

THE WIDOW OF WALL STREET

Chapter 1

November 2009

Phoebe never hated her husband more than when she visited him in prison. The preceding nightmare of ordeals—eleven hours hauling a suitcase by bus, train, and cab, her muscles screaming from the weight—were the coming attractions of the misery she faced the next day.

She arrived at the grimy hotel close to midnight. Without sleep, exhaustion would lengthen every minute tomorrow. After wrestling her luggage to the bed, Phoebe thumbed through a small stack of folded sweaters, hoping they would withstand the raw weather. So many never-envisioned experiences: riding a dingy Greyhound bus; drowning ramen noodles in a hotel coffee maker; choosing clothes to wear to Ray Brook Federal Correctional Institution—and then envisioning her choice through her husband’s eyes.

Each month, Jake became more of an albatross, and yet, even now, through tooth-grinding anger, Phoebe found herself still seeking his approving smile and the satisfaction of soothing his melancholy.

Phoebe worried how long she could, would, continue making the long trip to this prison in upstate New York. One hour further and she’d be in Canada. To stop visiting required strength she hadn’t yet found—loving and worrying about Jake had been her default for too long—so she agonized about everything from prison conversation to the choice between wearing a cardigan or crewneck sweater.

“Why won’t you stay longer?” She dreaded hearing those words Jake repeated every visit. “Other wives come Saturday and Sunday, not for a measly few hours.”

She’d stare just as she had before. Silent, hoping her eyes might express the command she couldn’t speak: *Screw yourself, Jake*. Her husband, once a titan—a god—now whined like a child.

What she said: “A few hours is plenty.”

What she didn’t say: *Two days would kill me*.

What he said: “Getting out after three hours must be nice.” What he probably meant: *I hate you for being free*.

What she said: “Staying here must be hard.”

What she didn’t say: *Leaving is deliverance from you*.

Then she'd change the topic—a difficult task with a world of off-limit issues: The kids. Jake's guilt. Her lack of money. Her not knowing this man; this fraud of a husband who steamrolled over her desperation to unravel the tangled skein of their past.

She held up first a soft white turtleneck, and then a subdued blue cardigan, and finally a camel-colored blazer. Jake liked her to dress sharp. Even in prison he demanded that she reflect well on him. How ironic. Yet, after building her life on pleasing Jake—even after him swindling her and everyone else in his life—she couldn't shake the habit of following his orders.

Phoebe also needed to please her other husband, the new authority in her life—the Federal Bureau of Prisons—and adhering to the prison's rules for visitors meant dressing to its standards.

“Visitors are held to a dress code before being admitted into the institution.”

Stark divisions outlined her life. Before, she would wander through the highest-end stores clutching fabric from an old Caribbean-blue dress, a shade that brightened her eyes, to match that color in a sweater. After . . .

“Visitors wearing transparent clothing, dresses, blouses or other apparel of a suggestive or revealing nature, halter tops, short shorts, miniskirts, culottes, or excessively tight fitting clothing will not be admitted into the institution.”

Too tired to concentrate, she placed her wardrobe choices on the extra twin bed. In the morning, when she knew the temperature, she could make her decision. And November temperatures in the Adirondack Mountains often fell below freezing.

After brushing her teeth and covering her face with motel lotion, she carried her laptop to bed. Her closest relationships were with her sister and her Mac; lately she had started Googling “average life of Apple laptops.” Imagining life without her electronic connection petrified Phoebe. Thoughts of spending almost two thousand dollars for a replacement provided equal amounts of panic.

Messages from frightening strangers stuffed her Gmail in-box. The distraught and inflamed found her no matter how many times she changed her email provider. Her encrypted email account—Hush-mail—the sole communication method she managed to keep private besides her cell phone, contained only one new message, from her sister. Deb wrote daily, always cheerful. Today a long-ago picture of the two of them climbing on iron monkey bars in a Brooklyn playground accompanied her note.

No word from the kids. Occasionally, Kate sent updates about Amelia, Phoebe's granddaughter. Noah wrote monthly emails filled with agony and anger.

After dashing off a quick note to Deb—“Everything is fine! Weather holding up—more tmw”—she opened Etsy, her online Xanax. Phoebe daydreamed of having an anonymous work life there, building friendships with a community of crafters who appreciated one another only for their dedication to the perfect quilt or ceramic mug. She could sell handmade recipe books devoted to

cupcakes. At night, as she struggled toward sleep and fought against memories—and giving in to sleeping pills—she invented pen names: Mimi Appleby. Yoshiko Whisby. Gianna Gardner.

Phoebe tried holding back, but finally, pressing her lips hard together, unable to resist, she opened PrisonMessages.com. Within moments, she found herself captured by Karlgirl's question: "Would you be angry if your man showed off your sexy pics?"

Phoebe couldn't conceive of any man wanting photos of her, sexy or otherwise, but still, she slipped into the world and wondered about Jake in that situation.

The man she thought she'd married would have gouged out the eyes of any man trying to see her naked. Today's Jake would likely sell pictures of her to the highest bidder.

Like a man vowing to stay off porn sites, she slammed her laptop closed.