

## **Chapter One**

Eight years after her divorce, Sophie Lane still wasn't very good at dating. She supposed she only had herself to blame—if she really "put herself out there," as her cousin Kristine was always saying, she could find someone.

From Sophie's point of view, there were multiple problems with that statement. First, Kristine had married her high school sweetheart after graduation and had been happily married for the past sixteen years. She wasn't exactly someone who should be giving dating advice. Second, Sophie didn't have a lot of time to "put herself out there." She was busy—she owned a company and she loved her company and all the hard work that went into keeping it successful. To be honest, her business was way more interesting than any man, which might be a big part of the dating problem. That and well, the actual dating.

Getting dressed up, meeting for dinner, listening to a man talk about himself for three hours, wasn't exactly how she wanted to spend a lone evening when she wasn't dealing with some crisis at the office. Plus, she never quite understood all the rules.

She was pretty sure it was supposed to be sex after three dates, but that didn't work for her. If she liked a guy and wanted to have sex with him, why did she have to wait? She was busy. If she had the interest and the time on the first date, then her feeling was, why not just do it, clear her head, so to speak, and happily get on with her life? Because if she didn't want to do it on date one, there was no way she was interested on date three. By then the guy had probably annoyed her fifty-seven ways to Bakersfield.

Which explained why, on date two with Bradley Kaspersky, she was one hundred percent convinced saying yes had been a massive mistake. Not that his sixty-minute explanation of how laser sightings worked hadn't been fascinating their first evening together. Under normal circumstances she would have ended things when the check—split at her request—came, explaining he wasn't for her, and while she appreciated meeting him, there was no moving forward. And no, he shouldn't bother calling, texting or emailing.

She would have except... She was lonely. CK was gone and three months after the fact, she still couldn't believe it. Going home to her empty condo was physically painful. She'd taken to sleeping on the sofa in her office to avoid all the memories, but then she had to go home to shower and the second she walked in the door, she wanted to cry.

Because of all that, she hadn't given Bradley the brush-off and now here she was, at dinner two, listening to the practical applications for calibrated laser sighting. Or was it sightings? Regardless, she was stuck and to be honest, maybe she should just suck it up and go back to her place and let the pain wash over her. Because CK deserved to be mourned and she had a feeling her therapist would tell her she'd been putting off those feelings for a little too long. Assuming she had a therapist. Which she didn't. Although more than one person had told her she needed one. Usually an employee she'd fired, or who had quit. As they walked out, the parting shot, often yelled across the company's open foyer, was something along the lines of, "You're impossible. You think you can do everything. Well, you can't. You're not superhuman. You only *think* you're better than everyone else. You have a serious problem, Sophie, and you should get help." About half the time, the B word was tossed around.

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"Sophie?"
"Hmm?"
"Your phone is ringing."
"Oh. Sorry. I forgot to turn off the sound."
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She looked down at the phone she'd placed next to her wineglass and realized it was indeed ringing and buzzing and dancing on the table. She was about to send the call to her voice mail when she read the caller ID info.

"It's my alarm company," she said. "I just need to take this."

She grabbed her phone and her handbag and started for the front of the restaurant.

"Sophie Lane," she said crisply. "Do you need my authentication code?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She gave the code, then asked, "What's the problem?"

"We have notified the local fire department that several fire alarms have gone off at the location. Our sensors indicated that there is a fire, Ms. Lane. This is not a false alarm. CK Industries is on fire."

Twenty minutes later, while waiting impatiently at a stupid light that wouldn't ever turn green, Sophie remembered that she'd been on a date when she'd bolted for her car. She activated her hands-free calling and said, "Call Bradley Kaspersky."

"Bradley Kaspersky. Cell phone. Dialing."

Seconds later she heard ringing, followed by, "You left."

"Bradley, I'm sorry. My office building is on fire. I'm driving there right now to meet the fire department."

"How do I know that's true? How do I know you didn't just run out on me?"

"Because I didn't. Because... I don't know, Bradley. If that's what you really think then this isn't going to work. I have to go."

She disconnected the call and tried to ignore the sense of fear and dread growing in her chest. If there was a fire, she could lose everything. Her inventory, her records, her pictures of CK that she kept on her desk.

Maybe it wasn't so bad, she thought. Maybe it was—

She nearly rear-ended the car in front of her. Sophie jumped on the brakes at the last second and stopped inches from the pickup's rear bumper. Up ahead, on her right, dark smoke rose in the sky. No—rose was the wrong word. It shot up, like out of a cannon, spreading maliciously, portending disaster.

She turned at the corner, made a left and three more rights before being forced to a stop by a barricade manned by two members of the Santa Clarita Police Department. She pulled over and jumped out of her car, grabbing her company ID and showing it to the officers.

