

Chapter 1*Rafe*

Late on the first day. The only thing Rafe hated more than being late was being late on the first day. He paced the entryway to his condo, wondering where she could possibly be. He was stuck waiting for her because it was too late to get a replacement. Why had he agreed to watch Gus in the first place?

He was about to try the cell phone number she gave him for the tenth time that morning when Gus went crazy. A second later, he heard a frantic pounding at the front door. Opening the door, he came face to face with a woman wearing purple tinted sunglasses, a loose fitting tie-dyed top, and a long brown skirt. Her light brown hair framed her face in a fluffy afro. She wore a tentative smile on her full lips. She was attractive, but her attractiveness wasn't going to get him to class on time. He was too annoyed to fully appreciate her beauty.

"Sorry I'm late," she said. "May I come in?"

He stepped aside and allow her to enter the condo. Gus bounded over to her and jumped up to say hello. Gus thought he was still a puppy. Although the year old lab wasn't fully grown, he was too big to be tearing around Rafe's place and crashing into things and knocking everything over. And he hadn't quite gotten the concept of not jumping on people either. His parents needed to get back from their trip soon.

"I don't have a lot of time," Rafe said pointedly. "So I'll keep this brief." He handed her a key to his place and a list. "I'll only need you for the day, so you can leave the key on the table in the entryway and lock only the bottom lock when you drop Gus off this afternoon. Here's a list of instructions. His food is on the bottom

shelf in the pantry. My cell number is at the bottom of the list if you have any questions.” Rafe took a deep breath, and his nostrils flared as he exhaled. “As you seem to have forgotten it.”

“I’m sorry. I would’ve called. Only...I found my phone in the toilet this morning. Long story, but I’m sure you don’t want to hear excuses.” Sadie rubbed slim, long fingers with perfectly oval nails across her forehead.

“No. I don’t,” he said. “I really should get going anyway.” He picked up his books and car keys.

“I’d really love another chance.” As she spoke, she was bent over, rubbing Gus behind the ears. Gus was in heaven. And Rafe couldn’t say he was unhappy with the view down Sadie’s loose fitting shirt. There wasn’t a whole lot there to handle, but from what he could tell, what was there would be nice to handle. “I’ll give you a ten percent discount on this week’s walks,” she said. “I promise nothing like this will happen again. This is the newest of my business ventures, and I’m just getting things off the ground. I’d really hate to lose your business on the first day.” She took her glasses off and set aside and gave him an apologetic look with startling light brown eyes. She had really nice eyes.

Making direct eye contact with her was unsettling in a way that wasn’t unpleasant but wasn’t welcome, either.

“Isn’t that right, Gus? Yeah.” She started crooning to the dog.

Rafe considered his options for a moment. He didn’t know much about looking for dog sitters or about owning a dog at all. Gus had been foisted on him by his parents while they were visiting family in Brazil followed by a trip to see friends

in Belize. He didn't have time to go around looking for and vetting a whole bunch of dog sitters. He'd found Sadie on Craigslist. Maybe not the most reputable source, but she was obviously good with animals. Gus was in love with her already. Her references had been good—glowing even. And he was beyond out of time to debate this. Class had started five minutes ago. What was the harm in giving her one more shot? Besides, there was also the benefit that she was nice to look at.

“Okay,” Rafe said with a sigh, relenting. “I’ll give you another chance. But if you’re late again, it’s over.”

“Thank you,” Sadie jumped up and walked over to him, leaving a disappointed Gus behind. Gus found something else to entertain himself quickly, though. With Gus being the rambunctious and not well-disciplined dog his parents had entrusted to him, Rafe wasn't surprised. As the dog bounded off, Rafe braced himself for the crash he was sure would soon follow. “I promise I’ll be on time tomorrow.” She shook her head. “Early.”

He nodded but wasn't too concerned. Now that she had the key to the condo, he wouldn't have to worry about her making him late again.

“Just make sure Gus gets his walks and that he has plenty of food and water when you leave for the day.”

“Of course. Again, thank you.” She reached out for his hand. When he shook hands with her, he found he didn't want to let go right away. Her palm was warm and smooth. Being so close to her, he could smell some sort of flower scent on her. Jasmine maybe? Whatever it was smelled nice.

Realizing he was lingering over the handshake, Rafe pulled his hand free and cleared his throat. "Well, I have to get going."

Sadie gave her head a little shake as if she'd been in a similar trance. She smiled but not as widely as before and there was something dazed about it. "Right. Yeah."

Rafe headed for the front door, still puzzling over what had happened with Sadie just a moment ago. In fact, he was in so much of a fog over it that he didn't pay any attention to what Gus was up to. Until he opened the front door of his condo and Gus, sensing his chance for escape apparently, bolted out of the front door.

"Gus, no!" Rafe shouted at the same time that Sadie called out the black lab's name. Groaning, Rafe dropped his books and took out after the dog. Sadie was right behind him.

"Get going!" Sadie called out from behind him. "I'll take care of him!"

"You'll never catch him," Rafe shouted behind him. Besides, Rafe knew all of Gus's favorite spots and where he was likely headed right now. This wasn't the first time during his short stay that Gus had bolted on Rafe. Turning the corner of his building, he saw Gus headed for the park that bordered the back of the property. Sprinting through the parking lot while mentally cursing his luck, Rafe pursued the overgrown puppy.

Rafe lost sight of Gus after he entered the park but wasn't too worried. He headed toward the grove of trees that bordered the small park and went into a dead run for the stream. Sure enough, Gus was at the edge of the stream with a big dog grin on his face.

