

Sofi's Bridge

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my son Kyle whose heart of gold always wants to help others. And just as the characters in this novel learn to let their light shine, with pride I watch you doing this too. Continue to let Christ shine through you and in all you do.

1

Seattle, Washington, June 1913

A blur of white raced along the grounds to the beach.

Sofi froze at the second-story window. Set against the tattered sky of an incoming squall, her sister's nightgown billowed in the dark. For the past six weeks, Trina kept as much distance as she could from the sight and sound of the surf. Sofi raised a shaking hand to her throat, turned, and tore along the upper hall. "Mattie, she's outside."

China shattered as Matilda, their housekeeper, dropped a supper tray.

At the staircase, Sofi hiked up her black silk skirts and pounded downward.

Matilda followed close behind.

Ten minutes ago, Trina had been in the nursery, huddling on the window seat. Though nearly grown, she was always in the nursery since that night when...Trina even slept in the nursery instead of her bedroom, crying for Papa, with Sofi holding her close.

Matilda huffed. "I only left Trina to collect her supper."

A yelping Odin found Sofi at the kitchen hallway. The Springer spaniel bounded, his cold nose nudging her hand. Thank goodness one thing in this house had stayed the same. With Odin barking, she pushed

through the green baize door. The dog darted past her.

Inga, their cook, swung around to face her.

Frida, the housemaid, dropped whatever she held in her hand.

A man Sofi could swear she'd never seen before sat at the table, and shot to his feet as she hurtled through the kitchen.

She reached the outer door when the man—the gardener, she remembered now—pushed past her and flung the door wide. He charged across the lawn. The dog yowled and leapt after him. With Inga, Frida, and Matilda running behind, Sofi fled in the wake of the gardener down the trail to the beach.

The man reached the sand.

Odin bolted past, across the beach as Trina rushed along the dock.

Sofi scrambled to keep up, each ragged breath a prayer.

Matilda shrieked, and behind, Frida's and Inga's calls, "Trina!"

Sofi reached the beach in time to see Trina slip into the skiff at the end of the dock. Her sister pulled on the oars and made swift progress out on Puget Sound. At the edge of the dock, the dog pawed the planks, whining.

"Trina!" The wind snatched her cries as Sofi tripped over the shore strewn with rocks and driftwood. *Dear God, please keep her safe.* She had failed in looking after her sister.

The gardener reached the end of the thirty-foot dock and dove. It was hard to see anything other than green phosphorus as he swam toward the small skiff.

Cold brine swirled at Sofi's knees as she waded to the dock. She ran to the end of the wooden planks. It

should be her saving Trina. It was her job to look after her family.

Twenty yards out, Trina stood up in the skiff. Her nightgown streamed in the wind, a white sail against the squalling night.

Sit down, Trina. Oh, please sit down.

Swells buffeted the small craft as Trina stood, peering into the depths.

Sofi cried out, but the wind swallowed her words, until a wave nudged the boat, and Trina fell. Sofi screeched.

One moment Trina was there, the next the sea had taken her. Just like Papa.

She wrenched open the buttons of her bodice. She would not remain frozen, but get out of this wretched gown and bring her sister out of the depths.

"No, Sofi!" Matilda gripped her arm. "You're not as strong a swimmer as Trina. She has a better chance than you."

She thrust off Matilda's hand. She couldn't lose her sister. She'd swim in her petticoat if need be. But Inga and Frida had made it to the end of the dock, and now three sets of hands held Sofi, as the rising tempest droned.

Captive, Sofi counted the strokes of the man swimming to Trina. Then he dove, and the night went quiet. Sofi couldn't breathe. All that she'd kept dammed up since Papa's death cascaded over her.

Waves pummeled the pilings and beach.

Odin whimpered at her knee.

A moment later, the gardener came up, gasped for air, and dove again.

Sofi pressed the heel of her hand against her tight chest. *Dear God, don't take her from me.*

At last, the waters broke. The gardener surfaced with Trina coughing in his arms.

Pins and needles flared over Sofi's skin. At last, she could do something. She reached for the life ring, tossing it to the man. It landed on the waves near his head.

Trina batted at him, and he ducked beneath her. Seconds passed. He emerged to take hold of the life ring. He kicked, towing Trina with his arm across her chest. Until he lost his grip on the ring.

The wind and waves flailed at him and Trina.

Hand over hand, Sofi pulled in the rope, and threw the ring out again.

