

## Chapter One

### *Present Day—Simone*

Simone met Carl on a trip to New York.

At forty-two, she thought she knew her own mind and all there was to know about life. She was good at her job. She believed the choices she'd made over time had given her a life that, if not happy, was at least interesting. Carl changed all that.

A reasonably attractive and quite intelligent woman, owner of luminous brown eyes and medium-chestnut hair, Simone considered her best features were her generous smile and her full lips, always shiny with colorless lip gloss.

Simone was a psychiatrist, specializing in paraphilias—sexual behavior disorders. Dozens of men and women with sexual problems of all kinds came to see her.

Carl had appeared in the middle of a presentation she was giving for the Society Sex Therapy and Research Conference at the New York Academy of Sciences.

Simone was on the stage, facing the audience. Behind the comfortable red leather chairs, the frameless glass walls of the 40th floor allowed a perfect view of Manhattan's sunset.

Simone was the ever-punctual type. She never failed to be first to a meeting. Perhaps this was an unresolved disorder of her own, a neurotic love for the clock. Carl caused a stir as he sought a seat.

"Loewenstein, in his psychoanalytical contribution to the theory of masochism, says the phenomenon is challenging since it contradicts the basic human characteristic, which is to avoid pain and displeasure, thus departing from standards of normality."

She couldn't finish her thought because, besides arriving late and still standing up, the guy decided to jump in. "But, Doctor, what is pleasure and what is displeasure? And what is normal? Who has established that?"

He'd interrupted her presentation. She had to respond. She couldn't avoid it. "Studies are carried out to learn what normal behavior is. This is what is practiced by the majority of the population in a given country, region or culture. Deviations from such behavior are considered abnormal. Generally, there is a group consensus as to what is good—pleasurable—and what is not. Based on these findings, pleasure and displeasure can be determined."

But the tardy disrupter proved unhappy with her explanation. "With due respect, Doctor, I still don't understand."

She sighed a bit impatiently. Seeing that the man would not desist without an answer, she decided to discourage him. "Your name, please?"

"Carl."

“Carl, my time is limited. Could you kindly leave your questions ‘til I finish? There will be ample opportunity for them then. I won’t be able to conclude my talk, otherwise.”

“There is a seat in the last row.” She pointed.

“Thank you and excuse the interruption.”

He finally went to find a seat and left Simone to pick up her train of thought.

The lecture lasted fifteen minutes longer without further interruption. Afterward, during the coffee break, Carl approached her.

He was attractive and fair-skinned, though not handsome in the classical sense. Charming and magnetic, he had a square and angular face, far from what could be called pretty. His eyes were light brown, his dark hair flecked with gray. He was a tall man and at first sight, you couldn’t tell if he was lean or muscled under his suit. But he was certainly well proportioned.

“Okay, Carl, what do you want to know?”

He seemed shy. She sensed it in his sweet smile, the one only shy people use when they want to be accepted. That was her mistake – she believed in the assurance the shy pass to others that they are gentle, calm, agreeable and pose no risks.

“The question I tried to ask before was what is normal sexuality and what is not?”

The way he spoke showed great interest. He looked her right in the eye while awaiting her response and reaction.

“I think I know where you want to go. Who defines normality? Who has the authority to do it? You don’t have a medical background, do you? You’re apparently unfamiliar with diagnostic standards. Is that correct?”

His little smile said “bingo.” Then he said, “Your diagnosis is right on the money. I’m a lawyer. I really don’t have the slightest idea about diagnostic standards.”

This truly surprised her. A lawyer? At a sexology workshop, she would have expected a psychologist or a therapist or a gay person trying to understand himself. But a lawyer?

“And what brings a lawyer to a sexual disorder workshop?”

“I’m here because I need to build a defense in a case involving sex games that led to a woman’s death. I need to understand the subject better so I can do my job.”

*Right*, she thought. *A lawyer lost among shrinks. Wonderful. Any more surprises?* And “lost” was the correct word because the subject involved medical statistics...a bit out of a layman’s depth.

“What *games* are we talking about?” Simone made quotes in the air with her fingers when she said “games.” She wanted to show she didn’t think any sexual activity that led to death was sportive material.

“Sadomasochist games,” he replied, eyeing her intently.