“Don’t you dare,” Rafe muttered. As he lunged for the dog, Gus leaped into the water. Sadie had caught up to him and lunged at the same time. She miscalculated her leap so that she landed on Rafe. With both of them trying to extricate themselves from the situation at the same time, they ended up just getting in each other’s way more and more so that their legs ended up intertwined.

Sadie threw her head back and laughed. His eyes went to her slender throat and then moved down to one of her shapely legs, which had been exposed by her skirt riding up while they were struggling to get free of each other on the ground.

“What a start to this morning, huh?” she asked.

He put his arms around her waist and felt and heard her sharp intake of breath. Gently moving her aside, he pulled his legs away from hers. Then he sat up and nodded his agreement.

“Between Gus and me, I think we’ve made you sufficiently late,” she said, giving him a brilliantly white toothy grin. “Why don’t you get going? I’ll get Gus back to the house. By the way, today’s walk? Free of charge. You’ve done half the work after all.”

“Thanks.” He stood and dusted off his pants. “I’m plenty late now. There’s no rush,” he said with a sigh. His tardiness was going to be really obvious and look really bad whether it took him an extra five minutes to get there now or not.

“You said you’re in law school at CVU when we talked on the phone earlier and you offered me the job,” Sadie said.

“Yeah.” He reached for her hands, and she gave them. As he helped her to her feet, he felt that strange pleasure at his skin coming into contact with hers again.

What was with that?

“Do you know my friend, Astoria?” Sadie asked.

“Astoria Banks?” He knew her from a distance and knew enough about her to understand that it was best to know her from a distance.

Sadie nodded. “That would be her.”

“I know who she is.” Yeah, he knew her from a distance all right. He didn’t know how anyone managed to get to know her well.

“Oh okay. She’s my girl.”

Rafe nodded. He couldn’t picture the two of them as friends, though. They seemed so entirely...different even though he didn’t know either of them well. The first word that came to mind when he thought of Astoria was, acerbic. That was definitely not the first word that came to mind when he thought of Sadie. The closer he looked at the tall, willowy woman standing in front of him, the more he found worth a closer look. A breeze kicked up, pushing her shirt closer to chest and allowing him to admire the small yet perky breasts she was hiding beneath that baggy shirt.

Gus, bored with his game now that the attention was no longer on him, jumped out of the stream. He shook himself dry, spraying Rafe and Sadie with water droplets in the process.

Sadie laughed and bent down to rub the dog’s wet head. “Just what are we going to do with you, Gus?”

“Good question.” Rafe found himself smiling for the first time that morning. Sadie caught his eye and returned his smile. The two of them just stared at each other for a moment.

Gus broke the trance by attempting to advance on Rafe, but Sadie held onto him. “Oh no you don’t, Gus. Rafe doesn’t have time to change clothes after you get him all wet and muddy, I’m sure.”

Rafe grinned. “Thanks. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do,” Sadie said, turning her attention back to Gus.

Rafe walked toward the parking lot for his condo, going over the chaos of the morning in his mind, trying to get it to make sense.

#

After a miserable first class during which his professor made it clear he did not care for Rafe’s tardiness, Rafe headed to a class he was actually looking forward to. It was the first meeting of the semester for his Child Advocacy clinic. He forgot that Astoria Banks was big into Child Ad until he walked into the classroom. Right away, he saw a perfect example of his word to describe Astoria. At the moment, she was in full-on attack mode. Some poor, hapless girl had managed to get on the wrong side of Astoria Banks on the first day.

“Who do you think you are?” Astoria asked in a well—acerbic—tone.

The girl gave Astoria a shocked, startled look. She opened her mouth, and Rafe would never know whether she did it to reply or as part of her shocked reaction.

At that moment, Cole, the lawyer who's in charge of the legal clinic, stood up at the front of the room. "Could I have everyone take their seats, please?"

Five of the seven students of the legal clinic were seated at a long, rectangular table. The girl Astoria had attacked and Rafe were the only ones standing. Rafe quickly ducked into a seat next to his friend, Malcolm. Astoria's victim slunk into a seat at the long table as far away from Astoria as possible. Rafe looked up and locked eyes with Cybil. Well. This could be awkward. Cybil gave him a death glare.

Rafe glanced at Malcolm who mouthed, *casualty* to him. Rafe shrugged. It wasn't like he ever promised any of them forever.

Cole started to give them an introduction to the legal clinic and lay out his expectations for that semester. He was just a few years older than Rafe and his classmates, just a few years out of law school himself. Cole worked for a local legal aid organization and ran the Child Ad clinic as an adjunct professor for CVU's law school. His wife was also a legal aid lawyer. Cole was pretty popular around there. With certain girls to an extreme and with people in general because he was good at balancing his professional side with his social side. Cole was chill and yet admirably devoted to and passionate about his work.

After he finished laying out the class, Cole asked everyone to go around and introduce themselves. There were only eight of them in the class as the school tried to keep the legal clinics small to ensure they were effective and everybody had an enriching experience and all of that. A guy Rafe didn't know that well went first. Then Astoria's victim went while Astoria did plenty of eye rolling.

Next, it was Astoria's turn. "I'm Astoria, and I worked with Cole over the summer, and I worked with the Innocence Project last year. Helping the less fortunate is very important to me," she said, throwing a pointed glance the victim's way before continuing. "For those of you who don't know, my brother is in prison for a crime he didn't commit." Astoria continued on with her introduction after that, but Rafe knew the story pretty well, so he only half-listened.