He caught it.

The tide fought to drag him and Trina, but with Frida's help, Sofi hauled them in.

As they neared the dock, Sofi and the women reached down to lift Trina from the waves. Sofi pressed on her sister's back to expel the water she'd taken in.

The man hoisted himself to the dock. Dripping wet, he pushed Sofi away and rolled Trina on her back.

"What are you doing?" She slapped his hands. If anyone would take life-preserving measures, it would be her.

But he shoved her and pried Trina's mouth open. After searching her mouth and throat, he flipped Trina on her front and thumped her back.

A moment later, Trina coughed and spat, and the man stood, leaning down to lift Trina into his arms.

Sofi gave him a shove. "I'll carry her."

"Don't be foolish, miss."

"You can't possibly carry her up to the house after that swim. We'll carry her together."

He swiped his wet hair out of his eyes. "It'll be

quicker if I carry her. She's worn out and she needs—" He scooped Trina up.

"Please...hurry." Sofi turned and ordered Matilda. "Water on to boil. Get blankets." Buffeted by the wind, Sofi walked beside him as he carried Trina up the incline with the squall whistling.

He kept his gaze on the lights shining across the lawns from the kitchen.

She kept turning to watch the rise and fall of her sister's chest, those pale eyelids that remained closed, that long blonde hair straggling like seaweed over the bodice of the white nightgown.

When they reached the kitchen stoop, Trina opened her eyes and looked at the man holding her.

Sofi gasped.

For a moment a spark of the real Trina—sixteen-year-old Trina—shone in the depths of her blue eyes.

Inside, the kitchen was a warm hive of activity.

The gardener settled a shivering Trina in Inga's armchair next to the stove.

"A towel," Sofi said to Frida. She dried Trina's arms and legs and wrapped her in a quilt as Matilda barged in with dry clothing.

Kneeling before her sister, she'd been prepared to take charge, have the man fade to the background as a servant of his standing should, but just as he'd done on the dock, he pushed her away. Ignoring his dripping clothes, he leaned close, listening to Trina's breathing.

And Trina latched her blue gaze with his.

In rigid silence, Sofi stood.

Matilda pierced her with a look that asked if she'd lost her mind.

Sofi put a hand to her head. Was it giddiness at Trina being alive that sapped her of her usual verve?

No. There was something about this man that calmed her sister like none of them had been able to do for weeks.

“Take your hands off her, ye shameless oaf,” Matilda shouted. She’d cared for Trina since she’d been a baby as if she’d been her own.

The gardener fended her off with a pained look. “Matilda, do you honestly think I’d want to hurt her?” He took hold of Trina’s wrist, as if he counted her pulse, and hunched down to examine her feet. Rocks on the beach had gashed the inside of one arch. With a tea towel, he wiped away a trace of blood.

Sofi reached out to help, but Trina shrank from her and focused on the fire burning in the grate.

Inga, Frida, and Matilda began to talk at once, while Sofi stood aside, alone in the eye of the storm. It wasn’t that Trina rejected her help—she was getting used to being rebuffed by her young sister lately.

But this stranger had taken control.

Frida and Inga submitted to his orders as if they’d known him for years instead of a month. Even the dog sat, his tail thumping as he shifted his gaze between the gardener and Trina.

Only Matilda eyed the man as though he were a hooligan.

The desire to cry crept up on Sofi, but she shoved it deep. She must be exhausted from carrying the weight of what was left of her family to let him take charge. Everything had changed since Papa’s death. She spoke to the man in a level tone. “You’ll need iodine. Bandages.”

“Hot water too.” He smiled his thanks when she brought him the basin. “She’ll be fine, stop your worrying.” His voice flowed in rhythmic Irish cadence.

With a calm Sofi did not feel, she retrieved the tin box, opened the bottle of iodine, while Matilda ripped a clean white cloth into strips. Sofi would let him see to Trina's superficial abrasions. He obviously had first-aid training. But more than simple medicine was needed to heal her sister's mind and heart. To think...only a few months ago, Trina had been at the yacht club, laughing, challenging the young men to a race. Her sister's teeth chattered. But her gaze was clearer than since the day they'd brought her home without Papa. "Leave me...alone. It's my..."

The man's eyes crinkled with a smile. "You're all right. Your few wee cuts and bruises don't worry me at all."

