

## **SOPHIE – JANUARY**

When I met Hilliard, my grandfather was in the ground. After a long life filled with jazz music, extreme tastes and never saying NO to anything, my grandfather died peacefully in his sleep. My mother was the first one to find him; Grandma was still asleep when everything hit the roof. My mother was staying with her parents for one night while taking care of her father. Granddad came down with a severe cold, giving Grandma enough reason to ask their doctor daughter to come by and visit. I came by as the support staff, doing as much as I could without getting in the way, then left a couple of hours later. When my mother found him the next day, she immediately called my father and me to come to the house. I was not shocked but rather sad. I had promised to take him to a local jazz festival for the fifth time in a row. He was looking forward to seeing Donald Harrison perform. The whole family prepared for his funeral within the next two days, making sure he was taken care of without delay.

The funeral was quick and to the point with many in attendance to say goodbye. He was well loved by all and never had an unkind word to say about anyone. He was a rare human. So, on a cold Thursday in January, I buried my grandfather with frozen tears on my cheeks. When I saw the dirt placed over his casket in the ground, I closed my eyes. After the repast at my parents' home, with much food and many friends coming to talk to the family, I went home and cried for a full hour. Funny thing was that I cried only because it was so cold in my apartment and not because of my dead grandfather. Even though I missed him, I knew he was in a better place, be it the Christian Heaven, Nirvana, or returned to earth already as a bird, lion, camel, or even as another human being. My grandfather had an old soul, one that had been used before. I knew I would see him again very soon.

Since I was off the next two days for bereavement, I decided to drive to one of the funky local coffee shops to take in a cold

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and sunny day while sipping a cup of hot tea. Although I had 20 different kinds of tea at home, I wanted to be out among people that were not affected by my Granddad's death. I wanted to remind myself that the world did not end just because he died. Perhaps it was shallow of me to think like that, but for me it was necessary. I drove to Indigo Bean and ran inside because it was freezing cold. I ordered a pot of Japanese Sencha while looking at some artwork by a local artist and then found a quiet corner table and sat down. I looked out the window as I pulled out my latest read from my messenger bag: *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy. I was in the middle of the massive tome and I couldn't wait to dive back into 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. I prepared my cup, opened up the book to my bookmark and began to read. Soon, Tolstoy's words caught me like a flame and I knew several hours would be lost today.

What I did not realize then was that while I read and absentmindedly drank tea, a man watched me with great interest. After twenty minutes of reading, I finally looked up, saw his face and smiled. He grinned as he got up from his table and sat down across from me.

"I know this sounds so cliché but I could not help noticing what you were reading," he said in a deep and thoughtful tone. "You don't find too many people reading *Anna Karenina* these days, then. Tell me, for school or pleasure?"

"Simple pleasure," I replied. "I'll read anything I can get my hands on as long as it has a good story." I placed my bookmark in the book and fanned through it a couple of times. "I read *Crime and Punishment* not too long ago and wanted to return to Russia."

"I read *Crime and Punishment* when I was vacationing in Paris a year ago," he said as his eyes stared into my own. Was he searching for something I wondered, or was he just trying to size me up? To this day I still don't know, but what I did know was this: I was attracted to him. He took my book and caressed the cover (cheap trade paperback) then placed it back on the table and extended his hand out to me.

"Hilliard Ravensdale," he said as I shook his hand with a firm grip.

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“Sophie Joyce.” We shook hands for several seconds in silence, our eyes never leaving the others’, and then I released mine and smiled. I knew this man. I had read his novels, and here he was sitting across from me in a small coffee shop in Memphis. “I know who you are,” I said. “I’ve loved every one of your novels.” He smiled and for a moment, I almost sighed like a schoolgirl with a crush on her professor.

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Joyce.”

“It’s Miss and please call me Sophie.”

