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LEEANNA
MORGAN

A *Stitch*
IN TIME



A STITCH IN TIME

A SWEET SMALL-TOWN ROMANCE

THE COTTAGES ON ANCHOR LANE

BOOK FOUR



LEEANNA MORGAN

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ABOUT THIS BOOK



“All the books in this series had me holding my breath with each turn of a page. Five stars!”

Fans of Netflix’s Virgin River series and Sweet Magnolias will love this small-town, feel-good romance!

After being homeless for most of her life, Jackie West has finally found her idea of heaven. Living in Sapphire Bay has given her the security she craves and the friends she needs to be happy. When she sees the fourth cottage on Anchor Lane sitting empty, she dreams of turning it into a knitting store. But with limited finances, it’s unlikely to happen.

Aidan Remington works for BioTech Industries creating state-of-the-art prosthetics. Meeting Jackie sets him on a path he never saw coming but is everything he needs. When he’s asked to organize a charity Christmas gala to raise money for children’s prosthetics, he can’t say no. But he needs Jackie’s help. With the hopes and dreams of more than one child resting on their shoulders, they embark on a journey so important neither of them can turn back. Until what drew them together starts to tear them apart.

Join Jackie and Aidan in this heartwarming tale of resilience, friendship, and the relentless pursuit of dreams, set against the backdrop of the beautiful town of Sapphire Bay.

A STITCH IN TIME is the fourth book in *The Cottages on Anchor Lane* series and can easily be read as a stand-alone. All of Leeanna’s series are linked. If you find a character you like, they could be in another novel.

If you’d like to know when Leeanna’s next book is released, please visit leeannamorgan.com and sign up for her newsletter. Happy reading!

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Montana Brides:

[Book 1: Forever Dreams](#) (Gracie and Trent)

Book 2: Forever in Love (Amy and Nathan)

Book 3: Forever After (Nicky and Sam)

Book 4: Forever Wishes (Erin and Jake)

Book 5: Forever Santa (A Montana Brides Christmas Novella)

Book 6: Forever Cowboy (Emily and Alex)

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Book 2: The Starlight Café (Andrea and David)

Book 3: The Cozy Quilt Shop (Shona and Joseph)

Book 4: A Stitch in Time (Jackie and Aidan)

The Cottages on Anchor Lane Boxed Set (Books 1-3)

Love on Anchor Lane:

Book 1: The Magic of Summer (Daniella and Harrison)

Book 2: The Magic of Sunshine (Harper and Owen)

Book 3: The Magic of Rainbows (Emily and Steve)

Book 4: The Magic of Christmas (Chloe and Liam)

CHAPTER 1



Jackie carefully added another rose to the table arrangement for the wedding of Jan Harris and Cliff Simons. After working on the flowers for the last two days, she was thrilled with how wonderful they looked.

With a final tweak, she repositioned a rosebud and smiled. She loved working at The Flower Cottage and creating special memories for their clients. Especially when they were as nice as this couple.

Some days she had to pinch herself. The best thing she'd ever done was move to Sapphire Bay. After spending most of her life living in trailer parks, shelters, and her mom's car, the small Montana town had given her so much more than a roof over her head. It gave her a sense of belonging she never thought possible.

She'd discovered a tight-knit community where everyone knew each other's names, a far cry from the anonymous, stressful existence she was used to. And even though she was a stranger, the community had welcomed her with open arms, embracing her as one of their own.

Paris, her boss and friend, stopped beside her. "That's lovely. Do you need any more flowers?"

"Not for this arrangement. Would you like me to check the bridal bouquet? Jan's father's picking it up soon."

Paris shook her head. "I just had a look and it's wonderful. The tiny flamingo you added is cute."

“I thought it’d make Jan smile.” Until she’d met the bride, Jackie didn’t know anyone who collected flamingos. But Jan’s house was full of flamingo cushions, ornaments, and posters. No one was surprised when she’d chosen a flamingo-themed reception. “After I’ve put this arrangement in the truck, I’ll take everything to The Fairy Forest. Is there anything we’ve forgotten?”

“I don’t think so. The balloon arch is finished and the other flowers look amazing.” Paris reached for a spool of ribbon. “I went into The Cozy Quilt Shop yesterday. There weren’t many of your baby clothes left.”

As well as working part-time at The Flower Cottage and at another flower shop in town, Jackie sold her hand-knitted baby clothes at The Cozy Quilt Shop. “A tourist bus stopped in Anchor Lane yesterday. The people on board bought most of the jackets and booties I’d made.”

“That’s fabulous. You must be thrilled with how much you’re selling.”

“I am, but I’m a little worried I won’t be able to keep up with the demand. I’ve had to stop taking orders from my website.”

Paris placed the bouquet she’d made onto two sheets of sparkly paper. “That’s what you get for knitting such amazing clothes. Should I add a gold or silver bow to this bouquet?”

Jackie tilted her head to the side. “Silver. It’ll look lovely with the red roses and gerberas. The last alterations to our bridesmaids’ dresses will be finished this weekend. I can’t wait to see them.”

“Neither can I. It still amazes me that Andrea’s getting married in three weeks. It only seems like yesterday that she got engaged.”

“I hope she’ll be happy. Andrea and her boys have been through so much.”

“They have, but they also have a wonderful future to look forward to.” Paris added the bow to the bouquet and glanced at

Jackie. “Andrea isn’t the only person who’s had a difficult life. I’m proud of what you’ve achieved.”