Trina moaned as her shivering eased and pulled the quilt around her. Then that heavy curtain came down behind her eyes. It seemed she grew smaller, shrinking away from them all. At least Trina was safe for now.

Sofi pressed a hand to her stomach.

A frown replaced the gardener's smile as he scrutinized Trina. "Is any tea ready? She needs a cup. With plenty of sugar and milk." He cupped Trina's chin, but she avoided his eyes. "It'll do you good," he murmured, "whether or not you want to talk to me." His brows creased at Trina's lack of response, and he cupped her shoulder. "You'll be fine, so I'm handing you over to Matilda's care before she tears me limb from limb." His smile matched the lilt in his voice.

Matilda needed no further encouragement. She, Frida, and Inga began to cluck over their one chick, Matilda's Scottish *r*'s rolling, the two other women elongating their Swedish vowels.

For now, Sofi would leave Trina in their capable

hands.

Her sister was locked away in one of her moods. Later, tonight, Trina would need her.

Setting her jaw, Sofi studied the gardener in an attempt to remember his name. She and this man had hardly spoken until tonight.

Inga laid out his duties from the time he arrived on their grounds just days before Papa...

Emptiness swelled inside. With Papa's drowning so shortly after this man started to work for them, she'd not had the heart to get to know him. She dammed up the memories of her father again, before grief sluiced through her—a grief she had no time to indulge. Not now when Trina needed her so much. And Mama too.

This gardener's name was...Neil Macpherson. And his manner, his confidence...too controlled to be a mere laborer. His abilities hinted at some training, but he was still the gardener. A man who thought he knew what was best, as Charles thought. But then, Charles, as Papa's business partner, always thought he knew best.

Her voice shook. "You're quite handy at first-aid, Mr. Macpherson."

"Sure anyone could do this. Even me, hired to trim the grass and prune the shrubs." He flinched, so slight, she almost missed it.

Matilda held a cup of tea to Trina's lips.

Trina sipped and leaned her head against the back of the chair, her eyelids drooping.

Sofi felt Neil Macpherson's gaze. "You don't look so well yourself, miss. Take that cuppa that Frida's bringing you."

She rubbed her arms and shook her head. Her

soaking clothes clung. Weariness of heart must be spurring this unfamiliar perversity within her. This need to fight, to protect Trina and Mama.

"Well, if it's not a cup of tea you want," he said, "then perhaps coffee, as long as it has plenty of sugar to counteract the shock." He led her away from Trina, and for a second she wanted to lean against him, like Mama used to lean against Papa.

But this was her family. She must rally herself.

"It's plain your sister's suffering from a prolonged sense of trauma," he said, lowering his voice.

"It's nothing more than a nervous malady."

His brow winged upward. "It's far more than that. She needs help."

She turned away from his all-too-inquisitive eyes. Of course her sister needed help.

Trina just didn't need the kind of help Charles was suggesting.

Inga and Frida whisked away the first-aid materials, and Matilda raced upstairs for an item of Trina's clothing she'd forgotten.

Sofi hunched down in front of Trina. She traced a finger down her sister's cheekbone, along the delicate line of jaw. She turned the young face toward her, only to be met by Trina's vacant stare. Sofi choked back a sob. "Where are you, *älskling*? Where are you?" No response came from Papa's favorite endearment. And really, there was no need for Sofi to ask. She knew exactly where the soul of her sister lay. Six weeks ago, it floated downward with Papa's body to the dark and sandy bottom of the Juan de Fuca Strait.

What the gardener said was true. She didn't need anyone to tell her that her sister suffered from trauma, but there had to be a way to bring her sister back to

health other than what Charles was arranging.

Neil Macpherson's officious manner wasn't what angered her. As a simple laborer, he must only mean well.

But as for Charles...she would fight him with everything she had before she'd allow her sister to go to a hospital for the mentally insane.

2

The next morning, from the nursery window high near the corniced peak of the house, Sofi watched Charles's green limousine rumble up the drive.

He'd bought his Cadillac a year after Papa bought his. Everything Papa did, Charles did soon after.

Her insides sank. She no more wanted to talk to Charles today than she did yesterday, or the day before that. He'd been no more help than that doddering imbecile, Dr. Atwood, he'd brought with him.

She turned from the window to the anchor of her and Trina's childhood—this nursery of wooden desks where Trina had created her drawings of boats and Sofi had done her sums and dreamed of designing bridges like Papa.