“Only if you call me Hilliard, then.” I glanced down at his hand and noticed no ring. Maybe he had a girlfriend, or maybe he was gay. However, I wanted to talk to the author not shack up with him. Dismissing the typical girly thoughts from my mind and replacing them with literary ones, I said, “So, are you working on anything new?”

“Actually, yes I am. In fact, I’m here trying to gather research for possible characters. I’m just people watching, drinking vanilla lattes and taking notes, then.”

“Seen anyone interesting so far?” His eyes glanced over my whole face and I tried like hell not to blush but did so anyway.

“I have never seen a black woman blush before,” he murmured. “I love it. Suits you, actually.” I smiled as the blush remained. “Was that the wrong thing to say? Should I have been more PC or something, then?” He waved his hands around for emphasis, causing me to laugh.

“Actually, to be honest,” I continued, “I don’t like the PC crap. To me, it sugar coats what people are really trying to say. I want the real meaning behind words, not just something to please the intelligent black woman who reads a lot.” My last statement caused his eyebrows to go up in surprise or acceptance or perhaps both.

“Well said, I think. And yes, you are beautiful when you blush, but you are beautiful even when you don’t. I’ve never said that to a black woman before and honestly, I am glad I said it.” He smiled as he looked down at his hands. I looked at them as well. They were long and slender, and some of his fingers were stained with ink. They were hands that typed and wrote for a living, I thought. I wanted my hands to look like his one day; I

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was currently working on my first novel and still wet behind the ears. Here was a man who not only wrote for a living and supported himself with his words but he also lived the life I so desperately wanted, the life of an eccentric and creative soul. I wanted to reach out and touch his hands to feel the fingertips that graced a keyboard and produced such literary mammoths. Without thinking further on the matter, I did just that. For a second, his eyes remained focused on his own hand, then they moved to my hand, and then he looked up at my face and smiled.

“Do you mind if I bring my stuff over here? I think your table is bigger than mine.” I nodded yes and he got up to retrieve his bag, journal and latte. When he sat down again he said, “Why did you touch me like that?”

“Because I wanted to know what your hands felt like,” I replied, not caring if he thought my answer was dumb. “I wanted to know what an author’s hands felt like.”

“And how do you feel now that you’ve touched my hands, then?”

“Makes me want to finish my novel even faster.”

“Ah, so you’re a writer too, huh? I figured as much.” He took a sip from his cup then set it by his hand. “And what are you writing?”

“A novel about a woman who reads *Anna Karenina* and suddenly, her world begins to change and become that of what she reads.” He nodded as he took another sip of his drink.

“Anyone wanted to look at it yet?”

“I do have one friend who is a publisher; he wants it once I’m done.”

“What company?”

“Corvus Corax Publishing.”

“Ah yes, Andrew and the gang, huh? Good people and a good choice.”

“They’re good in my book since they want to publish my first novel.”

“How far along are you?”

“I’m actually done, but I am editing it a final time before I give it to him.” He sighed, finished off his cup and set it far away from himself.

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“Do you mind if I read it before you give it to him?” I was stunned; Hilliard Ravensdale, one of the biggest, well-known authors in this country, wanted to read my work. The man who I placed next to British author Ian McEwan, *God of Literature*, and based all of my literary hopes on, wanted to read my work. For a brief second, I only stared at him in mute shock. I felt that my words would betray me and make me out to be a gushing admirer. However, he wanted to read MY work. He made the suggestion, not I. I quickly reeled in the emotions and returned to being a writer.

“As much as that makes me feel really good right now, I would like to finish my edits and then give it to my, hopefully, soon to be publisher. No offense.”

“None taken, Sophie. However, what about dinner tonight? Fuel Café perhaps?” I looked at him, wondering if perhaps I offended him in refusing to let him read the work. Then again, he invited me to dinner, so...

“Fuel Café sounds lovely. What time would you like to meet?”