Rafe might have found Astoria attractive if she didn't remind him so much of the pit bulls that had guarded his family's compound when they'd lived in Rio de Janeiro. Astoria had short black hair, rich brown skin, and was small-framed, on the petite side.

"Okay," Cole said eventually, interrupting Astoria's lengthy introduction. "Thank you, Astoria. Rafe, would you like to tell us a little about yourself?" Cole asked, running a hand through his black hair, looking more than a little frazzled. Rafe couldn't blame him. Wrangling Astoria couldn't be an easy task.

Rafe stood. "Sure." He went on to introduce himself.

At the end of class, Malcolm and Rafe were talking about their summers when Astoria sauntered over and gave Malcolm a tap on the shoulder. "Hey, Malcolm, how've you been? How was your summer?" She gave him a huge hug that seemed to surprise Malcolm. Malcolm hugged her back hesitantly. She was being kind of blatant. Malcolm either didn't get the hint or didn't want to get it, but Rafe could clearly see what was happening. He made a mental note to ask Malcolm later which it was.

"I'm good," Malcolm said. "My summer was...good. Have you met my friend, Rafe?" Malcolm turned and gestured to Rafe.

Rafe smiled and stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you."

Astoria gave Rafe a look that implied he was intruding on something and barely touched his hand in a limp-as-a-dead-fish handshake. "Hi," was all she said. Then she turned her attention back to Malcolm. What a charmer that one was.

After Malcolm and Astoria talked for a few minutes, Malcolm said, "We're going to grab lunch." He nodded at Rafe. "Do you want to come along?" Malcolm asked Astoria.

"Sure," she said. "Should we all ride over together?"

"Okay," Malcolm said in a tone that held a bit of a surprise.

"I'll get my things and meet you outside," Astoria said.

When Astoria headed back to her seat to grab her stuff, Rafe said in a low voice, "She's awfully friendly all of a sudden." He added with a chuckle, "With you anyway."

"Yeah," Malcolm said.

"What do you think about that?"

Malcolm shrugged. "She's never done anything to me. I have no reason to not be nice to her."

"I'd watch out for that one if I were you."

Malcolm didn't have a chance to respond because Astoria was back at his side. She talked his ear off all the way outside and to The Pit where they were having lunch. The Pit was a new barbeque place in Richmond on Broad Street downtown.

CVU's campus was only a short drive from Richmond, so it didn't take long to get there. Malcolm found a parking spot on a street not far from the restaurant, and the three of them went inside together. The menu was simple but good. Rafe made no pretensions about it. He was a carnivore; loved his meat. He was a good South American that way. And The Pit did not disappoint when it came to barbeque.

"I love my pork," Malcolm said as they walked in. "My family's Muslim, but I had to convert because I had to have my pork."

Astoria laughed a little too loudly as she had at anything that might have been a joke—no matter how bad the possible joke might be—that had come out of Malcolm's mouth since they left the law school earlier. "There was probably more behind it than that," she said.

He smiled at her. "You're right. There was. But the bacon, ham, and especially barbeque are nice bonuses." Held the door to the restaurant open for her, and she stepped inside. Rafe followed the two of them into the air-conditioned building. A welcome blast of cold air hit him in the face as he walked into the darkened restaurant that smelled stomach-grumblingly good of pulled pork and charcoal. Astoria and Malcolm ordered their food. Pegging the guy who worked behind the counter as a Guatemalan, Rafe ordered in Spanish.

He turned to find Astoria's reproving and judgmental eye on him. Wondering what he'd done to draw that kind of attention, he raised his eyebrows.

"I thought they speak Portuguese in Brazil," she said. "You said you were from Brazil in class, right?"

"True and true," he said, not sure where she was going with this.

“Weren’t you speaking Spanish just now?” She nodded toward the counter where they’d just ordered their food.

What was this, an inquisition? He smiled easily and saw that his smile had its intended effect even on this one. “I speak both. I also speak Mandarin and French. And obviously English for a total of five languages. Just in case you’re keeping score for some reason.” He tried to joke with her but could see immediately that he hadn’t succeeded.

She gave him a who-do-you-think-you’re-talking-to look and turned around to walk to the table Malcolm had staked out at the back of the restaurant. Rafe thought he heard her mutter, “show off” under her breath, but whether he had or not, he decided to leave it alone. There was no point in poking an angry bear with a sharpened stick.

While they waited for their food, Rafe busied himself with checking his email on his BlackBerry. He figured that was the safest course of action at the moment. He had no interest in striking up a conversation with Astoria—and possibly unwittingly picking a fight. And he was pretty sure she had no interest in striking up one with him. It was pretty obvious, blatant even, that her only interest was in Rafe’s friend.

“What are you doing this weekend?” Astoria asked Malcolm at one point.

Rafe’s interest in the conversation picked up again. He wondered how his friend would handle this one. He couldn’t see Malcolm and Astoria. Malcolm liked his women a lot more, well, toned down than Astoria was for one thing. Docile was probably the better word. For another, Malcolm tended to go after undergrads.

“Rafe and I are playing soccer,” Malcolm said. “More like Rafe will be picking up my slack.”

Rafe looked up with mock seriousness. “So true,” he said. They laughed. Malcolm punched him in the arm, and the two of them traded several fake blows.

“Where’s the game gonna be?” Astoria asked. “Maybe I’ll drop by.”

“The intramural fields on the undergrad campus,” Rafe said, watching from the corner of his eye for Malcolm’s reaction.

Malcolm jumped up as a number was called. “That’s my food. I’ll get everybody’s. You two stay here.”

Rafe and Astoria sat in uncomfortable silence until Malcolm returned to the table.