“And you want to understand what’s normal about that kind of game?”

“I need to understand. But your response a little while ago didn’t help me. When you base something on studies where you ask people questions, you’ll have to agree that most of them don’t tell the truth. So how can you know if a given behavior is real or just a lie, and the majority not really a minority?”

“What do you mean by people lying in a study of that kind?” she asked, eager to get a lawyer’s point of view.

“They just lie. Most people are too stupid and frightened and dishonest to answer a questionnaire truthfully. Even more so when it comes to a taboo subject like sex.”

His body language said nothing. It didn’t reveal what he thought about the subject. He seemed to be trained not to physically give away what he felt. Simone hadn’t been able to read him yet.

“But we have to start from the premise that responses are true. If we don’t, we’ll never establish a standard.” She rabbit-punched the palm of her right hand with her left in emphasis. “Regarding sexuality, it’s very easy to identify sadism and masochism because we use a standard that shows only fourteen percent of the population has had an experience of that kind. I’ll grant you that’s not an exact figure but we have to work with the idea that about eighty-six percent of the population behaves differently.”

“They behave differently or they’re lying.”

He was insistent. Clearly, he needed answers that fit the case he wanted to build, and the ones she offered didn’t satisfy him.

“Maybe,” she said. “What’s normal for you?” Better for her to ask the question, she thought. That way she could understand what he really wanted to hear and then she’d be rid of him.

“Normal is to feel pleasure and do everything you can to get it. The rest is prejudice, nonsense or cowardice!”

His heated tone at last showed that behind his noncommittal lawyer’s façade was someone with fire in his belly.

“People kill in pursuit of pleasure. You should know that better than anybody. You’re defending such a person.”

“Yes, the case I’m working on is basically that. Death for pleasure. Someone who puts pleasure above all else. Risking death. And that’s not wrong or good or bad. It’s the desire of someone to have that pleasure – someone who accepts the consequences.” He stressed these words as if to show he truly believed what he was saying.

“True. But considering you’re here, lost among shrinks, it seems your argument’s not strong enough to convince the judge.”

He smiled vaguely, as if agreeing. He ran his hand through his hair, showing impatience, apparently frustrated. “Not only the judge. I need to convince him and the whole jury. The charge is first-degree murder. They’ll say it was premeditated. When my client goes to trial that will be taken for granted

because sex frightens people. Unconventional sex terrifies them. Sex is easy to condemn.”

“Can you sleep at night after you’ve defended a murderer? I’ve never been able to understand lawyers. You always defend one story and it’s not necessarily the true story. My whole life has been dedicated to the search for truth.”

“I hear you. But I understand the situation and I know he didn’t intend to kill, only to give pleasure. It was an accident and…”

Apparently, he believed his own words.

“Lawyers always seem to say that. But you’re right that unconventional sex terrifies the average person.” She glanced at her watch and saw she was two minutes late for the resumption of her presentation. It disconcerted her. “Oh. We have to get back.” She turned and took a step.

“Dr. Bennet, could you help me with my case?”

He placed a hand on her arm. Though partly absorbed by the sleeve of her jacket, the touch sent a frisson all through her.

“My name is Simone and I swear I don’t see how I can help you.”

“Simone, can we talk again after this gathering wraps up?”

“Yes, certainly.” Out the window went her desire to go back to the hotel, take a bath, get something to eat and go to bed.

The other lectures were meat for a sexologist but probably not much help to a lawyer. Carl did, nevertheless, keep quiet and pay close attention. After the final presentation, he waited at the door with his hands in his pockets.

“Carl, you went the distance,” she said, a tiny bit pleased to see him there.

“I toughed it out. How you people do complicate things. It’s impossible to understand some of those terms you use!”

“Just like you lawyers when you write.”

He nodded in agreement. “But our handwriting’s more legible.” He beamed and showed his perfect teeth.

“How can I help you? You’ve just met me. You don’t even know what I do. You don’t know if I’m capable or knowledgeable enough to be of any service to you. And from the little you’ve told me about your client’s situation, it’s complicated.”

“I’m not a psychiatrist but I’ve been practicing law for twenty years. In my field, we also get to know people, to form speedy opinions about a person’s character or worth. You can help me. I know you can. Sexuality is your area. I liked your book. Even though I didn’t understand half of it, I could see that you approach problems with an open mind.”