“How about if I pick you up at your place, say around 6pm, then?” I blushed again, harder this time, as I now stared at my hands. Suddenly, I saw his hand touch my own. He gave it a brief squeeze and said, “All I want to do is get to know you.” I looked up, saw his green eyes actually deepen in colour, and told him my address.

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I paced around my living room in a nervous fit. In twenty minutes, Hilliard Ravensdale would be at my place and I still had no idea what to wear. Fuel Café was a really hip and cool restaurant in the Midtown area of Memphis and the last time I went, I wore yoga pants and an oversized shirt. Although I wanted to dress for comfort, I still wanted to impress Hilliard. After all, he had connections that I could possibly use in fueling my own literary career. I paced around once more while occasionally glancing out of my windows at Midtown Memphis in all of its glory at night. The headlights played momentary spots

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of false hope along the street as people drove to their destinations, not aware of how it all played out so deliciously well together.

I moved to Midtown ten years ago because I wanted to be around the bohemians, the artists, the people who refused to conform to safety and reason. I wanted to be alive and experience every sensation possible while understanding just why I did what I did. I wanted to learn more about Memphis and what she, as a city, could offer me. So far, she offered me quite a bit and still had more to give, as long as I was still willing to take it. When I returned home from university in Boston, Massachusetts, I hated Memphis, claiming that it was awful and it would drain the life out of me. It did, but only because I allowed it to happen. When I finally realized that my life would change only with me taking that first step, I took that step and never looked back. Now I had a good shot of being published while learning about my life and why I was repressed and held back simply because I was afraid. Now, I had a chance to be alive.

When those thoughts entered my head again as I paced, I stopped and walked into my bedroom to pick out something to wear. I did not care what Hilliard thought of my clothing. I just wanted to enjoy a good night and a good meal with a man that did what I wanted to do.

Just as I put on my earrings, the phone rang; it was Hilliard. I picked up my phone, no longer nervous.

“Hello there, how are you?” he said in that same deep and thoughtful voice.

“Doing good. Would you like to come up or shall I meet you downstairs?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to come up, then.”

“When you come in, use the second set of elevators.”

“Right. See you soon, Sophie.” I hung up the phone and turned on my CD player. Although my grandfather was in the ground, I still felt the need to play jazz. I wasn’t ready to leave the music just yet, even though I knew I could come back to it at anytime. Jazz would forever mean my grandfather in my mind. As Herbie Hancock performed *One Finger Snap*, I heard a knock at the door. I walked over and opened it revealing Hilliard

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dressed in a black sweater, jeans, a dark grey wool coat and black loafers. His salt and pepper hair fell all over his head and for a moment, I wanted to ask him if there was a strong wind outside. He held a bunch of roses as he walked in.

“Ah, good ol’ Hancock, then?” he said as he walked into the living room with me following. “Good taste. Like jazz a lot, then?”

“Yep, my granddad was the jazz lover in our family. He taught me everything I know about jazz.”

“Was he a musician?”

“No, just loved the music and collected many records. I’m supposed to be getting them this week. Several hundred, I think.”

“I know you’ll have quite the collection,” he said as he handed the roses to me. I took a long and satisfying sniff of the lovely bouquet. “I wasn’t sure if you’d like roses but I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

“You’re the first person to actually buy roses for me.”

He smiled sadly. “Glad I was, then.” He took the roses from me, placed them behind his back, pulled me closer to him and kissed me tenderly. For several seconds, I did not know where I was or who I was. All I knew were his slightly cold lips and I was glad for them. I could smell a soft scent of lime mixed with sandalwood on his clothing and skin. I closed my eyes and melted into that scent wanting more but knowing I could only have so much tonight. When Hilliard pulled away he said, “Do you have a vase?” I walked into the kitchen to find one, leaving him in the living room. “You know, I’ve never been in Kimbrough Towers before yet I’ve driven by here a million times,” he said.

“Yeah, I’ve wanted to live here for quite some time but never thought I made enough to live here. Turns out I did.” I found one of my vases and filled it halfway with water then carried it out into the living room. Hilliard took the vase from me and placed the roses inside while I turned off the music. I then led him out of my place with only one thought: I was in love with him.

