

Echoes of
Sunrise
Excerpt

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Chapter One

Friday, June 22, 1883

“The threat is real.”

Gideon Spencer wished his brother were prone to exaggeration but knew he wasn't. If Andrew claimed there was a threat, it was as real as the unseasonable heat that made this part of Massachusetts feel as if it were mid-August. The fact that Andrew had come here in person rather than writing a letter underscored both the urgency and the gravity of the situation.

Andrew's brown eyes, so like Gideon's own, darkened. Two minutes earlier, they'd been bright with enthusiasm as he described his daughter's latest antics, but as soon as the subject changed, so did Andrew's demeanor. He was no longer the doting father. Now he straightened his shoulders and tipped his head ever so slightly to the left as he often did when he was in court, cross-examining a witness. Andrew might be Gideon's favorite brother, but he was also one of the most respected attorneys in the state, one that opposing attorneys feared.

“Jonah Waters is looking for his son.”

As the words echoed through the small room that Gideon was using as an office, he took a deep breath, trying to tamp back the memories the man's name evoked, memories of the wounds—visible and invisible—Jonah Waters had inflicted on his only son.

“Why now after all this time?” By some small miracle, Gideon's voice remained calm. “You know what happened. Jonah disowned Charles three years ago, claiming he'd rather have no son than one who refused to run the mill.”

In one of the many arguments that had characterized his relationship with his father, Charles had declared that he could have no part of a business where the workers were treated as little more than slaves. He'd further infuriated Jonah by announcing that he was going into partnership with Gideon, building the houses Gideon designed.

"A Waters does not demean himself by doing manual labor," Jonah had said, to which Charles had retorted, "This Waters does."

And he had, for which Gideon continued to give thanks. Charles had been the ideal partner, a man whose skills complimented Gideon's, a man he could trust implicitly.

"It appears that what happened in the past is no longer important." Andrew leaned forward in the chair opposite Gideon, his expression as solemn as if he were presenting incriminating evidence to a jury.

"It seems Jonah decided he should be our next governor." Andrew's voice was laced with scorn. "Rumors are that he plans to pay his workers to vote for him, but his advisors have told him he needs to appeal to the rest of the state, and the best way to do that is to have his family by his side."

Though he disagreed, Gideon knew that was important to some voters, that they chose a man based on his personality and family connections rather than his positions on important issues.

"Jonah has a young and beautiful wife." The fact that he had married a woman only four years older than his son had been one of the points of contention between Charles and his father.

Andrew shook his head. "From what I've heard, he needs more. He needs Charles or the stories of their estrangement will hurt him. Voters won't trust a man who disowned his only child."

"But Charles is ..." Gideon paused, not wanting to pronounce the final word. Though it had been months and he had daily reminders, he still had difficulty accepting that the man who had been almost as close as a brother no longer walked the earth.

Gideon's true brother had no such difficulty. "Yes, Charles is dead, and so is Leah, but when Jonah discovers that he has a grand-

son—and make no mistake, he will learn that as long as you're here—he'll do everything he can to exploit him.”

The thought made Gideon shudder. “The birth certificate says Amos is my son.”

Andrew shook his head in disagreement. “His hand says otherwise. It will only take one look to tell anyone who cares that Amos is Jonah's grandson.” Though sympathy radiated from Andrew's eyes, his voice was firm as he continued. “The man is ruthless. You know that. I can envision him going to a judge to gain custody. He'd probably argue that a single man cannot care for a child and that he and Earline would give their grandson everything he deserves.”

“Everything except love.” In Jonah's world, the only things that mattered were those that money could buy. “I won't let Amos become a pawn.” That was the reason Gideon had left Europe sooner than he'd planned and that he'd entered into what some would call a foolish agreement.

“Then you need to do everything you can to protect him.”

Gideon had believed he was already doing that, but based on Andrew's revelations, it wasn't enough. “What would you suggest? I know you must have had a plan in mind when you came here.”

As he'd expected, Andrew nodded. “I do. The first part is the easier one: you should get as far away from Boston as you can. That'll delay the investigators finding you. From what I've learned, they've already started looking for Charles.”

Gideon was silent for a second, considering his brother's advice. There was definite merit in leaving Massachusetts for a while, even though it would create some inconveniences. “You know I have clients here, but their buildings are at a stage where I can delegate responsibility.”

Once the election was over and Jonah had lost—for the thought of that man governing the state was one Gideon didn't want to contemplate—he could return. The fees he'd already been paid for

designing those buildings would support him and Amos until he was able to take on new contracts.

“What’s the second part?”

The way Andrew wrinkled his nose told Gideon he wouldn’t like the answer. “You need to marry again. Preferably yesterday.”



He wasn’t here. Sophia Carr looked around the ballroom for what felt like the hundredth time, searching for a tall man with dark brown hair, a chiseled chin, and the smile he’d promised he’d be wearing when he arrived. There were other tall men, other men with dark brown hair, but none was the one she sought.

It was time to admit that he wouldn’t be coming, that the time they’d spent together had meant nothing to him, that he hadn’t been counting the days until they could see each other again. It was only Sophia who had cherished the memories and been confident that they’d soon begin creating new ones.