Jackie smiled at her friend. “I wouldn’t have stayed in Sapphire Bay if it weren’t for you and Andrea. You’ve been amazing.”

“And we love you,” Paris said softly.

Jackie swallowed the lump in her throat, her heart heavy with the weight of those precious words. “I love you, too.”

With a mischievous smile, Paris held up the bouquet. “What do you think?”

“It’s perfect.” Just like their friendship. She gave Paris a quick hug, then placed the table arrangement she’d finished into a temporary vase. “I’ll head across to The Fairy Forest now. If I’ve forgotten anything, I’ll call you.”

“Okay. After I’ve closed the store, I’ll come and help.”

“Don’t rush. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“That’s what we always say on the morning of a wedding.”

Jackie smiled. “And by the afternoon, we wonder where the time’s gone. I’ll see you soon.”

After she’d placed the flowers in the truck, Jackie hurried to the driver’s door. For someone who was scared of happy endings, the crisp October morning lifted her spirits and made her think anything was possible.

Including getting a wedding reception ready for a flamingo-crazy bride and the man of her dreams.



AIDAN SAT in his temporary office surrounded by blueprints and sketches of the research and development laboratories being built for BioTech Industries.

The high-tech prosthetics his team created were sent around the world, changing people’s lives. A month ago, he was working in New York City, hunched over his desk,

refining the latest designs for his clients. And, after the morning he'd had, he wished he was still there.

When, David, his boss asked him to come to Sapphire Bay to oversee the initial fit-out of his team's research area, he'd leaped at the chance. From the start of the process, he'd been involved in reimagining what their new research and development center could look like. Helping to bring those plans to life was something very few people were able to do.

Frowning, he picked up one of the packing slips on his desk as he spoke on the phone with David. "Only half the 3D printers we need have been ordered. I've spoken to Bryce to see if he can do anything as Project Manager, but he hasn't had any more luck than I have. How are we supposed to meet our deadlines when we don't have the technology we need?"

"It's frustrating, but we'll find a solution." David's voice was calm and steady. "Did the company say how long it'll take to deliver the other printers to Sapphire Bay?"

"They're too expensive to keep in stock. We won't get them for at least another month. The only thing we can do is take a few of the printers from our lab in Manhattan and bring them here. But that'll have too much of an impact on the work we've already scheduled."

"I'll send you the contact details of someone I know in Los Angeles. They might be able to help."

Aidan sighed. "Thanks. I'll call them today."

"You aren't usually this stressed. Is everything else okay?"

"Apart from some minor issues, everything's going reasonably well. I keep forgetting that working from Sapphire Bay isn't as easy as being in the city. If something goes wrong, it takes a lot longer to fix."

David chuckled. "I thought our barbecues beside the lake might've made you overlook the disadvantages of living here."

"They've made a difference, especially when Andrea bakes her famous chocolate chip cookies."

“Are they good enough to make you stay in Montana for another year?”

Aidan ran his hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t go that far.” Most of his team couldn’t wait to move to Sapphire Bay, but he wasn’t sure this was where he wanted to live. “Thanks for listening.”

“You’re welcome. There’ve been days when I felt the same way, but I try to remember that this project is special. We couldn’t afford to build a research facility in New York like the one you’re working on. Once it’s opened, we’ll make a difference in many people’s lives.”

Aidan had seen the impact BioTech’s medical devices were making. As frustrating as it could be, if it meant helping to create a facility on the moon, he would’ve done it.

“Besides,” David continued, “you told me you needed a change of scenery.”

Aidan smiled. “That’s true. You can’t get much different than Sapphire Bay. Are you still coming for a run tonight?”

“I wouldn’t miss it. Andrea’s providing the food for a client’s wedding anniversary, so I’m free until eight o’clock. I’ll meet you at your place at five.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.” Aidan ended the call and stared at his cell phone. If his brother was alive, he’d tell him to get on with the job and stop stressing about every last detail.

But it was because of his brother that he wanted everything to be perfect—even if that meant working long hours and having too many sleepless nights.



JACKIE SLID a box of flowers out of her truck and headed into The Fairy Forest, a fairy-themed events center in the heart of Sapphire Bay. A few years earlier, Daniella had risked everything she owned to start her dream business. It was an instant hit with people of all ages from around Flathead Lake and had become one of the town’s most popular attractions.

Anyone stepping into the red-brick building for the first time would be amazed at what was inside. With its whimsical decorations and breathtaking forest of trees, flowers, and twinkling fairy lights, it was the perfect setting for Jan and Cliff's wedding.

Daniella walked through a doorway sculptured to look like the trunk of an ancient tree. Wearing a pair of golden wings and a pretty tulle dress, she looked like she'd stepped straight out of a fairy tale. "You've come at the right time. I've just finished the archway behind the bridal party's table."

Jackie's eyes widened. "You must've been here before the sun rose to finish it."

"I don't mind starting work early. We're fully booked for events today, so the sooner I set up each room, the happier my clients are. Do you need a hand to bring anything inside?"

"There are still a few boxes in the truck, but only help me if you have some spare time."

"For you, I'll make the time. Is your truck unlocked?"

Jackie nodded. "The box on the back seat is the last of the table decorations. If you could bring that inside, it'd be great."

"Consider it done. I'll see you soon." Daniella's wings fluttered as she made her way across the room.

