

# *Sofia's Secret*



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SHARLENE MACLAREN



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

*Publisher's Note:*

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible. The Scripture quotations on pages 172, 173, and 175 are from the American Standard Edition of the Revised Version of the Holy Bible.

## **SOPIA'S SECRET**

Book Three in the River of Hope Series

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## **Dedication**

To Mason Jax Tisdell.

When you came to us on October 22, 2011, this  
grandma could not get the smile off of her face for days.  
You are a heart stealer, you handsome little man.



# Chapter One

*June 1930  
Wabash, Indiana*

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:  
a broken and a contrite heart, O God,  
thou wilt not despise.*

—Psalm 51:17

**T**he blazing sun ducked behind a cloud, granting a smidgeon of relief to Sofia Rogers as she compressed the pedal to stop her bike in front of Murphy's Market and, in a most inelegant manner, slid off the seat, taking care not to catch the hem of her loose-fitting dress in the bicycle chain. She scanned the street in both directions, hoping not to run into anyone she knew, then parked the rusting yellow bike next to a Ford truck. These days, she dreaded coming into town, but she couldn't very well put off the chore much longer if she wanted to keep food on the table.

Her younger brother, Andy, had won the race to their destination. His equally corroded bike leaned against the building, and he stood next to it, his arms crossed, a burlap sack slung across one shoulder. As she approached, a smug grin etched his freckled face. "Didn't I t-tell you I'd b-beat you?"

“That’s because you had a full minute head start on me, you rascal.” Sofie might have added that her present condition did not permit the speed and agility she’d once had, but she wasn’t about to make that excuse. “Just you wait. I’ll win on the way back home.”

“N-not if I can help it.”

She pressed the back of her hand to her hot, damp face and stepped up to the sidewalk. “We’ll see about that, Mr. Know-It-All.”

Andy pointed at her and laughed. “Now your face is all d-dirty.”

She looked at her hands, still soiled from working in the garden that morning, and frowned. “I guess I should have lathered them a little better when I washed up.” She bent over and used the hem of her skirt to wipe her cheek before straightening. “There. Is that better?”

He tilted his face and angled her a crooked grin. “Sort of.”

“Oh, who cares?” She tousled his rust-colored hair. “Come on, let’s get started checking those items off my shopping list.”

They headed for the door, but a screeching horn drew their attention to the street, where a battered jalopy slowed at the curb. Several teenage boys, their heads poking out through the windows, whistled and hollered. “Hey, sister! Hear you like to have a good time!”

At their crudeness, Sofie felt a suffocating pressure in her chest. With a hand on her brother’s shoulder, she watched the car round the bend, as the boys’ whoops faded into the distance.

“Who were those guys?”

“Nobody important.”

As if the baby inside her fully agreed, she got a strong push to the rib cage that jarred her and made her stumble.

"You alright?" Andy grabbed her elbow, looking mature beyond his eleven years.

She paused to take a deep breath and then let it out slowly, touching a hand to her abdomen. Even in her seventh month, she could scarcely fathom carrying a tiny human in her womb, let alone accept all of the kicks and punches he or she had started doling out on a daily basis. She'd read several books to know what to expect as she progressed, but none of them had come close to explaining why she already felt so deeply in love with the tiny life inside of her. Considering that she hadn't consented to the act committed against her, she should have resented the little life, but how could she hold an innocent baby accountable? "I'm fine," she finally assured her brother. "Let's go inside, shall we?"

Inside Murphy's Market, a few people ambled up and down the two narrow aisles, toting cloth bags or shopping baskets. Sofie kept her left hand out of view as much as possible, in hopes of avoiding the condemnation of anyone who noticed the absence of a wedding band on her left ring finger. Not that she particularly cared what other folks thought, but she'd grown weary of the condescending stares. Several women had tried to talk her into giving the infant up for adoption, including Margie Grant, an old friend who had served as a mother figure to her and Andy ever since their parents had perished in a train wreck in 1924. "The little one growing inside you is the result of an insidious attack, darling. I shouldn't think you'd want much to do with it once it's born," Margie had said. "I happen to know more than a few childless couples right here

in Wabash who would be thrilled to take it off your hands. You should really consider adoption.”

Because Margie had long been a loyal friend, Sofie had confided in her about the assault, including when and where it had occurred. As for going to the authorities and demanding an investigation—never! Margie had begged her to go straight to Sheriff Morris, but she had refused, and then had made Margie swear on the Bible not to go herself.

“That is a hard promise to make, dearest,” Margie had conceded with wrinkled brow, “but I will promise to keep my lips buttoned. As for adoption, if you gave the baby to a nice couple in town, you would have the opportunity to watch it grow up. That would bring you comfort, I should think, especially if you selected a well-deserving Christian couple.”

“I can’t imagine giving my baby away to someone in my hometown, Christian or not.”