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We arrived at Fuel Café within five minutes, thanks to Hilliard's driving. At first, I wanted to be the driver, but Hilliard insisted that he do the honours.

“Besides, this is our first date; let me be the chivalrous man,” he said in a joking manner. When we pulled into the parking lot, he got out of the car and walked over to open my door. He helped me get out of the car then took my arm and linked it with his. I smelled his cologne again as we walked side by side into the restaurant. At once, all eyes turned to us and I wanted to hide from embarrassment. As a best selling author several times over, Hilliard's face was well known to the general public of not only Memphis, Tennessee, but also the literary world. He walked in, his eyes searching for familiar faces, while the restaurant patrons stared back in amazement and wonder: *Just who is that younger black woman next to him and why are they so close?* I was sure those thoughts ran through some of the patrons' heads yet there was nothing I could do about it. Hilliard noted my nervousness, patted my arm and then kissed me on the cheek.

“Dear, let's sit down, then,” he said as a waiter strolled by and told us to please seat ourselves. Hilliard gripped my arm again and led me to an empty table for two while some of the patrons went back to eating. Others still kept their eyes focused on us, but then they too left us alone when they realized that we were going to eat just like them. We were going to be boring just like them. Hilliard pulled out my chair then pushed me close to the table; he was being quite the gentleman tonight. When he sat down, the waiter came by and handed us menus then asked us what we wanted to drink. I asked for a glass of iced tea while Hilliard asked for a glass of water. The waiter walked off and immediately Hilliard began talking.

“So, as I said before, Sophie, I like you. I like you very much, then. I won't go into my life story because I am sure you already know it, correct?” He arched one of his eyebrows as he said the last line to me. I hid my smile with my hand. Hilliard reached out and removed my hand. “Don't cover that up,” he said with a slightly stern voice. “I like your smile.” I smiled again.

“Thanks. I do that without thinking. So, I am supposed to know all about you, huh, because I know who you are?”

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“Well, my life has been made quite public these last couple of years. I don’t see why you of all people would not know anything about me, then.”

“Strange thing is,” I said, just as the waiter brought our drinks to the table, took our orders and walked off, “I want to know how old you are.” He laughed, a deep rich sound like a tolling bell and then said, “I thought for sure you already knew that. I’m 49, turning 50 in August. Is that a problem?”

“No, no, not at all. Just curious, old boy, you know.”

“Old boy?” he said with a smirk.

I waved my hands in slight frustration. “Sorry, bit of an Anglophile, so I say things like that without realizing it.”

“Great gods,” said Hilliard, as he rolled his eyes, “let me guess; you drink your tea while watching period dramas on the telly. Am I right?”

“I have over twenty blends at home and I love my BBC drama DVDs.”

“Actually, I can’t make fun of you. I also enjoy the *camellia sinensis*.” He sighed and then smiled, showing all of his slightly stained teeth. Coffee, fruit juices or perhaps he was a smoker I thought and then let the matter drop. He took a sip of his water with a deliberate carefulness, as if he was afraid of spilling it all over himself. He had such interesting moves and speech patterns; everything was so deliberate with him. I wondered if he could do anything by accident.

“So, Sophie, are you dating anyone?”

“No. The last man I dated was quite wrong for me and I refused to play his mind games. He was the latest in a long line of losers, idiots and other unsavoury characters that I misjudged greatly.”

“And are you so jaded now that any and all men are off limits to you, then?” He leaned forwards and I caught a whiff of his cologne.

“Good question. I will admit, having dinner with you is very lovely and I am so glad you invited me. However, I have no idea what to expect from either this or from you tonight. I mean, although I know who you are and all that-” He waved his hands in silencing me.