Jackie stepped through the doorway and into the main events room. Daniella had added special touches to the fairy forest to make Jan and Cliff's wedding extra special. There were more flowers scattered around the park-like interior, and the ceiling was filled with pink and white paper lanterns.

When she saw the floral archway, she was stunned. The delicate silk roses and twinkling fairy lights were amazing.

A smile lit her face when she saw a dozen flamingos standing tall and proud on the edge of one of the gardens. On the far side of the room, another group of flamingos decorated the edge of the chocolate fountain. She could only imagine everyone's delight when they saw the long-legged birds beside the warm, chocolate treat.

“I hope I haven’t gone overboard with the flamingos,” Daniella said, coming to stand beside her. “I added forty to the garden, and I found some pink flamingo paper napkins for the tables.”

“Everything’s amazing. Even the pink sashes around the backs of the chairs look beautiful.” Fifteen circular tables had been placed around The Fairy Forest. Covered in crisp white tablecloths, sparkling crystal glasses, and silver cutlery, all they needed was the table decorations Jackie had finished this morning.

Reaching inside the box, Jackie lifted out a vase of pale pink roses and placed it on the nearest table. “What do you think?”

Daniella smiled. “It’s perfect. Jan and Cliff will love what we’ve done.” Her cell phone beeped and she read the text. “Oh, no. The ice cream truck that was supposed to be here this afternoon has broken down. Will you be okay bringing the rest of the decorations inside? I need to talk to the company.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be fine.”

“If you need anything, let me know.” With her phone pressed to her ear, Daniella hurried from the room.

Jackie took another vase out of the box and made sure the floral foam was still wet. The last thing she wanted was for the flowers to droop before the wedding. It wouldn’t take too long to bring everything inside and, once Paris arrived, it’d be even quicker.

“Excuse me. Are you Daniella?”

She jumped and the vase wobbled in her hands. Quickly, she pulled it close to her chest. “No,” she said as she turned toward the man. Her eyes widened and curiosity made her take a closer look at his face. She didn’t recognize him, but that wasn’t unusual. Each day, more and more people visited Sapphire Bay to get away from big city life. He was tall—well over six feet, with dark brown hair, and guarded blue eyes.

She didn’t get the impression he was here on vacation. “Daniella left to sort out a problem.”

“Oh. I’m sorry if I startled you.”

“It’s okay. I was thinking about something else and didn’t hear you come into the room.”

The stranger’s gaze wandered around the room. “This is amazing.”

Jackie nodded and placed the vase of flowers on a table. “There’s a wedding here this afternoon. It looks just as stunning for other events.”

“Do you work here?”

“No. I work at The Flower Cottage. We’ve created most of the floral arrangements.” She walked back to the box and took out another vase. “If you want to speak to Daniella, her office is on the left-hand side of the main reception area.”

“Would you mind if I look around before I find her? I need to choose a venue for a fundraising event, and this could work.” He held out his hand. “I’m Aidan Remington. I work for BioTech Industries.”

She wiped her hand on her sweatshirt. “I’m Jackie. Do you know David O’Dowd? He’s my friend’s fiancé.”

“David’s my boss. I’ve had dinner with him, Andrea, and her boys quite a few times.”

His appearance in Sapphire Bay was beginning to make sense. Once the new research facility was finished, half of the staff in BioTech’s Manhattan building were supposed to be arriving in Sapphire Bay.

“It’s nice to meet a friend of theirs. Are you moving here with the other staff from BioTech?”

“I’m not sure yet. At the moment, I’m helping to set up the prosthetic labs. After that, I’m heading back to Manhattan.”

For some reason, a flicker of disappointment flared inside her. She had no idea why. Aidan was attractive, and he seemed like a nice person. But she knew nothing about him, and he might not be staying in Sapphire Bay. She really needed to get out more if this was her reaction to a stranger.

“You’re welcome to look around. Just be careful of the flamingos.”

Aidan frowned. “Is that a special code for something important?”

“No. There really *are* pink flamingos everywhere.” She pointed to the nearest ones. “The bride loves them.”

“In that case, I’ll be extra careful.” Aidan smiled before turning his attention back to the room.

She couldn’t help but watch as he walked around, his eyes taking in every aspect of the magical space. She tried to keep busy by arranging the table decorations, but her mind kept wandering back to Aidan.

She didn’t blame him for wanting to get back to New York City. Living here must feel like being in the middle of nowhere. But, for her, it was perfect.

Jackie hurried outside and grabbed another box of flowers. There were still a lot of things she needed to do. Thinking about New York and everything a big-city life involved wouldn’t get anything done faster.

As she was finishing the decorations on another table, Aidan walked toward her. “I’m glad I came in. This could be perfect for our fundraising event.”

Jackie wasn’t surprised he was impressed. In all her travels, she’d seen nothing like it either. “I’m glad you like it. What kind of fundraiser is it?”

“BioTech’s working on a special range of prosthetics for children. A lot of people can’t afford to buy the latest devices, so we’re starting a charitable trust that’ll pay for the prosthetics and all the follow-up care they’ll need. We’ll use the fundraiser to launch the trust.”

Jackie looked more closely at Aidan. Anything that helped children and their families was important to her, and this project seemed even more vital. “That sounds great. I’m sure Daniella would love to work with you.”

“I’ll talk to her about it. Thanks for letting me interrupt.”
And, as quickly as he arrived, Aidan left the room.