"That's my company," she said. "I own it. What happened? Was anyone inside? Oh, God, the cleaners. Did they get out?"

The officers waved her past the barricade and pointed toward one of the firefighters. He looked more management and less like a climb-a-ladder-to-make-a-hole-in-the-roof guy.

At first she couldn't move, couldn't do anything but stare at what had once been a large warehouse with offices. Now there was only fire and smoke and heat.

Go, she told herself. She had to get going!

She rushed to the guy and identified herself again.

He nodded. "From what we can tell, the cleaning team discovered the fire. They all got out safely. We did a search, as best we could, and didn't find anyone else. Do you know of any employees who work late?"

Sophie tried to focus on what he was saying, but it was impossible. She'd never seen a real fire before—not outside of the movies or TV. There was no way that two-dimensional image had prepared her for the real thing. The heat was incredible. Even from a hundred feet away, she wanted to step back, to get away from the climbing temperature.

Even more stunning was the sound. Fire really was alive. It breathed and roared and screamed. Her building put up a fight, but it was no match for the beast that consumed it. As she watched, the fire cried out in victory as a wall collapsed.

"Ma'am, is anyone working late?"

The question was screamed in her face. She tore her attention away from the flames.

"No. No one works late. Only me. I don't like anyone in my building when I'm not there." The cleaners were the exception. She trusted them. Plus, anything important was locked up.

The man's expression turned sympathetic. "I'm sorry. The building is going to be a total loss."

She nodded because speaking was impossible. Her throat hurt, and not just from the smoke and ash in the air. Her throat hurt because she was doing her best to keep it all inside.

Everything she'd worked for, everything she'd dreamed of, built, sweated over and fought for was gone. Just gone. Her mom had always warned her that if she wasn't careful, people would break her heart, but no one had warned her that a building could do the same.

She turned away and started for her car. The left side of her brain said she needed to call her insurance agent, and maybe some of her employees. Thank God her accounting records and orders were all backed up externally, but CK Industries wasn't going to open its doors anytime soon.

That was the left side. The right side of her brain only felt pain. First CK and now this. She couldn't do it. She couldn't lose them both.

She fumbled with her phone and scrolled through her contacts until she found a familiar number. She pushed it.

"Hey, you," her cousin Kristine said. "This is a surprise. I thought you had a date. Oh, Sophie, it's barely eight. You didn't dump him already, did you? I swear, you're impossible. What was wrong with this guy? Too tall? Not tall enough? Did he breathe funny? Hang on a sec—"

Kristine's voice became muffled. "Yes, JJ, you really do have to do your European history homework. The First World War isn't stupid or boring and you will need the information later in life."

Kristine's voice normalized. "You know he's going to come back to me when he's thirty and tell me I was completely wrong about the everyday relevance of World War I."

Sophie managed to find her voice. "Kristine, it's gone."

"What? Sophie, what happened? Where are you? Are you okay? Did your date do something? Do you need me to call the police?"

"No. It's not me." At first Sophie thought she was shaking, but then she realized she was crying so hard she could barely stand or breathe.

"There's a fire. Right now the whole place is on fire. There's not going to be anything left. It's gone, Kristine. It's just gone."

"Are you okay? Was anyone hurt?"

"No one works late and the cleaning crew found the fire, so they're all okay. I don't know what to do. I can't handle this."

"Of course you can. If anyone can, it's you, sweetie. We both know that. You're in shock. Look, I'm going to get myself on the first flight out in the morning. I'll text you the information. We'll figure it out. We can do this together."

Sophie stared at the hungry flames and knew she'd been bested. She'd been prepared for a hostile buy-out or an all-employee mutiny, but not total annihilation.

"This is all I have and now there's nothing," she whispered.

"That's not true. You have your family and, knowing you the way I do, you have more insurance than you need. This could actually work out for the best. You've been talking about moving your business back to the island for years. Now you can. It'll be like it was back in high school. You'll see."

"I hate it when you're perky."

"I know. That's mostly why I act that way. I'll be there tomorrow."

Sophie nodded and hung up, then she opened the driver's door of her car and sank onto the seat. There were a thousand things she should be doing but right now all she could do was watch her entire world literally go up in flames.

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The distance between Valencia, California, and Blackberry Island, Washington, was about 1130 miles, give or take, and Sophie could make the drive in two days.

She filled her car with clothes, her laptop, two boxes of records she would need as she continued to deal with the aftermath of the fire, along with a large tote bag overflowing with pictures, blankets, a pet bed and a few treasured catnip mice and toys. The movers would pack up everything else and deliver it in a week or so. She'd sold her condo furnished, so she would only have to deal with twenty or thirty boxes of personal things. In the meantime, she would get by with what she had. It was, in fact, her new mantra.