“So what are you taking this semester? Besides the clinic,” Malcolm asked Astoria, seeming eager to change the subject from the soccer game.

“A criminal procedure class,” Astoria said.

“Of course you’d be taking that crim pro class,” Malcolm said with a smile. “Got us a future public defender here.”

“Hope so,” Astoria returned the smile eagerly. “I also have Trial Ad and a seminar on the Fourth Amendment and that’s it. What about you?”

“White collar crime, a seminar on law and the economy, Virginia civil procedure, and tax,” Malcolm rattled off the names of his classes.

“That’s a lot for third year,” Astoria said. “And you’re on a journal, too, right?” She leaned across the table a little, seeming much more interested in his answer than in her food.

Rafe hid a smile, looking forward to ribbing Malcolm about all this later.

“International law journal,” Malcolm said. “I like to keep busy.”

“I see.” Astoria gave him a look that implied she’d like to be what kept him busy. Rafe knew he couldn’t miss that one.

Malcolm turned abruptly in his seat and looked at Rafe. “What are you taking?”

“That advanced level contracts class if I haven’t already been kicked out, for one thing,” Rafe said.

“Kicked out?” Malcolm asked. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Rafe laughed. “You won’t believe my morning.” Rafe thought of Sadie as he said this. Glancing across the table at Astoria, he thought maybe he’d better save his story for later. “But first, let me finish my classes.” Rafe rattled off the rest of his classes.

Strangely enough, he couldn’t deny that he didn’t mind having Sadie on his mind.

Chapter 2*Denise*

Around lunchtime, Astoria texted Denise to ask if she could come over later. Denise didn't have any afternoon classes on Wednesday, which worked out well because she was going to pick her fiancé up from the airport soon. Fiancé. Man, that sounded nice. She didn't think she would ever get tired of saying it. Whether saying it in her mind or saying it out loud to other people when introducing him or talking about him or anything, it never got old. And she seriously doubted it ever would, and after they'd worked so hard to be together, that was just fine with her.

Denise told Astoria it was fine for her to drop by for a while. It was probably best for Astoria to drop by before John got home anyway. John, her fiancé. Yep, fiancé, fiancé, fiancé. It just didn't get old.

John and Astoria got along okay for Denise's sake, but they would never really be friends. Astoria had her...hang-ups, and there was no love lost on John's side either. John insisted Astoria hated him because he was white and there was no reason to make an effort with a person like that. Denise wanted to insist that he was being silly, but she couldn't exactly do that. There was some truth to John's theory even though Astoria had made some changes in her attitude over the past year. After all, as everybody knew, Astoria had her...hang-ups.

But Astoria could be such a great friend as well. And a fiercely loyal one. Part of the reason Astoria didn't like John was because she believed John had been a jerk to Denise. Admittedly, John and Denise hadn't had an easy time of it getting together. But John had his reasons, and they'd gotten past it all. Well, Denise and John had.

Astoria and John's parents were having issues getting past it all. And John's ex-girlfriend wasn't too happy with the way things were, either.

Denise let Astoria in and gave her a hug hello. Astoria took in the pictures that were all over the apartment with a "Hmph." Denise couldn't help it. She'd covered the place with pictures of her and John. Engagement pictures. Pictures from events at the law firm where she'd worked over the summer, Dettweiler. Just everywhere.

"You do that every time you come in here," Denise said. "It's not like the pictures should still come as a shock to you. We've been in this place since June."

"These pictures will always come as a shock to me," Astoria said.

"He treats me like gold now." She didn't want Astoria to start in on him.

"He better. He has a lot of making up to do for when he was being a fool and a coward," Astoria said. "You could still do better, though."

"We've set a date."

"I know. Getting married right after the bar exam?" Astoria shook her head.

"Girl, you just invite stress into your life.

"We're giving ourselves a couple of weeks. Wedding isn't until mid-August."

And Denise was sure her firm wouldn't appreciate her taking a whole bunch of time off coming through the door for the bar and the wedding and the honeymoon. Might as well knock it all out at once. Besides, she just wanted to be married to him as soon as possible after graduation. "So, how was your drive back?" Denise asked. Astoria had given herself just enough time to get some sleep and head to class that morning. Astoria always hated leaving New York for the small college town-esque community

in which CVU was located. Even nearby Richmond was too small for her tastes. Richmond was just the right size for Denise, though.

“Good,” Astoria said.

“And how was the clinic?”

Astoria rolled her eyes. “Put my anger management skills to the test.” Astoria launched into a story about a girl she’d worked with over the summer who she could barely tolerate and who was now in her legal clinic.

Denise laughed and shook her head. “What am I going to do with you?” Her phone vibrated, and she looked down at it. Her face lit up with a grin as she sent a reply text.

“I might not like him too much, but damn if he didn’t do a good job on that diamond,” Astoria said. “You could see that thing from outer space.”

Denise smiled and kept texting. The diamond was nice, but what it represented—who it connected her to—was much more important to her.

“Who you texting?” Astoria said. “No, I already know. It’s gotta be John. I can tell from that huge goofy grin you have on your face right now.”

“Yep,” Denise said through her grin.

“What’s he say?”

“His flight just landed. I’m going to have to leave in a little while to pick him up.” She worried her lower lip with her teeth. “You can come with if you want.”

“No thanks,” Astoria wrinkled her nose. “I’m sure you two are going to need your alone time anyway after being separated for one whole week.

She laughed and felt the tips of her ears grow warm, but she couldn’t deny it.