Jackie hoped The Fairy Forest worked for what he wanted to do. Daniella would appreciate the extra business and, hopefully, BioTech would need some amazing flowers to decorate the venue.

And she knew exactly where he could go to get them.

CHAPTER 2



*A*idan's breath formed small clouds in the frosty morning air as he jogged through the quiet streets of Sapphire Bay. Although it was seven o'clock on a Monday morning, there weren't many people in town.

The general store was open and Mabel and Allan Terry would be there, getting everything ready for the day. Brooke and Megan were working in Sweet Treats. Even though the lights in the front of their store were off, he could smell the addictive scent of fudge and all kinds of cakes being baked.

He increased his pace and smiled. He didn't know many people in town, but he'd introduced himself to the owners of the stores where he liked to shop. Luckily for him, Sapphire Bay had an incredible range of eateries and specialty stores that, for its size, rivaled anything he'd seen in New York City.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, he looked at the other old-fashioned buildings lining Main Street. Living permanently in this small town might not be high on his list of priorities, but he enjoyed the quaint atmosphere and the freedom of being able to run wherever he liked.

As he turned into Anchor Lane, he spotted Jackie carrying a lot of small boxes inside one of the cottages. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a messy bun, and her cheeks were flushed from exertion.

He frowned when he saw the store she was going into. Yesterday, she'd told him she worked at The Flower Cottage, but she was taking boxes into The Cozy Quilt Shop. He

slowed his pace, then jogged in place. “Hi, Jackie. Do you need a hand?”

She sent him an easy smile. “The boxes aren’t heavy, but thanks for the offer. It’s great weather for a run.”

“I’m making the most of the weather. It could snow next week.” Hurrying up the steps, he held open the door for her. A few weeks ago, it would’ve surprised him it was unlocked, but not now. As soon as a staff member arrived at most of the stores, they opened the doors, happy for people to come in—even if the store wasn’t ready for customers. “Are you delivering some flowers to the quilting store?”

“Not today. The boxes are full of children’s knitting. My friend Shona owns the store, and she sells them for me.”

“You knit?”

Jackie’s blue eyes sparkled with amusement. “You sound surprised.”

“The only people I know who knit are my mom and grandma. And you’re nowhere near their age.”

“My moisturizer must be even better than the lady in the store told me.”

Aidan laughed. “You don’t look a day over twenty-five.”

“Thank goodness you didn’t say forty, or I’d be asking for my money back.” She grinned and rebalanced the boxes in her arms.

Despite what she’d said, he took the top two off her. She was right. They were incredibly light. “Where would you like them?”

Jackie nodded toward the large sales counter. “Just put them over there. After I’ve seen Shona, I’ll place them on one of the display tables.”

He should’ve known she wasn’t delivering flowers. The teddy bear and fluffy yellow duck designs on the outside of each box were a dead giveaway to what could be inside.

“How long have you been knitting?”

“For as long as I can remember. When I was little, one of my mom’s neighbors taught me how to knit. My first project was a scarf and I continued on from there.”

Aidan placed the boxes on the counter. “Whatever’s in these boxes doesn’t feel like scarves. They’re as light as a feather.”

“That’s because they’re babies’ clothes. It’s much quicker and easier to knit bonnets, jackets, and booties than bulkier adult sweaters or scarves. And they sell a lot faster, too.”

A woman with red hair walked out of a room at the back of the store. “I thought I heard voices. Hi, Jackie. Who have you brought with you?”

“Hi, Shona. This is Aidan. He’s giving me a hand to bring my knitting inside.”

Aidan held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too, Aidan. I’ve been looking forward to seeing Jackie’s latest creations. I have a lot of customers waiting to buy her baby clothes.”

A soft blush appeared on Jackie’s cheeks. “Shona says that to me each time I deliver new stock. I think it’s her way of encouraging me to knit faster.”

Shona sent Jackie a look that was laden with unspoken words. “It isn’t possible at the moment but, if you were knitting full time, who knows where it might lead.”

Jackie’s blush deepened.

Aidan didn’t know what had caused her to look uncomfortable, but he was now even more curious about what was inside the boxes. “After Shona’s glowing report, can I look at your knitting?”

Jackie’s eyebrows rose. “Are you sure you have the time? The morning’s too good to be stuck inside with us.”

“If you’re trying to change my mind, it won’t work. Besides, it won’t take long to look at the baby clothes.”

Shona sent him an amused glance. “Just remember, if you want to buy anything, you’ll have to wait for the next delivery. Otherwise, I’ll have a lot of unhappy customers calling me. See me when you’re done, Jackie, and we’ll decide where we’ll display everything.”

Jackie’s gaze followed Shona as she walked out of the room. Reluctantly, she opened a box. “I’ll make this quick so you don’t cool down.”

“I’ve got plenty of time.” He grinned at her soft sigh. When he saw the pale yellow jacket she pulled out of the box, he couldn’t understand why she didn’t want to show him what she’d made. “I’m not an expert, but that looks pretty amazing to me.”

Jackie pulled out a pair of the smallest booties he’d ever seen. “I don’t have a lot of time to knit, not like I used to, but I do as much as I can. This set is one of my most popular designs.”

“I can see why.” He made a mental note to remember about her knitting. Most of his friends’ partners were having babies. Sending them something handmade in Montana would be a bigger surprise than shopping at a boutique in Manhattan.

He handed the jacket back to her. “Thanks for showing them to me.”