Temporarily shutting down CK Industries had been unexpectedly easy. She'd hired an order fulfillment company to manage customer notification. Those who wanted to wait for replacement orders could do so, those who wanted their money back received a prompt refund. She'd offered to move key personnel with her to Blackberry Island and had received

exactly zero takers. Still too numb to be hurt by that, she'd written letters of recommendation and offered generous severance packages, all the while prepaying four months of health insurance for everyone.

Her only friends in the area had been work-related and with no more work, they'd quickly faded away. In the end, there'd been no one to see her off, so six weeks after the fire, at seven on Friday morning, she fought her way to the freeway, then merged onto I5 north.

Around ten, Kristine called.

"Where are you?" her cousin asked.

"North of the Grapevine."

"You should have let me fly down and drive up with you."

"I'll be fine. You have eight kids to deal with. They would die without you."

Kristine laughed. "It's three kids."

"When I visit, it feels like more."

"That's because they're loud." Her humor faded. "You okay?"

"Never better." Especially if she didn't count her broken heart and ragged spirit.

"You're lying."

"I am, but that's okay."

Kristine sighed. "I'm glad you're coming home. I'm worried about you."

"I'll be fine."

"I think the warehouse is still for lease. I want you to see it the second you get here. This is Blackberry Island. It's not as if we have more than one warehouse. If you don't grab this one, you're going to have to have your offices on the mainland, and driving there every day would be a drag."

Sophie felt her sense of dazed sadness ease a little. "Already done."

"What?"

"I signed the lease last week."

"Seriously?" Kristine's voice was a shriek. "But you haven't seen it."

"I know, but you said it was great. Besides, you're right. It's not as if there are six warehouses to choose from."

"I said it was available, but I don't know what you need. Sophie, you signed a lease? What if you hate it?"

"Then I'll be mad at you." She smiled. "It's fine. I'll make it work. Really. Right now I just want to be home."

"You leased a warehouse you've never seen. Sheesh. Next you're going to tell me you rented a house, sight unseen."

"Technically, I saw pictures online."

"Sophie!"

"It's just for a few months, while I figure things out."

"That's insane," Kristine told her. "I will never understand you. Okay, focus on your driving. I can't wait for you to get here tomorrow. The boys are very excited to see you."

"I'm excited to see them. You have six, right?"

"Sophie!"

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

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"Think of it as a rite of passage," Kristine Fielding said cheerfully. "You're twelve now. You deserve to take on more responsibilities."

"You say that like it's a good thing," her twelve-year-old son Tommy grumbled. "I'm a really good kid, Mom. Maybe I deserve *not* to do laundry."

"You'd rather I did it for you?"

"Well, yeah. Of course. Nobody wants to do chores."

They were in Tommy's bedroom, facing a massive pile of laundry. Kristine had been doing her best to convince her middle son it was time for him to learn a few life skills. As his older brother had before him, Tommy resisted. In the end, she'd had to threaten JJ with the loss of Xbox privileges before he was willing to take on the task. She was hoping she wouldn't have to resort to anything that dire with Tommy.

"So it's okay for me to take care of this entire house, cook the meals and do your laundry, while you do nothing?"

Tommy grinned. "It's your job, Mom. My job is school. Remember how I got an A on my last math test? Being a great student takes a lot of time." His expression turned sly. "Which would you rather have? Me doing my own laundry or a super-intelligent kid who gets straight A's?"

"It's not an either-or proposition. You're twelve now. It's time to start doing your own laundry."

"But I already help Dad out with the yard."

"We all do that. Look at my face. Is there anything about my expression that makes you think I'm going to change my mind on this? Let us remember the sad summer from two years ago when JJ refused to do his laundry. Think about the layer of dust on his Xbox controller and how he cried and pouted and stomped his feet."

"It was embarrassing for all of us."

"Yes, it was. Now, you can either be an example to your little brother, or you can provide me with a very humorous story to tell everyone who's ever met you, but at the end of the day, you will still be doing laundry. Which is it to be?"

"Maybe I should ask Dad what he thinks."

Kristine knew that Jaxsen would take Tommy's side—not out of malice, but because when it came to his kids, he was the softest touch around.

"You could and then you would still have to face me." She kept her tone cheerful. "Am I wrong?"

"No." Tommy sighed heavily. "I surrender to the inevitable."

"That's my boy. I'm proud of you. Now, collect your dirty clothes and meet me in the laundry room. You're going to learn how to work the washer and dryer. I have a schedule posted. You'll have certain days and times when you will have the privilege of using the washer and dryer. If you use them at other times, when they're scheduled for JJ or when I want them, you will not enjoy the consequences."

"No Xbox?"

"No skateboard."

"Mom! Not my skateboard."

