
Chapter 1

As Annika Bannon wove through Madison traffic on her bike on a perfect May evening, her heart was light. Annika finally felt her life was going well. It was a feeling she was rather unfamiliar with as she had felt this way very few times in her life. But now, things seemed to be coming together. Tomorrow, she would graduate from the University of Wisconsin with a double degree in human services and social justice. Annika was an excellent student and she had received several academic awards. She also had many job prospects but for now was content to continue working at the homeless shelter she had worked at all during college. The staff and guests were like family to her and she felt she truly made a difference there.

She and her roommate and lifetime best friend still shared a comfortable apartment near campus. Her friend Stacey's family had been next door neighbors to Annika and her family and had actually become her surrogate family when her mother died of breast cancer ten years ago and then when her father's alcoholism led to a fatal car crash just before they began college. Annika was sure she would not have survived if not for Stacey Rogan and her family who provided a safe haven for her. When

both girls decided to go to UW, it seemed natural for them to get an apartment together and that had worked out well. Stacey was more of a party girl than Annika and majored in marketing, but they knew each other so well that the living arrangement went smoothly.

Annika was an independent introvert who generally kept men at arm's length. She was an only child as well as parentless. She had become used to making decisions on her own and had developed strong values and beliefs that sometimes put men off. Annika thought of herself as strong, self-sufficient and anything but needy.

But about a year ago, she had met Derek at one of Stacey's parties in their apartment. They had been physically attracted and found they could have a good time together. He was more serious than other men she knew and they shared some interests and tastes. He did not push her sexually but waited until it happened organically. He was patient as she was inexperienced and she appreciated that.

The only glitch was that he did not approve of her work at the homeless shelter. He didn't understand social work and would never accept her invitations to go and actually meet the guests and see how the shelter helped those in crisis find resources. Just recently, when she and Derek were in a coffee shop, one of the guests who knew her came over to talk. Derek was uncomfortable and dragged Annika out of there as fast as he could, complaining about how they couldn't ever go anywhere without her running into "those people". Annika did not argue but she was saddened that Derek did not understand her work. When he turned up at her apartment the next day with flowers and an apology for the way he acted in the coffee shop, she was appeased. Her feelings for Derek were strong and she hoped their relationship could continue. She was sure she could change his opinion on those who were homeless.

Annika rode up to their apartment building, having left work

at the shelter early to get ready for graduation rehearsal. She locked her bike and grabbed the bag of groceries she had picked up. Annika was humming as she bounced up the stairs to their third floor walkup. She had seen Stacey's car in its parking spot so assumed she was home but she found the door locked. She put down the groceries and fished her keys out of her bag. She opened the door and went straight to the kitchen to unload. As she went to look through the mail on the living room coffee table, she noticed a man's shirt flung over the back of the sectional. On the floor next to it, was a top she recognized as belonging to Stacey. She bent to pick it up, noticing other clothing items strewn on the floor. Before she thought about the fact that the clothes were making a path to the bedroom, she was standing in the room's open door. She bent to grab one last piece of Stacey's underwear and when she stood up and faced the bed, she froze as she struggled to process what she was seeing. There, in *her* bed, was Stacey's naked body wrapped around Derek, who also wore no clothes. They were sleeping but it was clear that is not what they had been doing earlier.

Annika gasped and dropped the clothes she was holding, backed out of the room and then turned and ran out of the apartment and down the stairs. She kept running mindlessly until she found herself at the edge of a woody area along the shore of Lake Mendota. She was crying now as she bent over with her hands on her knees to catch her breath. She sat down on a park bench, dazed, as she considered her next move. Annika realized that she had nowhere to go and no one to trust. A wave of abandonment and despair washed over her. She was now completely alone and without a home—again.