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“Let tonight be a fun night for both of us. I wanted to take you out and get to know you better. Let’s leave it like that,” he said as he raised his water glass. I raised my glass of iced tea and we clinked our glasses in a good-natured toast.

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Three hours later, we were kissing in his car. His hands caressed my cheeks yet did not stray lower than my face. I could taste faint hints of his dinner, bison chili and brownie a la mode, mingled with the Carmex he placed on his lips as we exited the restaurant. His hands felt so soft against my oily skin; they seemed to want to explore every crease and line in my face. My own hands gripped his arms and for the first time, I felt his muscles through his sweater. He stiffened when my hands touched his arms and then later relaxed as we continued our kiss. Several minutes later, he pulled away from me and said while still holding my face, “Although I would love to follow you back to your apartment tonight, I will instead be a gentleman and walk you to your door with the hopes that we shall see each other tomorrow, then.”

“That would be lovely, Hilliard.”

He smiled when I said his name while he caressed my cheek. “Where do you work?”

“I work for a law firm. However, I am on bereavement leave; my grandfather just passed away.”

“Oh, Sophie, I am so sorry to hear that. Can I do anything, then?” He caressed my cheek again then took both of my hands in his own and began to stroke them.

“No. The funeral was yesterday but I do appreciate your concern.”

“Then I’ll pick you up for breakfast tomorrow, say 9am? The Arcade sound good to you?”

“Oh my gosh, they have the best breakfast! Sounds very good to me.” Hilliard leaned in and kissed me once more, then got out of the car and walked over to my side to open my door. I received a kiss on the hand and then on my lips as we walked up to my building’s front door. I wanted him to come upstairs and as he

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told me later, he would have if I had asked. However, I said good night, kissed him again and let myself in as he stood outside watching me. Hilliard told me later that when he watched me walk away from him, he felt a tug on his heart.

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That was how my relationship with Hilliard began. He was a perfect gentleman to me, and although we did kiss several times during our dates, not once did he try to sleep with me, although I knew he wanted to as much as I. We actually didn't sleep together until several weeks passed of our dating and getting to know each other better. True, I had never been with a man who was 49 years old but when we finally slept together, I had no clue. He proved to be a perfect lover and then some. My previous relationships' sexual moments were dismal at best when I regretfully remembered them, but Hilliard was not like that at all. According to him, it was all about both parties taking and receiving energy, a constant flow that created a bond not to be broken while in bed. He was a proclaimed Taoist and to him, sex was the transfer of human essence, or *jing*, between partners. When I made love in the past, I closed my eyes because I was self conscious of my partner's stupid and sweaty face staring down at me while they thrust inside of me for three minutes, ejaculated then conked out while I lay in bed staring at the ceiling in boredom. Hilliard was different in that making love was just that; we made actual love. The senses worked overtime when we first came together and I was amazed at his style.

After Hilliard and I made love for the first time, he held me tightly as though he was afraid that I was going to leave him. That was the last thing on my mind; I wanted right then and there to spend all of my time with him. I loved him but I refused to tell him because I didn't want him to suddenly disappear from my life. I felt his cooling breath on my skin as he slowly breathed while trying to rest.

"I can open a window for you, if you'd like," I said trying to be helpful.

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“It’s too cold outside, then,” he said, “and right now, I don’t want either of us moving. Let me feel your warmth.” I snuggled in deeper and closer to him while moving the thick blankets over our bodies. I turned my head to face the window that looked out to the street and the ice that still covered some of the trees. Snow had begun to fall. I propped up my head with my arm to get a better view of the snow, momentarily dislodging myself from Hilliard’s arms. He slid up to a seated position to get a better view of the snow as well.

“So beautiful, especially at night,” he said while tracing a line with his finger down my arm. “Snow makes everything so peaceful, even a city.” I sighed and leaned back against him, feeling his now cool skin. He leaned down to kiss my ear and we resumed our lovemaking.