“That’s all right. Now you know what I do when I’m not working in The Flower Cottage.”

Aidan was sure there was more to Jackie’s life than knitting and flower arranging, and he was oddly intrigued to discover more. “How was the wedding on Saturday?”

“I saw the bride’s mom on Sunday. She said it was beautiful. Jan and Cliff loved the flamingos and the extra flower arrangements we made. They’re flying to Orlando for their honeymoon this morning.”

“To see more pink flamingos?”

“Something like that.”

Aidan’s watch beeped, telling him his heart rate had fallen.

Jackie glanced at the blinking light on his wrist. “Is someone calling you or is your phone telling you something else?”

“It’s telling me I should keep running. Thanks for showing me your knitting.”

“You’re welcome. Enjoy the rest of your run.”

“I’ll do that.” He turned to leave, then stopped. Most of the time he enjoyed running on his own, but sometimes it was good to share the experience with someone else. He enjoyed talking to Jackie. If she was looking for a running buddy, he could be it.

“Do you enjoy running?” he asked.

Jackie shook her head. “It’s not my thing. I prefer to walk or ride my bicycle when I want to exercise.”

“In that case, I won’t invite you for an early morning run.”

“Definitely not.” She smiled as she took the lids off the other boxes. “If you’ve met Pastor John, talk to him. There’s at least one running group at the church.”

His watch beeped again. Sometimes, he wasn’t impressed with technology. “That’s a good idea.”

Jackie laughed. “You’d better leave before your watch zaps you.”

“If it did that, the company would go out of business. I’ll see you around town some time.”

“I’ll look forward to it. Have a great day.”

“You, too.” And before the next set of beeps sounded an alarm, he headed outside. Only this time it wasn’t the scenery he thought of. It was a woman with stunning blue eyes and auburn hair who liked making flower arrangements, riding bicycles, and knitting baby clothes.

He reset his watch, turned right, and headed toward Flathead Lake.

Jackie was completely different from the women he’d met in New York. There was a genuine warmth to her personality

that drew him to her, a simplicity about her life that made his own seem too complicated.

Before he spent too much time thinking about her, he'd better ask David what he knew about his fiancée's friend. Jackie wasn't wearing a wedding band, and she hadn't mentioned having a partner. But, as he'd discovered more than once, that didn't mean much to some women.



JACKIE LEANED against the doorframe of the workroom in The Cozy Quilt Shop. Shona's head was bent over her sewing machine, stitching another quilt, and listening to country music on the radio.

Being here always made Jackie feel happy. With colorful fabric filling the store's shelves, gorgeous quilts hanging from the walls, and beautiful thread, ribbon, and beads on display, it was heaven for anyone interested in quilting.

Shona could have sold quilts and nothing else, but she was using the store to showcase other local artists' work. There were hand-carved ornaments, gorgeous glass vases, and a display of ceramic beads and plates. In some ways, having a more diverse range of goods made The Cozy Quilt Shop even more popular with its customers.

Jackie was impressed with the showroom, but the workroom was even more inspiring. A shelf of half-finished quilts sat along one wall. Boxes of additional supplies covered another set of shelves and, closer to the small kitchen, boxes of handcrafts were waiting to be sold. She admired what Shona had done over the last few months. Her quilting store had grown from a dream into a thriving business. Groups of eager quilters booked the tables in the meeting area, sharing their skill, laughter, and friendship with anyone who wanted to be part of the magic.

Jackie tapped lightly on the door and stepped into the workroom. "Hey, Shona. What are you working on?"

Her friend looked up and smiled. “I’m finishing this quilt for Mrs. Jenkins. She wanted something with a Christmas theme for the winter months.”

Jackie nodded and took a closer look at the red and gold quilt. The colors were warm and inviting, reminding her of cuddling up with a mug of hot chocolate on a cold winter’s night.

“It’ll be a beautiful quilt.”

“I hope so. A part of me always dreads sewing commission pieces. Even with the design ideas and the fabric samples I show my clients, I don’t know if they’ll love the finished product. Has your friend left the store?”

For a moment, Jackie didn’t know who Shona was talking about. “Oh, you mean Aidan. He’s not my friend. I only met him the other day.”

Shona’s eyebrows rose. “Really? When you were talking, you sounded like old friends catching up.”

“He was being friendly, that’s all. I’ve left the boxes of knitting on the counter. Where would you like me to display them?”

A smile lit Shona’s face as she took the quilt out of the sewing machine. “I’ll photograph them for the store’s website first. Have I told you how much I love it when you bring in your baby clothes? You make each outfit look unique and incredibly sweet.”

Jackie was glad Shona was happy with the knitting. Sometimes, it was hard finding the time to add something different to each pattern, but she tried her best. “For these outfits, I’ve added crocheted flowers to the jackets and booties.”

Shona walked into the showroom and picked up the first box. When she pulled out the tiny pink jacket with white crocheted flowers along the bottom, she sighed. “This is adorable.”

Jackie grinned. “Thank you. I thought the little flowers were a nice touch.”

Nodding in agreement, Shona put the jacket back into the box. “They definitely are. It’s the little details that make all the difference. Show me the rest of the outfits.”

They spent the next half hour going through each box, taking photographs for the store’s website, and rearranging the shelving in the store to display the clothes to perfection.

When they were finished, Shona stood back and admired what they’d done. “I don’t know why we spend so much time displaying the baby clothes. As soon as I upload the photos to the website, people will buy everything you’ve brought in today.”