She couldn’t conceal her pleasure when he mentioned her book. It had taken so much work, so many hours of research, to write. Recognition was always welcome.

“I can’t have preconceived notions in my profession. I’m truly happy to meet someone from outside the academic world who’s had the grit to read it.”

"It was hard. It's pretty technical. You write with objectivity but it doesn't let a reader see much of your personality."

*My personality?* she thought. If she wanted somebody analyzing her personality, she'd write fiction, not a work of scholarship.

"It's a scientific undertaking, an extension of my doctoral thesis, not a novel. But getting back to your case. If you know something about my career, you also know I don't live in New York. I live in Woodbridge and I work in New Haven. I'll be here for just three days and I only have one free. I don't see how I can help."

"I'd like to hire your services. I want your help with this case. My office will pay you for your time. I really need help. I need an expert opinion. I'll go to Connecticut if necessary, or you can come here if possible. It's not that far, after all."

His eyes were timid and sweet and pleading with her. She never turned down a call for help. She nodded without having the vaguest idea what she could do for him.

"I can try. I'll need more details about your proposal."

"Can we discuss the case over dinner? I'll tell you what happened so you can think about whether you can help me and how."

Simone was prudent as a general rule and even more so because every day she treated people with serious behavioral disorders. Prudence had to be her name. But now she set prudence aside. Her curiosity about Carl took over, along with her attraction to this elegant, opinionated man.

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When they got to his car—a black Mercedes sedan—she couldn't help analyzing it. The vehicle one chose to drive said a lot about the owner.

She pointed to the parked car.

"You drive a safe and quite traditional sedan for someone who defends the unconventional. Oh well, the world is full of 'do as I say' and so on."

"It's a good-looking and fast car. I like to take control of a powerful machine, and for clients, it shows gravitas. But I'm not the car. It's only a car."

Her remarks had clearly made him uncomfortable.

"Relax, I wasn't being critical. It was an observation."

"I am relaxed. I just get edgy when someone analyzes me. I feel like a lab rat."

He courteously opened the door for her and helped her into her seat. His warm hands on her made the attraction grow.

"Part of the job. Excuse me," she said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm starved. How about you?"

Amazing how lawyers can so slickly change the subject.

"Famished." But her hunger had passed. She was dying to take a glance in the rearview mirror to see how she looked, to make sure she was presentable and that her hair wasn't a mess.

"How does a tasty risotto sound?"

"Sounds good. It's on my list of comfort food."

He nodded in agreement and kept quiet for most of the fifteen minutes it took to reach a quaint restaurant with dim lighting in the Meatpacking District.

He greeted the waiter with a smile. He was apparently an *habitué*. They seated themselves at a pleasant table beside a glass wall with water trickling down it. Very soothing. Only then did he speak. "Do you know anything about wines, Simone?" He spoke without looking up from the menu, which he seemed to be studying as if it were a case.

"Yes, I know they're made from grapes." She laughed at her own weak joke.

"But do you like wine?"

"I do. But I don't understand everything that I like."

It was getting late. She decided to stop analyzing Carl's personality. The menu was downright seductive and her hunger had returned with a vengeance. It was hard to choose. She wanted to order everything. He chose right away and waited for her to make up her mind before picking a wine. He didn't ask her opinion. Maybe he was afraid of another lame attempt at humor.

"How long have you been a doctor?"

"Thirteen years next January." She felt as if her ballroom days were over when she said it. She was forty-two now, a difficult age for any woman. Confessing to the fact took an act of courage.

"And was there any particular reason for specializing in sexual matters?"

"I didn't have much interest during medical school. I wanted to be a psychiatrist but sexology didn't appeal to me. Then two years after I graduated, and with an appointment book full of patients, I began to understand that most problems involve sexuality." She paused to taste the wine. It pleased her uneducated palate. "So tell me about your case."

"A complicated situation. Two lovers who liked to play sex games of all kinds. One night, the woman died in the middle of one."

His description was so nonchalant, he could have said, "I went out for a loaf of bread."

"What was the game like?"

"She had a fantasy she lived out over and over. She liked him to squeeze her neck during intercourse. That day, he squeezed too hard."