She took a deep breath and plastered on a smile in a desperate attempt to hide her disappointment. Today was more than Independence Day. It was the culmination of what had been the most exciting year of her life. This was an evening for celebration, not despondency. She could do it. She could don her polite hostess mask and pretend that these were guests she was welcoming to the Grand Carr hotel. But first she needed a breath of fresh air.

She opened one of the French doors, crossed the verandah, and rested her arms on the wooden railing, knowing she would need only a minute or two to regain her composure. Taking another deep breath, she inhaled the humid air that characterized New York at this time of the year, then forced her shoulders to relax.

“He must have been delayed.”

“The way he felt about you couldn’t have faded.”

Sophia spun around to face the two women who, though they didn’t share a drop of blood, had become the sisters she’d longed

for all her life. They were real. The other one, the one who looked like her, was only a dream.

“I can’t hide anything from you, can I?” Sophia tried to muster a smile, even though she knew they’d recognize it as false.

“Of course you can’t.” Victoria, the tallest of the trio, wrapped her arm around Sophia’s shoulders to give her a hug. “We know you almost as well as you know yourself.”

As Olivia nodded, one of her auburn curls escaped the intricate arrangement that had taken close to an hour to complete. “That’s one of the consequences of spending practically every minute together for a full year.”

“Except for those minutes you spent with him.” Victoria injected a slightly mocking note in what Sophia recognized as an attempt to cheer her. “Minutes? What am I saying? They were hours.”

“But I always made it back by curfew.” This time she managed a genuine smile. Extending a hand to Olivia, she said, “I’m not sure what I did to deserve friends like you, but I thank God every day that he brought us together. You’re the sisters of my heart.” For as long as she could remember, Sophia had dreamt that she had a sister; now she had two.

Olivia grasped her hand, then wrapped one arm around Sophia’s waist, the other around Victoria’s, drawing them into a circle. “And like sisters, we’re here to support you. There has to be a good reason he isn’t here. He impressed me as a man who kept his promises.”

“I thought so too.” That was part of what made his absence today so distressing. “But six months without a word from him tells me I was wrong. What we had must have been nothing more than a shipboard romance, only there wasn’t a ship.”

They’d had solid ground under their feet when they’d walked the streets of the fabled French city of Poitiers, sometimes dodging raindrops, other times gazing at a full moon while they marveled that Eleanor of Aquitaine had once trod the same stones.

“I need to be realistic.” Sophia wasn’t certain whether she was trying to convince her friends or herself. “I was only a passing

fancy. Once he set foot back on American soil, Gideon Spencer forgot that I existed.”

“That can’t be true. No one could forget you.”

Sophia shook her head slowly. Victoria wasn’t only the most beautiful of them, she was also the most optimistic, but tonight that optimism was misplaced.

“I wish you were right, Victoria, but the facts say otherwise. I don’t begrudge Gideon leaving when his friend needed him. I’d have done the same for either of you. But whatever emergency it was couldn’t have occupied every minute of every day. He had to have had enough time to write me at least one letter. I gave him the address where we would be staying in Germany.”

Victoria nodded, acknowledging the truth of Sophia’s words. “You’re right. I’d be as hurt as you are if the man I cared for—maybe even loved—didn’t keep his promise. But Olivia and I are here to remind you of all that the three of us shared this past year.”

“And this isn’t the end,” Olivia chimed in. “We need to go back to our homes, but that doesn’t mean that we have to stay there. I for one want to see whether the Texas Hill Country is as beautiful as you claim.”

Once again, Victoria nodded. “So do I. That’s why we both plan to visit you when those famous bluebonnets are in bloom. We want to see what changes you’ll make to that hotel you’ve told us so much about.”

Though it probably hadn’t been Mama’s intention when she encouraged Sophia to take part in Mrs. Marshall’s program, living in hotels in three different countries had given Sophia ideas of ways to increase the appeal of the hotel that her family had built and run ever since the town that bore their name was established.

“I hope you’ll come.”

The thought of showing her two dearest friends the majesty of her home state buoyed Sophia’s spirits, assuaging some of the pain that Gideon’s absence had caused. “What would I do without

you?” And while Gideon had abandoned her, she knew neither Victoria nor Olivia would.

When the sound of another waltz spilled into the evening, Sophia was suddenly aware of the passage of time. “We’d better go back inside before Mrs. Marshall comes looking for us.”

As they entered the ballroom arm in arm, the woman who’d been responsible for their year abroad approached them, her expression grim. “There you are. I’ve been looking for you, Sophia.” She extended her arm and handed Sophia a telegram. “This just arrived for you.”

Sophia’s spirits rose again. This might not be the way she’d envisioned today, but her heart pounded with excitement at the realization that Gideon hadn’t forgotten her, that the telegram would explain why he hadn’t been able to come tonight.

Unwilling to wait another second, Sophia unfolded it, scanned the brief message, then gasped. *No! This wasn’t true. It couldn’t be.* She fought back the darkness that threatened to engulf her, knowing that the oblivion it offered would be only temporary.

“What’s wrong?” Victoria reached for the telegram, but Sophia refused to let anyone touch the piece of paper that had upended her world.

“Tell us,” Olivia said as she once again wrapped an arm around Sophia’s waist. “Let us help you.”

“It’s my mother.” Sophia was surprised that she could form a coherent sentence when her brain was reeling, not wanting to believe what she’d read. “There was a fire in the hotel. Mama’s dead.”