

Healing Waters chapter one

CHAPTER ONE

I had done everything on my list. Everything but the last item.

Neat black checks marked the first five to-dos:

- *paint bathroom*
- *put last layer on torte*
- *redo makeup*
- *call modeling agency – say NO*
- *shave legs*

Before the traffic moved again and I made the turn into tiny Northeast Airport, I put a second check beside number five. I'd shaved twice. Chip liked my legs hairless as a fresh pear. Not that I expected him to be interested in them or in any other part of my ample anatomy, but it couldn't hurt to be prepared for a miracle. In truth, I'd probably broken out the razor again just to procrastinate—because I wasn't sure I could do the sixth thing on the list.

I snatched the paper from the seat next to me and folded it one-handed as I pulled up to the gate marked *EXECUTIVE AIRPORT PARKING*. I was still trying to stuff the thing into my purse when an attendant marinating in boredom slid open the window in the booth. She drew sparse eyebrows together and mouthed something I couldn't hear. Of course. My car window was still up.

I pushed the button and felt like I'd just opened an oven door. As the aroma of jet fuel joined the July heat, the makeup melted from my face.

“Help you?” the woman said.

"I'm meeting my sister's private jet," I said.

"Name."

"Lucia Coffey. Oh – did you want my name or hers?"

"Don't need your name."

Staring vacantly at some point beyond me, she smeared her wrist across her forehead and produced a damp cuff. My mascara gathered in puddles at the corners of my eyes. I didn't even want to think about the damage in my armpits.

The woman shifted her gaze to a computer screen. "Who's it you're meeting?"

"Sonia Cabot," I said. "Abundant Living Ministries?"

The attendant's colorless eyes met mine for the first time. "She that woman on TV? Does the show for people got somebody dyin'?"

I gave my watch a surreptitious glance. I would be the one dying if I had to run from the car to the terminal to meet them on time. Just sitting there I was already dissolving like a pat of butter in a skillet.

"She's your sister?"

I looked up, unsurprised at the sudden interest on Apathy Woman's face. The tinge of suspicion didn't shock me either. I waited for the usual next question: *Are you sure?* To be punctuated with *You don't look anything like her.*

I was tempted to save her the trouble and say *Sonia's adopted*, which wasn't true. Or *Usually I look more like her than this, but I'm pregnant*, which wasn't either.

The bulge hanging over the elastic in my pants resulted from pure mashed potatoes and gravy.

“Where do I park?” I said instead.

She perused the clipboard and, the epitome of servanthood now, pointed.

“Just to the left of that building. Door’s on the end. You better hurry. Plane’s due in about five minutes.”

I resisted blurting out a *No kidding?*

She knew who Sonia was, which meant I should be careful not to smudge the image. Besides, as I headed for the small, unimpressive terminal building, I had other things to deal with. Like the fact that my hands were now sliding off the steering wheel and my face felt like I’d baked it in the aforementioned oven.

When I parked, a glance in the rearview mirror confirmed it. My cheeks were the color of a pair of tomatoes. I pawed in my purse for Kleenex, found none, and grabbed the list. I tamped it against my forehead, my vine-ripened cheeks, my neck, and then viewed the half-bottle of L’Oreal foundation I’d spread on them so carefully just an hour before. So much for the ‘do as well. Dark curls, the only thing on myself that I *wanted* to be plump, had flattened to my head in strips.

A jet taxied in already, white and sleek, the sun glinting from it like an insult as it made a ninety-degree turn to come perpendicular to the terminal.

The hair was hopeless. Ditto for the sweat situation. My black tunic, permanently glued to the Spandex shaper beneath, cooked my skin and did little

to keep the fat under control. I dabbed at my raccoon eyes with my fingers, wiped them on my black pants, and climbed out of my PT Cruiser.

The list dropped at my feet and I would have abandoned it, except that all I needed when we got back to the car was Sonia or someone from her entourage seeing it. Especially the last entry:

- *tell Sonia I want my husband back*

I debated whether to grab the Tupperware of truffles I'd planned for Sonia and whoever to have for the ride to my house. My cookies would be a soup of chocolate and coconut by the time we got back here anyway.

Oh, let it go, Lucia.

A guy in one of those sketched-in-with-a-pencil goatees and a dark blue jumpsuit he'd rolled up to his knees and elbows opened the door for me, then pushed it further, as if he could somehow make the doorway expand. He avoided meeting my eyes as he slipped out.