"I'll catch up with you later," Astoria said. "But I just wanted to tell you about Malcolm real quick. That's why I came over here in the first place."

"Malcolm. What about him?" Denise knew Stori had a thing for Malcolm.

"We had lunch together at The Pit," Stori said, the rapture apparent on her face and in her voice. "One of his friends came along," she added with a bit of sourness in her tone. Then her tone went back up, all light and happy. "I think I'm going to ask him out soon," she said. "I might even go to his soccer game Saturday."

Denise nodded.

"What?" Astoria asked.

"What?" Denise parroted.

"I know that look." Astoria narrowed her eyes. "Why are you giving me that look right now about Malcolm?"

"Just be careful," Denise said. "The word on the street is he has a thing for undergrads. That he likes them young and inexperienced about the world."

"Just because he's dated a few undergrads—"

Denise raised her eyebrows but didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry, Denise, but you are the *last* person in the world I want to take relationship advice from." Astoria grabbed her purse from the coffee table where she'd set it down earlier.

"Okay," Denise said, pressing her lips into a firm line. She wouldn't let Astoria provoke her. "Fine."

"I guess I better let you go get your frat boy from the airport." She walked over to the door. "We can't all date perfect men with no flaws like John Archer."

“That was unnecessary,” Denise said with an unfriendly laugh.

Astoria looked over her shoulder at Denise, and Denise felt as if something was shifting in their relationship. This was the shortest, most tense reunion they’d ever had after a long period of time away from each other. Maybe they were starting to grow apart, and the thought of that saddened her.

“I’ll call you later,” Astoria said.

“Okay,” Denise said.

Astoria left the apartment, and Denise let out a long sigh. Astoria was a good friend. Despite their differences, they’d been close since they met during their first year of law school. As much as Astoria griped about the wedding, Astoria was supposed to be her maid of honor. Denise hoped that friendship—one of the best she’d ever had—was not about to be over.

#

The moment Denise saw the face of her favorite person in the world, all the tension and worry from her confrontation with Astoria earlier melted away. Everything inside of her lit up. She couldn’t stop her lips from stretching into a huge smile, and there was no reason in the world she would want to. John wheeled his suitcase behind him as he jogged from baggage claim toward her. He grabbed her and pulled her in for a long kiss she desperately needed.

“Hey you,” he said, his forehead pressed to hers. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” She pulled back a little to admire him for a moment. He kept his black hair buzzed short. His bright green eyes were taking her in as well. Those eyes were soft with adoration. She knew she’d made the right choice no

matter what anyone else thought. And after all, she couldn't live her life for other people. She'd already made that disastrous mistake once and didn't plan to repeat it.

So John had taken a little work. Some hearts just needed a little more coaxing than others before they really believed they were in good hands. John happened to have one of those hearts. Despite all the material things his parents gave him growing up, he never really felt loved by them. They gave him plenty of money but very little of their time.

John was almost a foot taller than her five foot six. And every inch from head to toe was lean and gorgeous. And at the moment, very tan. John spent every spare minute outside in the summertime.

"How was your flight?" she asked as they headed for her car.

He slipped one arm around her waist and pulled his suitcase along with his free hand. Good."

"And your brother?"

"Thom is great. He asked about you." Thom was John's little brother. John waited until his parents were out of town on a combined business and pleasure trip to London before going up to visit his brother in Connecticut. He and his parents weren't on the best of terms. In fact, he barely spoke to them anymore. And it was all because he was dating Denise. John went out of his way to reassure Denise it had nothing to do with her and was all about their hang-ups. Still, she felt guilty about separating him from his parents.

Denise hit the unlock button on her smart key as they approached the car. She'd finally gotten an upgrade in the car department. Her rust bucket was gone.

They'd had some good times together, but the time to say goodbye had come. It'd finally died over the summer, and since she was making summer associate money at Dettweiler, she decided to buy herself something decent. Hopefully, she'd be offered a job in a few weeks for after graduation and would start making full time associate money a year from now.

But back to the car. She now drove a Chevy Malibu. It was no Kompressor, like John had. Then again, she wasn't an Archer. Yet anyway. And even though John's parents were angry with him, and they'd cut him off financially in a lot of ways, they let him keep his old car. He would have let Denise drive it whenever she wanted, but she preferred to have her own. She didn't like the idea of driving around in something the Archers, who most likely hated her, had paid for. Besides, she liked paying her own way. She liked knowing that she'd earned everything she had.

John stretched out in the passenger seat after they were settled in the car.

Denise started out for the exit to the parking lot.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked. "Are you hungry?"

"Not for food." He took her right hand from the steering wheel, leaving her the left to drive with. Brushing her knuckles against his lips, he said. "I want to go home."

"I'm all for that." She picked up the speed as she headed for the highway.

As soon as they were home and through the front door, John dropped his suitcase. He wrapped his arms around her from behind.

Denise smiled and sank against him. "I love this place."

"Oh yeah?" he murmured, his lips brushing her ear as he did so.

“Yeah.” She looked up at him. “Because I share it with you.”

His lips descended over hers, and she reached up behind his neck. She pulled back long enough to spin toward him and take in his gorgeous face again. Locking her arms behind his neck, she welcomed his lips over hers. His lips pushed softly yet insistently against hers. She moaned a little as she pressed against him, feeling the proof how much he wanted her against her stomach.

His hands trailed over the sides of her arms, down to the waist of her jeans. He pushed them under her shirt and lifted it over her head. Tossing it onto the floor, he slipped his arms around her. “I missed this so much.” He unfastened her bra while kissing her shoulder. For a moment, he stood there just holding her before leading her over to the couch.