Kristine smiled. Both her mother and mother-in-law had taught her that the key to getting kids to do what you wanted was to find out what *they* wanted and use that as leverage. For JJ it was his Xbox, for Tommy it was his skateboard and for Grant it was being outside. She tried to use her power for good, but she did absolutely use it.

"And on Saturday, you'll change your sheets and wash those," she said happily. "It's going to be great."

"It's not fair."

"I know. Isn't it fabulous?"

"What if I don't care about clean sheets?"

"I think you care about clean sheets about as much as I care about driving you into Marysville to that skate park you love."

Tommy's brown eyes widened in horror. "You wouldn't not take me, would you?"

"Of course not. Any young man of twelve years old who has washed his own sheets deserves to be driven to a skate park."

"Is that blackmail?" he asked.

"I think of it as persuasion."

"I don't want to grow up. It's too much work."

"Interesting. Someone should write a book about a boy who refuses to grow up. It sounds like a great story."

"It's Peter Pan."

"Is it? Shocking!" She pointed to the pile of laundry on the floor. "I will be giving laundry lessons in ten minutes. If you're not there, I will start without you. If I start without you, I will do so with your favorite skateboard in my possession."

"When I have kids I'm letting them do whatever they want."

Kristine pulled her son close and kissed the top of his head—something she wouldn't be able to do much longer. He'd grown at least two inches in the past year. JJ already towered over her and he was only fourteen. In a couple of years he would be taller than his dad. Even little Grant wasn't so little. When he fell asleep outside, studying the stars, she couldn't carry him to bed anymore. She had to call Jaxsen to hoist him up and get him inside.

"I'm sure you will," she said with a laugh.

"You don't believe me." Tommy shook his head. "You're wrong. I'm going to be the best parent ever."

"Uh-huh. I'm looking forward to that first panicked phone call." She lowered her voice. "Mom, the baby's crying and I don't know what to do."

"I would never make that call. I'll be at work."

"Oh, I think you'll be a stay-at-home dad," she teased.

He looked horrified at the idea.

So far she'd managed to teach her boys to clean their bathroom and help in the kitchen. She was working on getting them to do their own laundry. But she'd been unable to convince them that child rearing should be shared. Probably because she'd always been a stay-at-home mom as were most of the moms of their friends. Jaxsen was a hands-on kind of father but he was more into taking the boys on adventures than shopping for their school clothes or helping out with the homework. She wasn't setting a very feminist example.

They needed more exposure to strong women with killer careers. Now that her cousin Sophie was back on the island, they could all have dinner and Sophie could talk about what it was like to run a business empire. Because sending her boys out with life skills was one thing, but sending them out with the belief a woman could be in charge was another.

Still, they were good kids who were kind and respectful. At least out in public and with adults. With each other they were wild monkeys testing her patience every single day.

"I should have had girls," she said with a sigh.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "You would have hated girls."

"They're clean and pretty and they smell nice."

"Boys do smell bad," her son admitted. "And some girls are really smart. But you're stuck with us, Mom. No matter what and you have to love us."

"Yes, that is the rumor. All right, middle child. Laundry room. Ten minutes or I'm taking your you-know-what for a ride."

"You'd fall in like ten feet."

"No way. I could totally go twenty."

He gave her a quick hug, then started loading the pile of dirty clothes into the clothes basket she'd brought with her.

She left him to his work and headed for the kitchen. Dinner was in the Crock-Pot. She'd taken care of that this morning. She glanced at the calendar—a large, framed, wall-sized rectangle with big squares for every day of the month and cute pictures of cats around the outside—and saw that JJ would finish up with baseball practice at four and Grant was at his friend Evan's house until four-thirty. Jaxsen would pick up both kids for her, which meant between now and dinner she only had to fold towels, prepare her grocery list for her weekly shopping, decide on a menu for her catering client and write up a grocery list for that, double-check her baking supplies because she would spend all night Thursday making cookies for the upcoming weekend and remind Jaxsen they really had to decide on summer camps for the boys. It was only April but the camps filled up quickly. And speaking of April, it was spring break in two weeks and she needed to know if he was still going to take the boys up in the mountains because if he was, he needed to get out the equipment and make sure everything was still functional.

Tonight, after dinner and homework, she had to finish her book for book club and get the May calendar put together and order more bags for her cookies and do her March books for her cookie sales, because she hadn't yet and if she got too behind, she never got caught up.

And in those five seconds between brushing her teeth and falling asleep, she would really like to run the numbers on that little space by Island Chic that had gone up for lease last week. Because if she could ever catch her breath, and scrape together the cash, she wanted to talk to Jaxsen about opening a bakery. It had never been the right time before, but maybe now would work. The kids were older and...

"Mom, I'm ready. I've sorted my clothes by colors, like you said. But is it really a big deal if I don't?"

"Girls," she murmured, walking toward the laundry room. "Girls would have been so much easier."

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