This was the only haven Trina could bear as she floated through this stupor. At the window seat, Trina rested her head against the warm pane of glass and stared at Neil Macpherson pushing a wheelbarrow through the garden.

Last night's storm had blown itself out, leaving a sham of peace over this house.

But Sofi knew better. A battle waited downstairs.

Matilda flung herself into the nursery. "Mr. Charles Bolton," her Scottish burr rolled with distaste. "The doctor's gone to see your mother. Charles is in your father's study. That blighted man has the admittance slip for your mother to sign."

An iron fist gripped Sofi's chest. She thought she

had a few months to help Trina back to health. "Mama's in no state to make any such decision. Is she in her room?"

"Aye, lass."

"But Charles has the admittance slip, not the doctor?"

"Aye, so he says."

"Right." Sofi clenched her fists. It was time she saw to that wretched man who waited in her father's study. That offense alone made her blood boil. She strode to the door but turned back to look at Trina, her posture and expression unchanged. But Trina's moods changed like quicksilver when a storm roused the water. Or a foghorn blew out on the Sound. "Stay with her, Mattie."

Downstairs in the foyer, the drapes were closed to the water as Sofi had instructed. Until last night, each of the Puget's faces disturbed Trina, whether it hid behind sheets of rain or sparkled like diamonds as it did today. But today a breeze transported the smell of the sea into the house with its invasive reminder of what it had stolen from them. And almost stolen again last night.

With sure steps she strode to her father's study.

Only Charles would have the audacity to invade this sanctum. By the fireplace, Charles lifted one of Papa's antique pipes as if he might smoke from it.

Sofi pulled in a sharp breath and swung her gaze to the walls of her father's study, seeking strength in the framed drawings. All those bridges Papa had built, and those she'd drawn for him, which he'd indulgently framed. But the pain in her chest remained.

Charles returned the pipe to the mantel. A red stain mottled his face at being caught out, and he

brushed a speck of dust from the sleeve of his seersucker suit. In his mid-fifties, his hair combed back from a severe part, he was still as dapper as always. He strolled toward her with a smile. "My dear—"

"I told you yesterday, Charles, Trina is not going to that hospital." There was only one way to deal with Charles—head-on.

"Sofi, she's unwell, needs constant supervision." His voice softened. "Trina had another episode last night, didn't she?"

"How do you know what happens in my home? Did you browbeat Frida or Inga for information?"

His mouth thinned. "The sanatorium is the best place for Trina."

The floor seemed to slant. "I know what Trina's suffering from, not that stream of doctors who man-handled her yesterday afternoon. She's only sixteen. She needs quiet, patience." Sofi shuddered. "Not...that hospital."

Charles took her hand, but she tugged it free.

"Sofi, you and your mother and sister are like my own flesh and blood. You used to call me uncle—"

"But we're not your family, Charles." She measured her words. "I don't know what we would have done without you, since Papa...but please don't overstep our friendship." Only the years of her mother's instilled good manners could produce the word *please* at such a time. She slipped behind her father's desk. "Charles, I'm not asking. I'm telling you. Trina is not going to that hospital."

"It's the best institution in the state, as Dr. Atwood and I discussed with your mother—"

"Trina saw Papa drown!" Her voice rang. "She could do nothing to save her father. Of course she's

traumatized. But I can help Trina get well. Here at home.”

“You, Sofi, are not of an age to be making decisions for your mother and sister.”

“I may be only twenty-one, but I know my father would never want his daughter in that place.”

He sank to the settee. “Then think of your mother. She needs complete rest. Dr. Atwood is at least pleased with Rosie’s progress.”

Rosie? The parlor closed in. Only Papa used Mama’s pet name. And Mama, what progress had she made, living in a laudanum-induced fog? Sofi attempted to settle her breathing. Clean air. She needed air. Splaying her fingers on the blotter, she articulated through clenched teeth, “Charles, Mama won’t be signing that paper today or any other day.”

He stared at the carpet until footsteps crossed the foyer and stopped at the parlor entrance.

Sofi couldn’t bring herself to look. She recognized the footsteps of Dr. Atwood.

The doctor announced himself with a slight cough.

She held her breath as the two men spoke quietly. A paper rustled between them. Without a word to her, the doctor crossed the foyer. The front door opened and closed.

And Charles met her eyes. “Your mama has signed the admittance slip, Sofi. The sanatorium is expecting Trina the day after tomorrow.”