She unfastened her jeans, and he did the rest of the work. Fully naked, she sank down onto the couch. He crouched over her, still fully clothed. He spread his hand across the skin between her hips, stroked her lower abdomen with his fingers in a way that tickled and stirred up desire low in her belly at the same time. She brushed against him, feeling the roughness of his jeans against her inner thighs.

She reached for the fly of his jeans, and they had him naked in seconds. They stopped using condoms at some point over the summer, and she was on the pill, so he pushed inside her and they moaned and groaned with relief at the same time. She raised her hips to meet his, and he grabbed them, pulling her closer. She lay limp against the couch as he found the exact right spot over and over again until she came with shuddering gasps.

“I’m not done with you yet, he murmured, lowering himself over her. He supported his weight with one elbow while kissing her. With his free hand, he went between fondling her breasts and teasing the sensitive nub of skin just above where he was inside of her. She could never get close enough to him. No matter how much of him she got, she’d always find herself craving more. She pressed her forehead to his shoulder, but he pulled her head back and kissed her mouth again before dipping his head so he could give his full attention to her breasts.

“I missed this more than I can ever tell you,” he mumbled against her skin.

“Show me.”

He kissed her long and deep while still exploring her body with his hands. He knew everything she wanted. He’d taken the time to learn it all. Including the fact that she always wanted his hands on her. All over her.

He stroked her with his hands, his tongue, and farther south until she couldn’t think of anything but him. The pleasure was mind erasing, so she couldn’t keep track of how long this went on, but she knew she didn’t ever want it to stop.

She squeezed her eyes tight and gave over to a second orgasm. He finished with her. Then he shifted them so that he was on the bottom, and she lay against him, resting her head on his chest. She lay there, thinking about how much she loved him and wondering what he was thinking about for a while.

His phone rang, and he looked over at it.

“Want me to get it for you?” she asked. It was a selfish offer; she kind of wanted to see who was calling.

“Nah,” he said. “I don’t feel like talking to anyone but you right now.”

“Oh yeah?” she grinned.

“I’m too tired to move.” He kissed her nose. “You wore me out, girl.”

“Right.” She laughed. She wondered who was calling him, though. Maybe it was Thom wanting to see if he made it back safely or not. She was not the jealous type, or didn’t think she was, but he was so friggin’ stunning, and she loved him so much, she was always a little afraid something—or someone—was going to happen to take him away from her. She knew he said he loved her and only her, but there was always that stupid, nagging little bit of worry at the back of her mind.

It didn’t help that his gorgeous ex went to school there. She followed him to CVU with the intention of getting him back. She’d backed off since her parents set her up with a new guy over the summer. He was a surgical resident at Massachusetts General Hospital, which was one of Harvard Medical School’s teaching hospitals. She and the new guy were moving lightning quick. They were engaged already. Denise was pretty sure Sasha wanted John to be jealous. Denise kind of wondered if he was but suspected that would be a dangerous question to ask. It could cause a fight for no reason, give her a reaction she didn’t want to hear or see, or both.

She still couldn’t believe he left Sasha for her. John avoided Sasha whenever he possibly could, but there was always that niggling “what if” at the back of Denise’s mind.

“How’s Suse settling in?” John asked, stroking her hair away from her face. Denise’s good friend, Suse, was studying abroad in Spain that year. She finally had a revelation over the summer, broke up with her awful, controlling boyfriend, and

decided to celebrate by spending her last year of school in Spain since she'd finished all of her core classes and all the electives at CVU that she wanted to take.

"Good," she said. "She just called me last night to tell me about how much fun she's having over there."

"And how's the other one?" he asked.

She laughed because she knew he was talking about Stori. "She's fine. She was over here right before I went to pick you up actually. She had only good things to say about you as always."

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "I'm sure."

She snuggled closer, pressing her head up under his chin. "Same as you have to say about her."

"You know, I wonder how the wedding is going to go with her standing on the other side of you as maid of honor."

"And what makes you say that?"

"I'm just getting this picture of the priest—"

"Reverend."

"So we'll have both." He shrugged. "Anyway, he'll ask if anybody has objections, and she'll hurtle herself across the way and start throttling me."

"No." Denise laughed. "She wouldn't do that."

"Mm. I'm not so sure. She hates me."

"She doesn't." She kissed one of his well-sculpted arms.

"She doesn't think I'm good enough for you."

"She doesn't even know you half as well as I do."

“She’s kind of right.” He looked down at her, those striking green eyes partially hidden by black lashes. “I know I don’t deserve you, but I’m lucky you chose to be with me regardless.”

She reached up and puckered her lips for a kiss. He slipped his over them while caressing her lower back. She couldn’t imagine ever being happier.

Chapter 3*Rafe*

Neither one of them were happy about this; Rafe could tell.

Normally, the clinic would meet only on Wednesdays for classroom time, and they would be allowed to plan their client meetings, research, and other activities on their own time. But on Friday of the first week, Cole had them meet so he could pair the seven of them up in teams for the semester. There was one group of three because of the odd number of people in the clinic. Cole chose the teams. He'd sentenced them to working with each other until December.

Rafe would've preferred to work with his bro, Malcolm. He had a feeling that Astoria would have preferred to work with his bro, Malcolm as well, albeit for different reasons. Instead, Malcolm was paired with Cybil. And Rafe and Astoria would be stuck with each other this semester. The good news was Astoria already knew the ropes as she'd done Child Ad work before. The bad news was Astoria was, well, Astoria. And notoriously so.