“Well then, we’ll go to one of the neighboring towns,” the woman had persisted. “Think about it, sweetheart. You don’t have the means to raise a child. Why, you and Andy are barely making ends meet as it is. Who’s going to take care of it while you’re at work?”

“I can’t think about that right now, Margie. And, please, don’t refer to my child as an ‘it.’”

The woman’s face had softened then, and she’d enfolded Sofie in her arms. “Well, of course, I know your baby’s not an ‘it,’ honey. But, until he or she is born, I have no notion what to call it—I mean, him or her.”

“‘The baby’ will do fine.”

Margie had given her a little squeeze, then dropped her hands to her sides and shot her a pleading gaze. “I sure wish you’d tell me who did this to you. It’s a crime, you know, what he did.”

Yes, it had been a crime—the most reprehensible sort. And it was both a blessing and a curse that Sofie couldn't remember the details. The last thing she could remember was drinking her habitual cup of coffee at Spic-and-Span Cleaning Service before starting her evening rounds. She'd thought it tasted unusually bitter, but she'd shrugged it off at the time. Half an hour later—at the site of her job that night, at the law offices of Baker & Baker—she'd been overcome by dizziness and collapsed. She'd teetered in and out of consciousness, with only a vague notion of what was going on. When she'd awakened, it had been daylight, and she was sore all over. Fortunately, it had been a Saturday, and the offices were closed; no one had discovered her lying there, nauseous and trembling, her dress torn, her hair disheveled. A particular ache had given her a clue as to what had gone on while she'd been unconscious. As the sickening reality had set in, she'd found beside her the note that had haunted her ever since.

*Breathe one word about this and you can  
say bye-bye to your brother.*

It had been typed on the official letterhead of the sheriff's office, making her even less inclined to go to the authorities. Whoever had assaulted her had connections to the law, and she wasn't about to risk her brother's life to find out his identity. Plus, without a name, and with no visual or auditory recollection, she had nothing to offer that would aid an investigation.

By the time she realized she'd gotten pregnant, two months had passed—too late to go crying to the authorities. Not that she'd planned to. Her attacker's threat had been enough to keep her quiet. She could bear the scorn and the shame, as long as he left her

alone. And the only way of ensuring that was to comply with his demands. No, she couldn't say anything more about it to Margie.

"Margie, we've been over this. It's better left unsaid, believe me."

"But, don't you know people are going to talk? Who knows what they'll think or say when you start to show? If they learned the truth, perhaps they'd go a little easier on you."

"No! I can't. No one must know—not even you. I'm sorry, Margie."

Margie had rubbed the back of her neck as if trying to work out a kink. A loud breath had blown past her lips and whistled across Sofie's cheek. "You know I love you, and so I will honor your wishes...for now." Then, her index finger had shot up in the air, nearly poking Sofie in the nose. "But if he so much as comes within an inch of you again, I want you to tell me right away, you hear? I can't abide thinking that he'll come knocking at your door. You must promise me, Sofia Mae Rogers!"

Sofie had hidden the shiver that had rustled through her veins at the mere thought of crossing paths with her attacker again. Why, every time she went to work, she couldn't get the awful pounding in her chest to slow its pace until she was home again. She'd stopped drinking and eating at work—anywhere other than at home, really.

"Show me your list, Sofie." Andy's voice drew her out of her fretful thoughts. She reached inside her pocket and handed over the paper. When he set off down an aisle, she idly followed after, her mind drifting back into its musings.



Dr. Elijah Trent parked his grandfather's 1928 Ford Model A in the lot beside Murphy's Market. As he climbed out, he was careful not to allow his door to collide with a bicycle standing nearby. Another battered bike leaned against the building. It looked as if it could use some serious repair work. He closed his door and took a deep breath of hot June air, then cast a glance overhead at the row of birds roosting on a clothesline that stretched between two apartment buildings across the street.

When he pulled open the whiny screen door, an array of aromas teased his nostrils, from freshly ground coffee beans to roasted peanuts in a barrel. As he stepped inside, a floorboard shrieked beneath his feet, as if to substantiate its long-term use.

"Afternoon," said the shopkeeper, who glanced up from the cash register, where he stood, ringing up an order for a young pregnant woman. Beside her, a boy dutifully stuffed each item into a cloth bag. The young woman raised her head and glanced briefly at Eli, who sensed a certain tenseness in her chestnut-colored eyes. Then, she shifted her gaze back to the clerk.

"Say, ain't you Doc Trent's grandson?" the man asked.

"That I am, sir. Elijah Trent. But most people call me Eli."