"And why did he squeeze too hard? Do you know? Did he lose control or was it intentional?"

"She kept asking him to squeeze harder. The more he squeezed, the more she wanted. He squeezed and squeezed and squeezed until she died."

He seemed as if he was watching the scene, his gaze far away while he described what happened.

"And you're certain that's what took place? That it wasn't rape followed by murder?"

"I'm absolutely certain!" he snapped. "He didn't want to kill her. He only wanted to give her pleasure."

*Good lawyer. Passionate about the case, she thought.*

"But he did kill. Squeezing the neck during the sex act to give and feel pleasure is called hipoxiphilia. Many accidents and deaths occur that way."

"So it's not uncommon?" he asked, sounding half curious and half relieved.

"No. There are even famous people who've died that way. The main problem is that it's very hard to know if the one who caused the death wanted it to happen or not. At times, it's not an accidental crime; it's just disguised strangulation, an obscured rape. It's necessary to be sure."

"That's not the case." Apparently he was certain.

"You seem convinced of that. The killer's account is persuasive?"

"I don't like the word killer. It implies guilt. I've known him a long time. He would never intentionally kill anyone."

"I wouldn't say that. We're all capable of killing. It depends on the circumstances and the restraints we have – or lack of them. You have no idea of the number of people who come to me who have killed or were about to kill and who are absolutely peaceful people, people who are apparently normal and level-headed."

"No one is normal up close."

"Up close. Apart from the statistics on standard conduct, we don't know very well what normal is."

"Then I'd better not get too close to you, Doctor, or my abnormality will show." He laughed, as if it were a good joke.

"I need to find out how to help you so I can know if I need to get close." She really wanted to get closer to him. He intrigued her more and more.

"Simone, I need to clear a person. He is a close friend and partner. I need to know the death was not premeditated, that it was not intentional. To prove innocence, I need to be convinced, technically convinced, I mean. For that, I need a psychological study of hipoxiphilia." He placed his hand on his throat as if to squeeze it.

What was this man doing to her? Just touching his own throat made her want him to touch hers.

"Hipoxiphilia," she corrected. "But just studying hypoxyphilia will help you clear someone?"

"It will. I need to know what makes someone feel pleasure from that, to know what's going on inside someone's head to make her demand such intensity. I want to understand what that behavioral deviation is and to

understand what leads her partner to satisfy her desire. I want to know what motivates him.”

He spoke these last words with an emphasis that left no doubt he needed an answer.

“I think we have to be more objective.”

“We have to be? So you’re agreeing to help.” He seemed relieved.

“The case seems interesting. But we need to look at the event itself to be able to find out if it was hipoxi or plain and simple death from asphyxia. I need details to help build your argument.”

“Simone, you’ll get all the information you need. He wrote a minute description of what happened with a wealth of detail.”

“He what? He described it?”

“That’s exactly what he did. And he didn’t just describe the death. He wrote the history of their relationship as if it were a novel.”

“Do they have names, or is it a professional secret?”

“Mark and Lara.”

“But are those their real names?” She was already thinking about Googling deaths by hipoxiphilia to try to find something.

“There are no lies in the text but first, you’ll read, then you’ll be able to say what’s real. At first, I’d like you to just stick to the text. Please don’t go to other sources ’til you finish it. That will eliminate any bias.”

As if he’d read Simone’s thoughts, Carl had put a damper on surfing the web. But, she reflected, he was right. Better to read the text and afterward look for additional information. Besides, the book is almost always better than the film.

“How are we going to do this? Will you lend me what he wrote?”

“Let’s do it this way; I’ll let you take the first chapter. You read it and then tell me if you can help me. If you say you can, we’ll draw up a contract covering fees and confidentiality and you’ll have access to the rest of the story.”

The lawyer had returned to life – contract, fees and confidentiality!

“Sounds good to me.”

He opened the briefcase he’d put on a chair, took out a yellow envelope and handed it to Simone. It felt like it held about ten pages.

“Simone, I suggest you eat. You still haven’t touched your food and risotto is good only when it’s hot.” He pointed at her untouched plate.

She tasted it and closed her eyes, signaling her approval. “It’s wonderful. I love risotto.”

“I do too. And I can make a great one.”