After he had announced the teams and given them folders containing information about their first clients of the semester, Cole told them to meet with each other and get to know each other a little better while they read through the information. The actual files for the clients were at Cole's office, so they wouldn't have a chance to look at those until they made their first trips over to the legal aid office.

“So, I guess we’ll be working together this semester,” Rafe said, trotting out his most charming smile. No need to get off on the wrong foot unless she made it necessary.

“I guess so,” she said with a small but polite smile.

That was a switch. So much so that it caught Rafe completely off-guard. It took him a moment to pull himself together and focus back in on the task at hand. He tapped the folder that sat on the table between them with his index finger. “Fiona Wattlebaum.” He read the name printed at the top of the folder. “What a name, huh?” He smiled again.

“I guess.” She inspected her fingernails.

“Do you want to get out of here? Maybe grab a cup of coffee or something and go over this?” Rafe asked, seeing no point in sitting in the classroom if they didn’t have to. They had all the materials they needed now, and Cole had told them they were on their own until Wednesday. Rafe didn’t like sitting in classrooms unless it was absolutely necessary. He did most of his studying at a local coffeehouse.

“Nothing personal, Rafe. You’re a very attractive guy and all, and I’m sure you know that,” she said. “But I only date African-American men.”

Rafe almost burst out with a laugh of surprise but caught himself. She’d thought he was hitting on her. “No, no that’s not what I meant at all. I just don’t like being in classrooms if I don’t have to be.” He fought to keep his face straight. “Do you have any particular reason for your dating policy, though?”

“Like I said, nothing personal. I just prefer to stay with my own kind.”

It was getting harder and harder to fight that laugh that wanted to burst out of him.

“What’s so funny?” she snapped, looking up at him. The Astoria he was used to was back in full force. Her brown eyes held a challenging look.

“Nothing.” He couldn’t fight his smile any longer even though he saw that it was only making her angrier. “I prefer to stay with my own kind, too. It’s just that I consider humankind my kind.”

She nodded. “Everybody’s entitled to their own opinion.” The way she said opinion made it sound like any opinion except hers was worthless.

“Look, we’re getting off on the wrong foot here,” Rafe said.

“You can say that again.”

Astoria grabbed the folder from him and started flipping through it. He searched his brain for some safe topic of conversation that might make things a little less tense. That was when Sadie sprang to mind. She was doing that more and more lately. With an alarming frequency actually.

“I think I met a friend of yours,” Rafe said. “Sadie.”

“Oh yeah?” Astoria didn’t look up from whatever she was reading in the folder. “How’d you meet her?”

“She’s my dog walker.”

“Okay.” She obviously had no intention of making holding a conversation easy.

“When should we set up an appointment with Fiona?” Cole asked.

Astoria shrugged.

“Astoria, we have to work together whether you like it or not.”

“We should look at this stuff first, right? I’ll make a copy and we can look it over tonight. We can each make our way over to legal aid to look at the actual file. I’ll be at the soccer game tomorrow. We can talk about which one of us will call Fiona to set up an appointment then.” Astoria stood with the folder in her hand.

“Or we could go over it together right now. We’re both here. Seems easier.”

Astoria stood and made a big production of rolling her eyes. “I’ll be right back.” She walked off with the folder in hand.

One thing was for sure. This semester was going to be a challenge.

#

After a very tense meeting with Astoria, Rafe was relieved to sit and review his copy of the materials in the folder that she’d made for him. After Astoria left, he sat quietly and learned more about his client, Fiona, while waiting for everyone else to finish meeting with their partners—the normal people who could work together like partners. Even Cybil seemed to be getting along with Malcolm okay. She didn’t seem to be holding the fact that Malcolm was friends with Rafe against him. Astoria was long gone, though.

When Malcolm was done meeting with Cybil, Rafe walked out with him.

“I see your meeting with Astoria went well.” Malcolm was laughing as he said it.

“Oh yeah. We’re best friends now.” Rafe laughed. “You know she’s into you, right?”

Malcolm’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Come on now. The way she acted at The Pit the other day. And the way she’s always acting around you. I’ve never seen her be nice to anyone before in my life. And I don’t think she’s coming to our soccer game tomorrow to see me.”

“You’re crazy,” Malcolm said. “She’s just being friendly.”

“And how often have you seen her do that?”

Malcolm laughed. “All the more reason not to shut her down. Maybe she’s trying to reach out to people. Maybe she’ll be less abrasive if people are nicer to her.”

“She’s only trying to reach out to you.”

“You need to stop reading into things that just aren’t there.”

“Did you *see* our meeting? We were the first pair done.”

“Maybe you pissed her off.”

“Man, a change in the wind pisses her off. I didn’t do a thing to her. I didn’t get the chance. She was on the attack from the moment we sat down.”

“Okay, Rafe.”

“I’m telling you. She has it bad for you.”

“Okay,” Malcolm said.

But Rafe could tell that his friend still didn’t believe him.

Chapter 4*Sadie*

Astoria had a potluck Friday night to celebrate the end of the first week of classes. Albeit a short week since classes always started on a Wednesday, it was still an event worthy of celebration. Sadie wasn't a student—she'd met Astoria through yoga class and the others through Astoria—but she was always up for a good celebration.

As usual when it came to potlucks, Sadie was put in charge of the wine. Her friends were well aware of the, er, limited extent of Sadie's cooking skills. Sadie was good at a great many things but cooking wasn't one of them. Her diet largely consisted of dry cereal and a separate glass of soy milk as she didn't like the two together, salads that she could easily throw together, tuna on multigrain sandwich rounds, and takeout from her favorite organic grocery store and café.