“At least you don’t have to worry about having extra stock to sell.”

“I’ll never have to worry about that with you. Do you have time for a cup of coffee?”

Jackie shook her head. “I promised Paris I’d come into work a little earlier. Andrea’s meeting us to finalize the flower arrangements and bouquets for her wedding.”

“That sounds exciting. How’s she feeling?”

“A little anxious, but very excited.”

Shona walked across to a table displaying pretty blue, pink, and purple crystal stones. “Take these with you. They’re for you, Paris, and Andrea. The amethyst is a wonderful crystal that promotes calmness, clarity, and relaxation. Tell Paris and Andrea that whenever they feel stressed, all they have to do is hold the crystal and take some slow, deep breaths.”

Jackie held them in her palm. “I’ll tell them. How’s Andrea and David’s wedding quilt coming along?”

“Even if I say so myself, it’s fabulous. Remember not to say anything to them. I want it to be a surprise.”

Jackie hugged Shona. “I won’t say anything. Do you want me to lock the door on my way out?”

“Don’t worry. At this time of the day, if someone wanders in, I’ll know them.”

After Jackie said goodbye, she checked her watch and walked to The Flower Cottage. Luckily, she didn't have far to go. The first four cottages on Anchor Lane had been converted into small businesses. Paris was renting the first building for The Flower Cottage, Andrea had opened The Starlight Café in the second cottage, and Shona had opened her store in the third.

Before she opened the door to The Flower Cottage, Jackie looked down the street at the fourth building. Unlike the other three businesses, the sign above the veranda didn't have any store logo or branding. It didn't have baskets of hanging flowers, and there were no tables or chairs for customers to enjoy a peaceful few minutes.

Her friends were trying to convince her that opening her own knitting store would be good for her and the community. There was nothing she'd like more, but she couldn't afford to take such a big risk. For now, the building was a blank canvas waiting for someone to make their own.

Someone who wouldn't be her.



WHEN JACKIE WALKED into The Flower Cottage, Paris was busy arranging a vase of flowers at the counter, and Andrea was flipping through a bridal magazine.

She left her bag beside the counter. "You haven't changed your mind about your bouquet, have you, Andrea?"

Her friend grinned. "Paris wouldn't speak to me if I did. I'm looking in Paris' magazines for inspiration for a big wedding decoration."

Paris picked up another flower. "David wants something spectacular behind the bridal table."

"Not only spectacular," Andrea added, "but glittery and bright. Where will we find something like that so close to our wedding?"

Jackie frowned. “I’m not sure, but I’m happy to help you look.”

“I’ve already gone through all Paris’ and my bridal magazines. I don’t understand why David’s so set on having something big behind where we’re sitting. Until two days ago, he was happy with everything we’d organized.”

David O’Dowd was the clinical director of BioTech Industries. When Andrea had shown them the spreadsheet he’d created for their wedding, she’d been impressed. He’d listed everything they’d need, with a timeline of when each item had to be booked, reconfirmed, and paid for. David had an organized, process driven mind. For him to add something at the last minute was a little out of character.

Jackie frowned. “Maybe he’s feeling as nervous as you are about the wedding.”

Andrea sighed. “You could be right. He’s so busy making sure BioTech’s new research facility meets all its targets, he doesn’t have much time for anything else. If I could find a picture of something similar to what he wants, it might make him feel better.”

Jackie thought about the wedding arch Daniella had made for Jan and Cliff’s wedding. Pulling out her phone, she showed Andrea the photos she’d taken. “What about something like this? You could make it even more dramatic by draping chiffon around the frame and adding some kind of lighting to make it even more sparkly.”

Andrea studied the screen. “It’s big enough, but I’m not sure it’s what David wants. To be honest, *I* don’t even know what he wants.”

“I’ll send you a copy of the photo. Show David and, if he likes the concept, we can design something so over the top that he’ll love it.”

“That sounds like a better plan than hunting through the Internet.”

Paris looked up from the arrangement she was making. “If he wants to be blown away by what we’re doing, we might

have some more pictures to show David.” She placed the vase of flowers on a small round table beside the front counter. Pink and red tinsel hearts were sprinkled over the center of the white tablecloth, and guest name cards, embossed with red roses, sat between the silver cutlery and red crystal glasses.

“What do you think about this for the reception? The tables will be bigger, but it gives you an idea of what they’ll look like.”

Andrea walked around the table. “It’s lovely. Are you sure you’ll be able to get all the roses we’ll need?”

“My supplier has assured me I won’t have any trouble,” Paris told her. “If something changes, another wholesaler said they’ll put some of their auction roses aside for me.”

Andrea breathed a sigh of relief. “You don’t know how happy that makes me. I’m just glad we’re getting married in The Fairy Forest. It doesn’t matter what the weather does, or how many last-minute emergencies we have, between you and Daniella in charge, everything will be okay.”

Before Andrea moved away from the table, Jackie took a few photos of the setting and the bride-to-be. “David will be happier when he sees these photos, too.”

Paris studied the project plan on her laptop. “That’s the table decorations sorted. Andrea’s happy with the bridal bouquets, and the flower arrangements for the church are signed off. The only thing we have to work on is David’s statement piece.”

Andrea emailed Jackie the photos. “I’ll call Daniella. Other people who’ve rented The Fairy Forest might’ve used something more extravagant than the arch at Cliff and Jan’s wedding. Her storeroom’s full of pieces from movie sets. There might be something in there David will like.”