"Is that the plane from Nashville?" I said. "Sonia Cabot's plane?"

He didn't impress as easily as the lady at the gate. Probably didn't pause on the Christian Broadcasting Network while channel surfing.

"Guess so," he said before he disappeared.

My heart immediately slammed against my chest wall.

My husband was home.

I got through the empty waiting room—a miniature version of any I'd ever been in—to a row of seats that faced the window overlooking the tarmac and

perched on the edge of one. An image of getting stuck and having to Crisco my hips in order for emergency personnel to pry me loose while I watched my svelte sister descend the steps from the plane plastered itself across my mental screen. Behind her would be Chip, shading his eyes with his hand and, I hoped, looking for the wife he hadn't seen in three months. He'd have a hard enough time disguising his reaction to my recently acquired thirty pounds, layered over the extra fifty he surely hoped I had shed by now, without finding me trapped in a chair, awaiting the Jaws of Life.

I tried to breathe in the blessed cooled air, tried to erase the screen and form a cheerier picture. One of me running into his arms and finding the grizzly-bear chest and sinking into his smell: Downy fabric softener and spearmint gum and something musky and masculine I could never define. Then he would look into my face in that searching way, trying to memorize it, he always said.

I wilted further. Would there even be an embrace? Or would I draw back from a peck on the cheek? A backslapping hug with a quick release?

I opened my purse and groped for my Snickers, then remembered that I'd already polished it off driving down I-95. I was about to look around for a vending machine when the high-pitched whine of the jet engine pierced the glass. The plane made a maddeningly slow turn toward the crew of two that awaited it, almost as if Sonia were *sneaking* into Philadelphia.

Her assistant had said she wanted our visit to be quiet. She didn't have much time before she had to fly out to Pittsburgh, and she wanted us to have some

just-family togetherness – the implication being that I shouldn't invite any celebrity hounds over. I didn't tell her that none of my acquaintances were into Abundant Living. I wasn't even into it. I wanted to see Sonia-my-sister.

And then, again, I didn't want to see her.

I stood up as the wheels finally stopped rolling and the engine wound down. Two crewmen, one of them Pencil Whiskers, moved in and placed yellow blocks under the wheels. No one's face pressed against a window, no hand waved an eager greeting. I tried not to sag. Maybe Chip was too busy grabbing his overnight bag –

The thought that my husband might come home after three months with only enough clothes for a weekend brought on a new onslaught of sweat.

The jet door popped open and began the slow hydraulic fall downward to become the stairs. A girl who looked to be about sixteen scurried out and down the steps like a startled squirrel. Pencil Whiskers swaggered over to her, and she scooped a mane of brunette-ness into a handheld ponytail as she chattered at him. He slid his earmuff off one ear and chattered back. So he did actually did have a vocabulary beyond "Guess so."

The girl hurried toward the building, letting the ponytail loose, and my eyes went back to the jet's open doorway. No one else appeared. I could feel bubbles of sweat forming on my upper lip.

Chip hadn't come. He'd sent this teenager to tell me we were done. She pulled open the door and scanned the waiting area. Her eyes skipped over me at first and then tripped back with unmasked disbelief.

Yes, believe it or not, I'm Sonia Cabot's sister.

"You're not Lucia, are you?" she said.

Everything in me wanted to scream that, no, I was not. That the real Lucia Brocacini Coffey stood as tall and slim and poised and stunning as her sister. That this dumpy woman whose waist had long since disappeared, whose chins repeated themselves, whose long sleeves in the ninety-degree heat didn't disguise the dangles of fat that hung like bags of pudding from her arms – this woman was no relation to the famous Sonia Brocacini Cabot at all.

"Yes," I said. "I am."

"Oh. Awesome."

I had to hand it to her: she recovered nicely. She came at me like Mary Lou Retton in her prime and extended a slender arm that flowed from the strap of her sundress.

"I'm Marnie," she said, in an accent so Southern I was sure she was putting me on. "Sonia's personal assistant? We e-mailed back and forth?"

I skipped the *Nice to meet you* and looked through the window at the jet.

"Where's Sonia?" I said. "Where's Chip?"

She smiled, revealing almost blue-white teeth, and wrinkled her pert nose.

"Oh, they're here. Yeah, they can't wait to see you."