The clerk stopped ringing items for a moment and gave him an up-and-down glance. "Heard you're takin' over the old fellow's practice. That's mighty fine o' you. I understand you graduated with honors from the University of Michigan, an' you worked at a Detroit hospital for two years, but you were itchin' for small-town

livin'. Timing's good, since Doc's retirin'. S'pose you two been plannin' this for quite a while now, eh? Hate to see Wilson Trent retire, but most folks seem to think it'll be good to get in some new blood. Get it? Blood?" He gave a hearty chortle, causing his rotund chest to jiggle up and down.

Eli smiled at the friendly man. "It sounds like Grandfather's been keeping everyone well-informed."

"He sure has. Plus, the *Plain Dealer* wrote up that article 'bout you."

"Yes, I heard that."

The woman shifted her narrow frame and fingered one of her short, brown curls, but she kept her eyes focused on the counter. Beside her, the freckle-faced youngster poked his head around the back of her and met Elijah's gaze. They stared at each other for all of three seconds, but when Eli smiled, the boy quickly looked forward again.

As the clerk resumed ringing up their order, Eli reached inside his hip pocket and grabbed the short list his grandfather had scrawled in his somewhat shaky handwriting. In Detroit, he'd taken most of his meals at the hospital. Helping his grandfather in the kitchen would be an entirely new experience. At least it would be only temporary, until Grandfather's housekeeper of twenty-odd years, Winifred Carmichael, returned from her two-week vacation out West.

"You lookin' for anythin' in particular?" the clerk asked.

"Nothing I can't find on my own, sir."

"Pick up one o' them baskets by the door for stashin' what you need. Name's Harold, by the way. Harold Murphy. I've owned this place goin' on thirty years now."

Eli bent to pick up a basket. He hadn't thought to bring along a sack in which to carry the items home. The store he had occasioned in Detroit had offered brown paper bags, but the trend didn't seem to have caught on in Wabash just yet. "Yes, I recall coming here with my grandmother as a kid."

"And I remember you, as well, with that sandy hair o' yours and that there dimple in your chin."

"Is that so? You have a good memory, Mr. Murphy."

A pleased expression settled on the clerk's face. "You used to ogle my candy jars and tug at your grandmother's arm. 'Course, she'd always give in. She couldn't resist your pleadin'. Seems to me you always managed to wrangle some chewin' gum out o' her before I finished ringin' her order."

"It's amazing you remember that."

"Well, some things just stick in my memory for no particular reason." He glanced across the counter at the freckle-faced boy. "Young Andy, here, he's the Hershey's chocolate bar type. Ain't that right, Andy?"

The lad's head jerked up, and he looked from Mr. Murphy to the woman beside him. "Yes, sir. C-c-can I g-get one today, Sofie?"

Her slender shoulders lifted and drooped with a labored sigh. "I suppose, but don't expect any other treats today."

"I won't."

The brief tête-à-tête allowed Eli the chance to disappear down an aisle in search of the first item on his list: sugar. He found it about the same time the screen door whined open once more, with the exit of the young woman and the boy. Next, Eli spotted the bread at the end of the aisle. He picked up a loaf and nestled it in the basket, next to the box of sugar.

“Well, I think it’s plain disgraceful, her coming into town and flaunting herself like that. My stars, has she not an ounce of decency? And what, pray tell, is she teaching that brother of hers by not keeping herself concealed?”

“I must agree, it’s quite appalling,” said another.

Eli’s ears perked up at the sound of female scoffs coming from the other side of the shelving unit at the back of the store. He stilled, slanted his head, and leaned forward. If he could push a few cans and boxed goods to the side without creating a commotion, he might manage a partial view of the gossips.

“I always did wonder about her and that pitiable little brother of hers, living all alone on the far edge of town. No telling what sort of man put her in a motherly way. Why, if I were in her place, I’d have gone off to stay with some relative in another state. One would think she’d have somewhere she could go. She could have birthed the child, given it to some worthy family, and come back to Wabash, and no one would’ve been the wiser.”

The other gossip cleared her throat. “Perchance her ‘lover’ won’t hear of her leaving, and she doesn’t dare defy him. She always did come off as rather defenseless, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, yes, and very reclusive. Never was one to join any charity groups or ladies’ circles. Why, she doesn’t even attend church, to my knowledge. As I said before, the whole thing is disgraceful.”

Eli shuffled around the corner and stopped at the end of the next row, where he picked up a couple of cans of beans, even though they weren’t on Grandfather’s list, and dropped them into his basket with a clatter. The chattering twosome immediately fell

silent. Eli cast a casual glance in their direction, and he almost laughed at their poses of feigned nonchalance. One was studying the label on a box, while the other merely stared at a lower shelf, her index finger pressed to her chin.

When Eli started down the aisle, both of them looked up, so he nodded. "Afternoon, ladies."