Andrea crossed her fingers. “I hope so. Apart from what we’ve organized this morning, I have some other good news.” Her smile widened. “My wedding dress has arrived and Kathleen’s making the adjustments. By the end of the week, everything will be finished.”

Jackie grinned. “That’s wonderful. Before you know it, there’ll be nothing left to do.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.” Andrea checked her watch. “I should go. I have to check on Vanessa and make sure the café’s ready to open. Thanks again for the table decorations, Paris. They’ll look amazing.”

“I’m glad you like them. After you’ve spoken to David about what he wants, give Jackie and me a call. We’ll see what we can come up with.”

After Andrea left, Jackie placed her bag in a locker and pulled an apron over her head. “I hope we can create something David likes.”

Paris collected the unwanted leaves and stems off the counter and dropped them into the trash. “I’m sure we can. All we need to do is read his mind.”

Jackie thought about her conversation with Aidan. “I might have a better way of figuring out what he wants. I met a friend of David’s who also works with him. He might give us some ideas about what he likes, especially since they’re both involved in the new research facility.”

“It’s worth a try,” Paris said as she checked their orders for the day. “Are you ready to make a lot of people happy with some amazing flower arrangements?”

Jackie laughed. “I hope so. And while we’re making today’s orders, you can tell me about the wreaths Ben wants for the Christmas Shop.”

With Christmas only a couple of months away, the number of orders they had to make had suddenly exploded. Paris and Andrea’s dried flower wreaths were so popular they’d had to make them year-round to keep up with demand.

While Paris told her about the style of wreaths Ben wanted to sell in his store, Jackie checked what flowers she’d need for their first order.

Looking at the spreadsheet of arrangements she had to make, she wouldn’t be asking Aidan about David today. But, if

Andrea could figure out exactly what her fiancé wanted, it wouldn't matter.

CHAPTER 3



This morning, Aidan was running earlier than usual. Even though it was Saturday, he had an important conference call with some suppliers in New York City. As long as he returned to The Lakeside Inn within the next ninety minutes, he'd be fine.

As he jogged down Main Street, he waved to Cassie as she arrived at her jewelry store. Saturdays were one of the busiest retail days of the week. With the farmers market and craft stalls filling the Connect Church's parking lot to overflowing, people came from far and wide to enjoy this small, lakeside town.

Maybe a market atmosphere was what he needed to create interest in his two events. With his feet pounding against the sidewalk, he took out his cell phone and dictated a few ideas that could come in useful.

One day, he'd learn how to switch off his brain. But it seemed to always be busy, creating one idea after another to make BioTech's involvement in the community more valuable for everyone.

"Hi, Aidan."

He tripped on an uneven slab of concrete and stumbled.

"Are you all right?" Jackie asked with a worried frown. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm okay." He slid his cell phone into his pocket. "I should've looked at where I was going, but my mind was a million miles away."

“We all have moments like that. I’ve never been able to work out how to dictate into my phone.”

“That’s not a bad thing. At least you won’t trip over your feet.”

Jackie grinned. “That happens even when I’m fully aware of what I’m doing.”

With a smile, he glanced at her tracksuit pants. “Did you change your mind and decide to go for a run?”

Jackie laughed. “Nice try, but unfortunately not. I’m heading into The Starlight Café. Andrea and I have hot chocolate and muffins each Saturday before the café gets too busy. It’s our time to decompress and laugh about what’s been happening.”

Andrea knocked on the café’s window, then came outside to see them. “Hey, you two. Was it a twist of fate that brought you here at the same time or was it planned?”

Aidan smiled. “It was fate. I nearly bumped into Andrea when I was running past the café.”

“It’s just as well you saw each other in time. How’s your run so far, Aidan?”

“Better than I thought. I’ll keep moving and leave you to catch up.”

Andrea held the door wider. “Why don’t you have a hot chocolate with us before the breakfast crowd arrives?”

He glanced at Jackie. “I’d like to, but I don’t want Jackie to think I’m stalking her. We’ve seen each other nearly every day since I called into The Fairy Forest.”

Jackie smiled. “It’s easy to keep seeing the same people in a small town. You should join us. Andrea’s hot chocolate’s too good to miss.”

“If you’re sure it’s okay, I’d love to join you.”

Andrea beckoned them forward. “While you’re waiting for me to make our drinks, ask Jackie to show you Natalie’s paintings. They’re wonderful.”

On their way across the café, Jackie pointed out the paintings. “Andrea hosts mini exhibitions at the café. Usually, Natalie’s paintings are in galleries around the world. But, fortunately, she’s been working on some canvases between her commission pieces. We’re lucky she’ll let us have a sneak peek at her latest work.”

Aidan stood in front of a large canvas. The sparkling lake surrounded by tall, pine-covered mountains, could only be Flathead Lake. He stepped closer, focusing on the stones Natalie had captured at the bottom of the painting.

“This is incredible. The closer I get, the more realistic the painting becomes. I feel as if I could reach out and touch the lake.”

Jackie studied the painting. “It really is stunning. This series is part of her photo-realism collection. Natalie’s done a lot more experimental work since she moved back to Sapphire Bay.”

Andrea placed a plate of muffins on a table close to where they were standing. “It’s probably because she married a crime writer. I’m surprised she hasn’t added splashes of red to her canvases.”