Obviously. That would explain why I saw no sign of them.

“Sonia wants you to come aboard.” Dusty or Bambi or whatever her name was glanced around the terminal, this time giving her nose a more disdainful crinkle. “Yeah, it’s way nicer on the plane.”

It was also “way nicer” at my house, but discussing that with this child was pointless. As I followed her to the door, I decided she was at least in her early twenties, but she couldn’t have weighed more than a Big Mac or two, most of which was firmly shaped into her breasts.

Again she told me that Sonia and Chip couldn’t wait to see me and that it was much nicer on the plane than in the terminal, and I began to wonder if she were actually a robot who had been programmed with only four sentences. She finally varied that with, “So, you’re a nurse. That’s awesome,” but by then I was chugging up the steps behind her and could only grunt.

Good. Already a soggy mass of sweaty flesh and ruined makeup, now I’d be a soggy mass breathing like a locomotive. By now Perky Patty stood at the top, wrinkling a smile as if I didn’t look and sound about to go into cardiac arrest.

“Here she comes,” Perky said into the plane, and then, with a waft of her arm, stepped back to allow me to pass. I had to press against her to get through. She flattened herself prettily against the bulkhead.

Whether it was nicer inside the jet than in the terminal, I couldn’t say. I only saw Chip, ducking his head to emerge from a doorway and still grazing the top with his sparse, spiky, sandy hair. How could I have forgotten how his eyes had

faded? Why was I surprised that those square shoulders that used to balance his head as if he were wearing a crown were still slightly slumped? Why had I expected that he would have changed back to the Chip I first knew?

“Hey, Babe,” he said. At least his voice was still a sandpapered tenor.

With a steaming cup in one hand he pressed me to him with the other arm.

“Let me take that,” Perky said.

She rescued the mug, and Chip folded me to his chest. My husband held me.

And I measured the hold, trying to tell if this was a beginning or an end.

“What does a person have to do to get one of those?”

I recognized my sister’s cream-filled voice . . . but when did she get a south-of-the-Mason-Dixon accent? She was born and raised in Pennsylvania just like me, but she sounded like a character from *Gone with the Wind*.

Chip released his arms and stepped aside. Sonia slipped by easily and wrapped her long, lithe arms around my neck. Smooth move. She knew they’d never circle my girth. I felt a soft kiss on my cheek before she stepped back so I could look at her.

I had forgotten nothing about Sonia. Her hair-the-color-of-maple-syrup was as sleek as always, defying the humidity that frizzed mine. She’d pulled it into a shiny bunch at the crown of her head, giving her exquisite cheekbones and full, sensitive mouth center stage. Those weren’t my words. I’d read them in *Today’s Christian Woman*, where an admiring journalist had compared her to Esther in the Bible.

She surveyed me with her gold-brown eyes, which I hadn't forgotten either. The windows of her beautiful soul, that same journalist had said. Right now her soul looked sad. No. Pitying. Disappointed – but not surprised.

Like little Perky, Sonia managed not to gasp and instead flashed me the smile that had won her every magazine cover from *TCW* to *Focus on the Family*.

“It is so good to see you, *sorella*,” she said. “And your face is just as beautiful as ever.”

I heard the unspoken *If only you'd lose some of that ugly fat*.

“It's been two years, *sorella*.”

It took me a few seconds to recover from her use of our pet name for each other. The Italian word for *sister* didn't quite translate into Scarlet O'Hara.

She shook her head. “It isn't going to be that long this time. When I come back, we are going to have some sister time.”

My mind tangled. “I thought you were coming over to the house. Everything's ready. I painted the bathroom.”

Good. *I painted the bathroom*. Add that to the list of pathetic things I have said to my sister.

“Darlin', I'm sorry.” Sonia put her hands on my shoulders. “We've had a change of plans.”

My eyes followed as she looked past me at Perky. She and Chip were by the door to the cockpit, Chip with his hand on the wall above her head, scanning her face with his eyes. Like he was trying to memorize it.

He whispered something to her, except that Chip Coffey had never been able to pull off anything quieter than a stage whisper. His “You have to change your mind” might as well have been broadcast on the airwaves.

“Hello,” Sonia said.

They looked up. The girl and my husband both flicked on smiles.

“Marnie, didn’t you send Lucia that e-mail with my new itinerary?”