Mama signed the paper. How could her mother be so foolish? Even in her grief, Mama should know better. With her chest held in that familiar vice, Sofi rushed through the open French doors to the patio.

Morning sun flashed, and she gasped for air.

Neil Macpherson, who’d been weeding flower

urns, jumped to his feet.

The pain in her chest almost bent her in two. Between the wrought-iron tables and chairs, the gardener blocked her.

He helped her straighten, his grave look holding hers as he steadied her by the shoulders. "Deep breaths, miss. Nice and slow. In...and out."

Charles's footsteps rang on the patio behind her. "Unhand her, man."

Ignoring Charles, Neil Macpherson kept his gaze on her, his voice pitched low and lilting. "Pay no attention, miss, to anything...or anyone, but your breathing. Again...in....and out."

"I said, take your hands off her," Charles bleated.

Neil shouldn't be touching her. It was not his place. But for the life of her, she couldn't find the strength to tell him so. Her breaths began to slow. Deepen.

"Concentrate only on your breathing, miss. Sure, you're doing grand." His speech, a warm current, eddied over her. His cloth cap shaded his face. A trace of a smile touched his mouth.

She rolled her shoulders back and took a cleansing breath. The pain behind her ribs began to lessen. He shouldn't be touching her, but she was letting him as she'd let him take over last night. Her weakness brought the sting of tears. Tears she refused to let fall. As chatelaine to this house, she must put this gardener in his place. Besides, what was he doing weeding the flower urns on the patio when clearly a private conversation was taking place in the study? "Remove your hands from me, Mr. Macpherson."

His hint of a smile left, he touched the peak of his cap and lowered his hands. "If you're all right, miss,

you'll be wanting the patio to yourself." With long strides, he rounded the corner of the house.

Charles rushed to put an arm around her. "My dear, are you unwell?"

As she pulled herself free, his features hardened. "Your vapors, Sofi, only prove you need my help, and Trina will get the best of care at—"

"What you saw was not vapors, but anger, Charles. Pure, undiluted anger...with you."

"Sofi, be reasonable."

She thrust up her hand to ward off the eroding effect of his voice. "No, Charles, I'm being quite reasonable, and I will fight you with everything I have. It is time you left my home."

His eyes narrowed. "You may banish me today, but remember, it is your mother's opinion that matters." He turned his back to her and, thank the Lord, he left the house.

If he'd stayed another minute, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. But her bravado evaporated, like a puff of steam from a locomotive as it ground to a stop. What could she do? Clobbering Charles on the head with a flowerpot wouldn't help Trina.

Leaving the patio, she took the trail to the rose gardens. Sliding to the ground with her back against the tallest fir on the property, she pulled her knees up to her chest. Odin gamboled toward her, his ears flying. He nudged his leathery black nose into her chin. She buried her face in a handful of his white scruff. There had to be a way to keep Trina out of that hospital.

At first, her mind remained a blank. Then she felt twelve again, when her best friend had died of

consumption.

Papa had caught her crying under this very tree. His voice echoed. *Think your way out of your grief. Don't wallow in emotion. Think, älsklिंग.* That was when he'd sat down at these tree roots and taught her to calculate the height of the fir using algebra.

She laid her head against the trunk. With the sun at this angle...the shadow of the tree thirty feet long. Do the equation. Think. Wood and equations sorted themselves out. Her pulse slowed. She had lost Papa. Perhaps Mama, but no one must take Trina from her. Her arms clutching her legs relaxed until the ethereal screech of an eagle sounded overhead. Her hand stroking Odin's head went still. She knew the place to take Trina.

Orchard Valley would surely bring Trina back to health. It could work for her mother too. But since Papa's death, nothing Sofi or Matilda said compelled Mama to leave her bedroom, not even the threat of Trina going to the hospital. Mother stayed hidden away within the refuge of her four walls. In her own private asylum from that little amber bottle of laudanum clutched in her hand, and the hazy fog it induced.

Though it broke her heart, Sofi would have to hide her plans from her mother. Only Matilda could know. And there was no time to lose. She must pack what they would need—food, household stuffs to make the old cabin livable. Gasoline for Papa's Cadillac.

With Odin loping beside her, the making of plans added strength to her stride. But her feet ground to a stop near the house. The gardener.

Neil slept in the room over the carriage house. First thing she must do was remove him from that