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When I told people I was dating Hilliard Ravensdale, at first they didn’t believe me. Sure, he was a well-known award-winning author who just happened to be from Memphis, Tennessee. However, as they put it, the odds of my dating someone like that were almost impossible until those same people saw us together at a charity event or a book signing. Suddenly, I was known as Mr. Ravensdale’s Special Friend. The words in capital letters even. Hilliard found it amusing when I brought in newspapers and magazines showing us off. Hilliard only laughed, claiming that the press could do whatever they liked in reporting about us; we had each other and that was that. After our first month of being together, Hilliard wanted me to move into his house, to which I said no. Although I loved being around him, which was pretty much every day and night, I still enjoyed my freedom and solitude when I needed it, yet I spent more time editing my novel at his home. I did have a toothbrush there and for some reason, it gave me a weird sense of comfort.

I told him over breakfast, one cold and sunny Saturday, that my birthday was coming up.

He glanced up from his book and smiled. “I’ll take you on a vacation during the weekend. Where would you like to go?”

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“Um, Hilliard, don’t you need to finish working on your novel?” I tried not to sound too harsh but from what he had told me, he was still in the initial stages of his latest work. Spinning the wheels while getting nothing done from what I could tell.

“Sophie, I am working on it but you must understand that I want to make sure your birthday is a special one.” He closed his book with a loud snap. “Actually, I have the perfect idea for you but I shall make it a surprise, then.” I shrugged my shoulders and smiled; that was just how he was. As much as I wanted him to focus on his work, I felt special that he wanted to do something nice for my birthday.

Since I began seeing Hilliard, my time with family dwindled somewhat yet I still made time to see them; sometimes Hilliard went with me. When I first told them about us, my parents wondered about the age difference. Hilliard, however, proved to be quite the gentleman and soon my family warmed up to him and to the idea that their daughter/granddaughter was in good hands. I was sure they were tired of my being single and/or bringing home loser men that truly had no place in my life, aside from being a distraction from loneliness. Truthfully enough, so was I.

I wasted so much of my time dating men who claimed that they were all in favour of an “independent woman” only they failed miserably in keeping up with me and later created excuses as to why they wanted to break up. Only one problem; I allowed such foolishness to occur rather than enjoy my life and get my writing career off the ground. Thankfully, I met my future publisher while attending a literary convention several months ago. His company’s booth was the last one I visited after receiving pamphlets, free copies of books, bookmarks, tote bags and other literary swag from many others. Andrew, along with some of the editors, sat behind their table that featured several of their better-known authors. They had even published one of Hilliard’s books. After introducing myself and telling them of my novel idea, why else was I there, he said with a laugh, Andrew informed me that he was interested in looking at my manuscript. I sent it to him that night. Two weeks later, he sent me an e-mail asking me to meet with him for coffee so we could discuss where

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I wanted to go with my work. I wasn't too sure what he was trying to say, but after two hours of vanilla lattes and warmed up snickerdoodles, he shook my hand and told me that they were going to publish my work.

"You have your voice, which is a hard goal to obtain in today's world," he said after I wiped the tears from my eyes and stopped shaking in my chair from excitement. "It is dark, foreboding and yet inviting to the reader. That is what sells in my world. In any case," he said while pulling out a contract from his messenger bag, "here is your contract. Please sign at the Xs and we'll take it from there." I did what I was told and then slid the contract back his way. He quickly folded it up and placed it back into his messenger bag. "Congrats, you are now a published author," he said as he got up from his chair and shook my hand again. When I told Hilliard that story, he sighed, placed an arm around me and squeezed me tightly.

"I remember my first book deal," he said in a soft voice, "and the nervousness I felt when my publisher said yes to my work. It meant that after years of hard work, imagined failures, many hours typing away on a damn typewriter, then a word processor, then a computer, I was going to do what I had set out to do. I'm very proud of you," he said then kissed my forehead. I leaned into him, smelling his lime scent and thinking of what to write next. But at that moment, it did not matter. At that moment, I was flying.