly hair. After an extended scalp massage, she lifted Marina’s head, pulled the towel up from around her neck and dabbed her hair dry. They

returned to the styling station, and Sophie finished with a quick trim and a blow dry.

Marina ran her hands through her soft hair and flipped it back.

“Thanks, Soph. It looks great!”

“The color’s good on you,” Sophie said. “Hey, lighten up on Michael,” Sophie warned with a smirk. “I know how annoying you can be when you’re not getting your way. You can’t expect Michael to always follow your perfectly planned, scheduled life. He’s gotta have a life, too,” Sophie scolded.

“I’ll try,” Marina replied with a quirky frown. “Look at your schedule next week and let me know when I can see Olivia.”

Olivia and Auntie Rina shared a unique bond. She was more involved in Olivia’s life than most aunts. But Sophie didn’t mind. She hoped having Marina in her daughter’s life would compensate for what Sophie lacked.

Sophie noticed the two male clients who watched Marina leave the salon. Their eyes followed her out the door. Sophie loved her sister, but it wasn’t fair. Marina had everything—a college degree, a cute figure, a fun husband, an important job and a fancy new home in the cities.

Marina walked to her car, and Sophie noticed the men’s attention following her. After she was out of sight, the men glanced at Sophie and quickly returned to their magazines. Sophie inhaled deeply and let out a defeated

sigh. She'd always been known for her striking beauty, but lately, her face had taken on a puffy appearance, and her once-chiseled cheekbones were nowhere to be seen.

One of the men looked up again. Sophie pulled her shirt lower over her hips, then hated herself for caring whether he looked.

Fat drunk. The words arrived with practiced ease. Sophie tugged her shirt lower, ashamed of her body and already thinking about the drink she would have when the shift slowed down.

How Sophie looked, she doubted either one of those men would want to have her—not that she wanted them. She was terrified of men and her beauty, anyway.

Somewhere along the way, Sophie had learned that being noticed was rarely safe. Even now, admiration made her want to hide and be seen at the same time.

“Hey, Sophie,” the salon manager said as she poked her head out of the back room. “I ordered takeout from next door, but I just got a walk-in customer. Do you mind running?”

Sophie went to McGovern's Pub next door to pick up the other stylist's lunch and ordered herself a burger. She took her usual stool at the short end of the bar, the one facing the door. She never remembered choosing it anymore.

“Usual?” McGovern asked.

“Sure.”

The answer left her mouth before she considered saying no.

Sophie watched the customers starting to fill the restaurant. It was getting close to the lunch hour. It brought back memories of when she and Carl would come here. Carl loved her more than she loved herself, and that was the problem. She didn't know how to handle someone who loved her unconditionally. He didn't try to control her, and sometimes it made her feel like Carl didn't care.

Sophie couldn't deny that Carl was a good father. He was attentive, caring and always present for their daughter, Olivia. Even though he'd never officially adopted her, he'd quickly taken on the role of a father. He was patient with her, listened to Olivia and never missed a single important event in her life.

Sophie had to admit it was hard not to feel envious of their relationship. As much as she loved Olivia, she'd never been the type of mother who enjoyed attending school plays or soccer games. She always found the other parents boring, and they never served beer at school events. Seeing how much Carl enjoyed these activities made her feel inadequate as a mother.

She picked up her phone to call him. He didn't pick up, and she didn't try a second time. But he called her back. "Hey, Soph—everything okay?" Carl's voice was softer than usual.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Do you still want Livvy this weekend?” she inquired.

“Of course. Of course, I do.”

“I’ve thought about it, and it’s okay with me if you want her to spend the weekend. I know she misses you terribly.”

It was quiet on the other end of the line. “Carl, are you still there—did I lose you? I can’t hear you—Carl?”

That dang cell phone reception—she looked at her phone, thinking it had dropped again. But the call was still active.

After a long silence, he cleared his throat and answered her in a shaky voice, “Yeah. I’m here.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Everything. Sophie, why don’t you want to make this work? I thought we had enough love to make it.”

Maybe it was the warmth of the vodka going down or hearing that Carl still loved her—for a moment, Sophie could feel her heart softening.

“It’s not your fault, Carl. I’m the broken one.”

Sophie ended the call before he could answer.

“Another?” McGovern asked.

She looked down at the melting ice in her glass. For a moment, Carl’s voice remained with her—the tremor in it, the hope she’d heard despite everything.

The ache in her chest sharpened.

“Yeah,” she said, sliding the empty glass toward him.

The story continues...