When Sadie got to Astoria's place, she found the door unlocked as Astoria told her it would be. She walked in and held up a bottle of wine in each hand, one red and one white. "I'm here, lovelies." She kicked the door closed and walked over to say hi to Astoria, Erich, and Tracy.

Erich was light-skinned and reminded her a little of Terrance Howard. Especially with the black-framed glasses he wore. Tracy reminded Sadie a little of Lia Johnson, the woman who played the love interest in that movie, *I'm Through With White Girls* (*The Inevitable Undoing of Jay Brooks*). Maybe it was just the dreads, which was what Astoria always told her. Maybe, but maybe not. Besides, Astoria just liked to argue. Astoria might have actually thought Tracy looked like Lia, too.

“How was the first week of class?” Sadie asked them. All three of them were in law school together. Astoria and Erich had met in undergrad at one of the SUNY schools, and the two of them had become friends with Tracy in their second year of law school.

“Let me just say I’m glad you brought that with you.” Tracy pointed at the bottle of white wine in Sadie’s left hand, which was her favorite.

After they talked about law school for a bit with Astoria shouting over her two cents from where she was working in the kitchen, the conversation turned to Sadie.

“Maybe I didn’t start my last year of law school Wednesday, but I have a story to tell. Girl.” Sadie shook her head. Acknowledging Erich, she added, “And Erich. You wouldn’t believe the day I had Wednesday.”

“Try us,” Tracy said.

“So I was babysitting my great uncle to give my great aunt a break Tuesday night. You know how he has dementia, right? Anyway, I stayed over so my aunt could get a full night’s rest. Long story short, my uncle hid my keys, and my cell phone ended up in the toilet. Anyway, I had a dog-sitting gig the next morning, but I couldn’t find my keys to save my life. I had already discovered my phone’s untimely demise when I went to use the bathroom that morning. Well, the only place I had the guy’s number I was dog sitting for was my cell phone. So I’m searching frantically all through the house for my keys. Getting later and later for the dog sitting thing all the time. Finally, I find the keys in the freezer.”

“What were they doing in the freezer?” Tracy asked.

“Child,” Sadie said, hand on hip. “Do you really think I knew?”

“The man has dementia,” Erich said, laughing. “*He* doesn’t even know.” He waved toward Sadie. “Go on with your story.”

“Okay, so I finally found the keys in the freezer like I said. Poor thing probably thought he was putting them away for safe keeping. And I high tailed it out of there. Luckily, the guy I’m dog sitting for didn’t fire me.” Sadie sat back and sighed at the memory of Rafe. “And let me tell you, he is *fine*.”

“What does he look like?” Tracy perked up. She was practically married to her boyfriend, but she lived through her friends when it came to stories about men.

“Right. Actually, y’all might know him,” Sadie said. “He’s a law student.”

“What’s his name?” Tracy asked.

“Rafe Cardoso,” Sadie said.

Something crashed in the kitchen, and Astoria cursed.

“You all right in there?” Sadie called into the kitchen.

Astoria came to the doorway that led into the dining room/living room area and leaned against the doorframe. She rubbed her right big toe on her left calf and winced. “What did you say just now?”

“Rafe Cardoso,” Sadie repeated. “He’s the man I’m dog sitting for.”

“Hmph.” Astoria rolled her eyes.

“I take it you know him,” Sadie said, stating the obvious.

“Know him?” Astoria snorted. “If I don’t, I guess I will. I’m stuck with him all semester.”

Sadie remembered being tangled on the ground with Rafe after they chased down Gus. Being “stuck” with Rafe didn’t sound like such a bad proposition to her.

“Why you talking about him anyway?” Astoria asked. “Don’t you have a boyfriend?”

“Not anymore,” Sadie said.

“Not again,” Astoria and Tracy said at the same time.

Sadie smiled at them and could only shake her head. She and Rico had gotten together and broken up more times than she could count. “Apparently, he kept trying to call me the night and morning that my phone drowned in the toilet. He got pissed that he couldn’t reach me—we’d had a fight just before that. He accused me of ignoring him. We had a huge blow up over it. It’s done.”

“I tell you, it’s that Dominican temper,” Astoria, who had a theory about everything and everyone, said.

“Whatever it is, he can stay gone this time.”

“That’s what you always say,” Tracy said.

“I mean it this time,” Sadie said.

“And that’s what you always say after we remind you that you always say you’re done with him,” Astoria said. She and Tracy exchanged what they probably thought were knowing looks.

Ready for a subject change, Sadie said, “Tracy, what did you bring?”

“My famous Waldorf Astoria salad in honor of our hostess.” Tracy nodded at Astoria who curtsied. She laughed and added, “And rosemary potatoes.”

“What about you, Erich?” Sadie asked.

“Dessert. Strawberry rhubarb pie.” Erich rubbed his flat stomach.

“You made that?” Sadie asked, surprised.

“I helped my girlfriend make it,” Erich said.

“By ‘helped,’ you mean you watched football while she slaved away, right?”

“Not the whole time.”

Astoria laughed. “Yeah right.” She looked back into the kitchen. “I need someone to come take a look at this salmon with me. I think it’s done.” She turned a sharp eye on Sadie. “Not you.”

They all laughed. Tracy got up to follow Astoria into the kitchen.

Sadie followed the two of them, asking, “Who wants wine?”

She was incredibly lucky to have such good friends. She couldn’t ask for more. Although, she couldn’t help thinking, it’d be nice to have more.

She wondered what Rafe Cardoso was up to that night.