Marnie didn’t have a chance to answer before Sonia turned back to me.

“We have to go right on to Pittsburgh,” she said. “I am so sorry. I thought you knew. Marnie, get Lucia a coffee – do you want a coffee?”

I shook my head.

Sonia threw out a smile that lassoed Chip and me. “I know ya’ll need as much alone time as you can get this weekend. I’m not part of that.”

When did she start saying *ya’ll*? When did she *stop* making herself a part of *everything* that happened to me? And what exactly *was* happening to me right now?

Sonia brushed her lips against my cheek again and let go of my shoulders.

“Remember,” she said to Chip, “I want you to pray hard before you give your final answer.” She pushed back the diaphanous sleeve of the tunic that outlined the curves of her slender shape and shook a gold Rolex down over her hand. “I wish we had time to pray now, all of us.” She smiled over my head. “I know, Otto, I know.”

I only looked back at the man she spoke to long enough to see that he wore a pilot's uniform and that he had a brilliant shock of white hair, disconcerting on someone about to take a plane into flight. Beyond that, I didn't care. I was aching with the idea of Sonia and Chip praying about some issue I wasn't privy to, dying under the image of his whispered exchange with a waif half my age. And weight.

I might have him for the weekend, but he clearly wasn't mine.

As I watched Chip squeeze Sonia and give Marnie a lingering hug, I knew why I'd been surprised that my husband still looked the same. I'd been so sure Sonia would have changed him, taken some damaged piece of him and reshaped it. Of all her many talents, she excelled at that one.

I clung to the cable handrail as I navigated the steps, but I still managed to stumble.

"Babe, you okay?" Chip said behind me.

No, I wasn't. I wanted to roll into a ball and bounce across the tarmac, away from the inevitable.

Chip groped for my hand when we got to the bottom of the steps, but I shifted my purse to that side and risked more breathing-like-a-freight-train to hurry ahead of him. When the door to the terminal sighed shut behind us, I stopped, even turned his way, but I didn't look right at him. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the steps folding back up into the plane and Pencil Whiskers retrieving his yellow chocks.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go with them?” I said.

“Excuse me?”

The sandpaper edges of Chip’s voice were raw. When he held me on the plane, I thought that meant he felt as frightened as I did about going back to our home and deciding whether we could live there together again—there or anywhere. I would have embraced his fear. Taken it home and fed it the five-course dinner I’d planned like the president was coming. Just like I always had.

Now those rough edges only sounded annoyed, the irritated last strings of a man anxious to tear away.

The engine roared to life, and Chip looked toward the window, eyes engrossed as the jet turned toward the taxiway. Slowly. As if it were dragging its wheels, giving him one more chance to change his mind. Or Marnie to change hers.

“Do you want to go with her?” I said. “Is that what you want?”

He whipped his face toward me. “What are you talking about?”

I shook my head, felt the limp panels of heavy hair threaten to stick to the sides of my face. I must make a stunning picture. How could I expect him to do anything but run after the plane that left with the pretty women? The skinny twenty-something and the gifted sister. The God-connected sister.

I had never known Dr. Chip Coffey to be a party to prayer before, but he evidently bowed his head with Sonia these days, even while his whispers sought the ears of her assistant. I had made a list of possible scenarios for this meeting,

many of them ending in a pained good-bye I would hide behind my pads of flesh. But this – this hadn't been one of them.

I watched the jet turn onto the runway and stop.

“Are they coming back?” I said.

“They're waiting for clearance for takeoff. Look, I just want to go home.”

Chip took hold of the back of my arm, and I felt his fingers slip until they were clutching a loose fold of fat. I pulled away.

Beyond us the jet engine whistled, louder and stronger until the jet suddenly raced down the runway. I kept my gaze glued to it, watched its light lift, listened to the billowing thrust. They were leaving, and Chip wasn't running after them. Crazily, I had to make sure Sonia and Perky Marnie and half of what I feared had truly taken off and left us before I could move toward the door.

The nose of my sister's jet lifted and pointed upward, ready to make a sharp ascent, and Chip took a step toward the window, murmuring a curse.

“What?” I said.

His answer was lost to me as the plane virtually fell from the sky. Like a toy being thrown to the ground by a child, it slammed against the barriers at the edge of the airfield and erupted. Ripped in half. One piece slid through the grass on the other side of the fence.

The other erupted in flames.