The more buxom of the two batted her eyelashes and plumped her graying hair, then nearly blinded him with a fulsome smile. "Well, good afternoon to you." She put a hand to her throat. "My goodness. You're Doc Trent's grandson?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I'll be. I overheard you talking with Harold, but I didn't lay eyes on you until now." She perused him up and down. "You sure are a handsome devil."

"Oh, for mercy's sake, Bessie, mind your manners." The second woman bore a blush of embarrassment. "Don't pay her any heed, Doctor. She's such a tease." She extended a hand. "I'm Clara Morris, the sheriff's wife, and this is Bessie Lloyd. Her husband owns Lloyd's Shoe Store, over on Market Street. Welcome to Wabash, Dr. Trent. We read about your impending arrival in the newspaper. I hope you find yourself feeling right at home here."

"I'm sure I will." Eli shifted his shopping basket and extended a hand first to Mrs. Morris, then to the annoying Mrs. Lloyd. He would have liked to remind them that two upstanding women in the community ought to put a lock on their lips, lest they tarnish their own reputations, but he hadn't come to Wabash with the intention of making instant enemies, so he restrained himself. "Nice meeting you ladies. You have a good day, now."

He glanced to his left and, seeing a shelf with maple syrup, snatched a can and tossed it into his basket. Casting the women one last smile, he headed down the aisle in search of the remaining items.

“My, my,” he heard Mrs. Lloyd mutter. “I think it may be time for me to switch physicians.”

“But you’ve been seeing Dr. Stewart for years,” Mrs. Morris said. “What about your bad knee?”

“Pfff, never mind that. I’d much rather look into that young man’s blue eyes and handsome face than Dr. Stewart’s haggard mug. Why, if I were younger...”

Eli picked up his pace and made it out of earshot before she finished her statement.

Several minutes later, he’d rounded up everything on his list, so he made his way to the cash register. As he did, the voices of the two gabby women carried across the store. Evidently, they’d found a new topic of conversation. “I went to McNarney Brothers yesterday,” Mrs. Lloyd was saying, “and would you believe they raised the price of beef by five cents a pound? Don’t they know times are tight? Before you know it, folks won’t be able to afford to eat.”

“She could afford to go a few days without eatin’,” Harold Murphy muttered. His eyes never strayed from his task, as he keyed in the amount of each item before placing it back in the basket.

Eli covered his mouth with the back of his hand until his grin faded. He decided it was best to keep quiet on the matter. Something else bothered him, though, and he couldn’t resist inquiring. He leaned in, taking care to keep his voice down. “That girl...er, that woman, who left a bit ago, who is expecting...”

“Ah, Sofia Rogers? She was here with her little brother, Andy.” Mr. Murphy rang up the final item, the

loaf of bread, and placed it gently atop the other goods. Then, he scratched the back of his head as his thin lips formed a frown. "It's a shame, them two...well, them three, I guess you could say." He glanced both ways, then lowered his head and whispered, "Don't know who got her in that way, and I don't rightly care. When she comes here, I just talk to her like nothin's different. Figure it ain't really my concern. I know there's been talk about her bein' loose, an' all, but I can't accept it. Never seen her with anybody but that little boy. She takes mighty fine care o' him, too."

"She's his guardian, then?"

"Sure enough, ever since...oh, let's see here...summer of twenty-four, it was. They lost their ma and pa in a terrible train wreck. They'd left Andy home with Sofie for a few days, whilst they went to a family funeral somewhere out West, little knowing their own funeral would be three days later." The man shook his balding head.

The news got Eli's gut to roiling. Even after all those years of medical school, which should have caloused him to pain and suffering, his heartstrings were wound as taut as ever. He needed to learn to toughen up. Needed to accept that, thanks to Adam and Eve's fateful decision in the garden, bad things happened to innocent people; that he lived in an imperfect world in which evil often won.

"Where do they live, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Somewheres out on the southwest edge o' town. River Road, I believe, just off o' Mill Creek Pike."

Eli didn't know Wabash well, but his grandfather certainly did, having driven virtually every street within the town limits to make house calls. But what was he thinking? He ought to bop himself on the noggin.

He knew next to nothing about this woman, and the last thing he needed upon taking over Wilson Trent's medical practice was a reputation for sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

Eli paid the shopkeeper and took up the basket. He had a good feeling about Harold Murphy. "Nice to see you again, sir. I'll bring this basket back next time I come in...or shall I return it to you tonight?"

Harold flicked his wrist. "Naw, you bring it back whenever it's convenient. You give ol' Doc a hearty hello from me."

"I'll do that." Eli turned and proceeded to the door, shoving it open with his shoulder. The first thing he noticed when he stepped outside was the absence of the two bikes, and it occurred to him then that Sofia and Andy Rogers had ridden to and from Murphy's Market on those rickety contraptions. A woman in what looked to be her seventh month of pregnancy, riding a bike clear to the edge of town? In a dress? And in this heat?

This time, he did bop himself on the head.