Besides being interesting, the guy could cook. She wanted to take him home and keep him in captivity.

The dinner went well. Carl was cultured and a good conversationalist. She guessed he was more or less her age, based more on when he said he’d

graduated from law school than on his appearance. She soon found out she wasn't far off. He was forty-three.

"I'm very curious to know what makes a pretty woman like you decide to spend her life delving into the human mind."

"Thank you for saying 'pretty.'"

Simone had never thought of herself as a pretty woman. She'd always looked at herself as being more "interesting" than pretty. Her hair and eyes were light brown; she exercised regularly and had a good shape. Nothing spectacular.

"The human mind is the most fascinating place that exists." *And your bed's probably number two*, she thought, a bit tipsy now from the wine.

"I prefer Paris."

He laughed. Wine can turn even the most severe lawyer into Mr. Cool.

"I agree. It's a more beautiful and less complicated place. But the trip into the human mind is much more intense and rich."

"Are you married, Simone?"

*The wine speaking again*, she thought.

"No husband in the world could put up with a life like mine. I'm a workaholic."

"But have you ever been married?"

Did he really care about her life or was he just being polite?

"Yes, a long time ago, and I have a daughter. I was sure that would be your next question."

"Indeed, it was. Classic, right?"

"To be expected. And you? Tie, black briefcase, wife and children waiting at home?" She was praying for him to say no.

"I left the tie in the car. As you've noticed, the briefcase is here. I'm a classic."

"And the wife and kids are at home?"

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand.

"No wife at home, no children. With all the time I spend on the job, they'd have to look for me in the classifieds whenever they wanted to talk to me. But I do have a plant."

*So he really does have a sense of humor*, she thought. *A bit on the harsh side but it's there. Just keep some alcohol in his blood.*

"That feat's beyond me. I can kill any plant. I always forget they need water." She paused. "Carl, the meal was wonderful. I don't mean to be inelegant but tomorrow the first presentation is at 9:00 a.m. and I still have to go over my notes."

"When will you have time to read the first chapter?" He was obviously in a hurry for answers.

"I promise I'll do it tomorrow night. Leave me your phone number and I'll call you on Saturday with my thoughts, okay?"

"I'm anxious to hear them but all right. Here's my card."

He gave her his business card, which seemed a pretty cold thing to do. Professional. *Wake up, Simone*, she admonished herself. *That's exactly what he wants with you, a professional relationship.*

"I'll need your cell phone. These are office numbers and the day after tomorrow is Saturday."

"I'll be at the office all day. Call me there."

"Talk about a workaholic. I just don't understand the live...what? Fern?"

"It's a cactus, Simone. It's just like me – tough, prickly, not very pretty and extremely resistant."

"Careful, Carl. The inside of a cactus is soft and watery."

"If you say so..." And he kept silent, looking deeply immersed in his thoughts or in another dimension throughout the journey to her hotel. Once there, he wished her goodnight and left.

## Chapter Two

The man intrigued Simone more and more but clearly he only wanted her professional assistance. He hadn't come on to her. But he had said he thought she was pretty. She smiled, content.

Women considered brainy, like her, longed to be appreciated for other qualities. Without false modesty, she was sure she was smart. Nice to know someone thought her pretty as well.

She reached her room exhausted. She looked around. She simply adored hotels—their impersonality and what waited behind the locked door...the very image of immaculate orderliness. She threw herself on the bed and lay there completely dressed for a few minutes. She was tired but her mind was in turmoil. Thoughts swarmed inside her head. She breathed deeply and decided to take a bath. Then she wanted to sleep.

But she couldn't sleep after the bath. Feeling relaxed and refreshed, she got under the covers. The night outside was cool, about 50 degrees. The temperature inside her room, however, felt just right. The yellow envelope she'd tossed onto the table when she came in called to her. *I'll just take a peek*, she thought.

As she opened it and removed the printed pages, she said to herself she'd just read the first one. A simple glance changed her mind.

The text was written as if it were a book. And with a dedication:

*To Lara.  
My life, my world, my love.  
Without you there is no color,  
no joy, no laughter.  
There is no poetry.  
Miss you day and night.*

Hard to sleep after a declaration like that. No one had ever written or said anything of the kind to her. She wanted to know who such a romantic soul was. Just a page...

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