Jackie laughed. “Her husband, Gabe, keeps telling her he’s creating a female detective who paints in her spare time. Natalie isn’t impressed.”

Aidan’s eyebrows rose. “Most people would jump at the chance of being a character in a book.”

“Natalie values her privacy.” Andrea pointed to the table where she’d left the plate. “Enjoy your muffins while Jackie tells you about Gabe and Natalie’s terrible ordeal. I’ll bring our mugs of hot chocolate across to the table soon.”

Aidan was intrigued. “I didn’t think anything terrible happened in Sapphire Bay.”

“You’d be surprised,” Jackie said. “When Natalie came back to Sapphire Bay, she met Gabe. Her mom had let him rent half of the house they owned. Unfortunately, one of Gabe’s superfans was recreating the murders in his books.

Somehow, he heard about Natalie and decided she should be his next target. I don't know much more about what happened, but it sounded terrifying."

Andrea placed two mugs of hot chocolate on the table. "It happened before I arrived, too. I don't know how anyone could get over something like that."

Neither did Aidan. "Has anything else happened in Sapphire Bay that I should know about?"

"You're probably safer not knowing," Andrea said in a lowered voice. "Sapphire Bay's home to more former military, police, and IT specialists than anywhere else I've lived. If you wanted to become a writer like Gabe, you'd never be short of ideas."

Jackie looked at the two mugs and frowned. "Where's your hot chocolate, Andrea?"

"I just got a call from a book group who meet here each Wednesday. They've decided to have another meeting and they'll be here soon."

Jackie frowned. "Do you need any help getting everything ready?"

"I'll be fine. I've already called one of my part-time staff. Enjoy your hot chocolate with Aidan."

Jackie's gaze followed her friend across the café. "I think *I'm* busy, but Andrea's days are worse. She works long hours to make the café a success."

Aidan looked through the front window at the women gathering on the sidewalk. "Whatever she's doing, it's working. Each time I come into the café, it's full of customers." He smiled at Jackie. "But the café isn't the only successful business in Sapphire Bay. What else have you been working on at The Flower Cottage?"

"Apart from our normal wedding and birthday arrangements, we've been making wreaths we supply to The Christmas Shop. Next week, all our part-time staff are working as many hours as they can to make the orders we've already

received. It will get even busier the closer we get to Christmas.”

Aidan frowned. “Isn’t it a little early to be buying Christmas wreaths?”

Jackie picked up her spoon and dipped it into the frothy milk on the top of her drink. “Not really, especially if you want to guarantee you’ll get the decorations you’ve set your heart on. We make two different types of wreaths. The dried flower ones last for years. We’re concentrating on those for the next few weeks. After that, we’ll work on the wreaths made from fresh flowers and foliage. It’s crazy how popular both types are.”

Aidan chose a muffin from the plate. “If they’re anything like the flowers I saw at The Fairy Forest, they must be fantastic.”

Jackie pulled out her phone. “We aim to please, especially when we’re making Christmas decorations. These are some pictures of the dried flower wreaths I made the other day. Scroll to the left after you’ve seen the first one.”

Aidan looked through the photos. Each wreath was full of festive character and charm. With bows, beads, and ribbons peeking from between the dried flowers, he could see why they were so popular.

Jackie leaned forward. “Ben has a great website that makes it super easy for people to place their orders. Do you like them?”

“They’re great. They’d make a perfect Christmas gift for my mom. How long would I have to wait if I ordered one today?”

Jackie smiled. “If you talked nicely to the florist and brought fresh muffins into The Flower Cottage, it could be made whenever you like.”

Aidan laughed. “I’ll look at The Christmas Shop’s website tonight and let you know which one I like. What type of muffins does everyone enjoy?”

“We aren’t picky. If you buy them from The Starlight Café, we like all of them.”

Seeing Jackie so happy made Aidan feel happier, too. Despite psychotic fans, mysterious letters, and an interesting mix of residents, Sapphire Bay might not be such a bad place to live, after all.



AS THE BOOK group came into the café, Jackie sipped her hot chocolate, savoring its warmth and sweetness. She smiled when she saw Mabel Terry and some friends from the church. Even before their meeting started, everyone was talking and enjoying each other’s company. Aidan must think he was living in a parallel universe when a book club generated this much excitement.

He followed her gaze. “I didn’t know the book club would be so popular.”

“That’s only one group. The church and The Welcome Center have other groups that meet weekly or monthly. Do you like reading?”

“I do, especially if it’s science fiction. But I haven’t read many books lately. I spend most of my time talking to people about the new BioTech research facility.”

“You must enjoy working with David.”

Aidan stirred his hot chocolate. “I’ll enjoy it even more when the prosthetic lab’s finished. Bringing everyone’s ideas to life is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity but, after the last few weeks, I’ve realized I like designing prosthetics more.”

Jackie nodded. “I can understand that. You have a lot of responsibility sitting on your shoulders.”

“I do, but it’s worth it when I see the progress we’re making. And, who knows, maybe one day we’ll create prosthetics that are even better than the real thing. Tell me about being a florist. If the flowers you made for The Fairy

Forest are anything to go by, you must have some very happy customers.”

“We try to create something that reflects who our clients are and what they want. It’s rewarding to see their reaction when their vision comes to life. Has Daniella said anything more about renting The Fairy Forest for your fundraising event?”

“Daniella’s sending me a quote on Tuesday, then we’ll meet on Wednesday to look at different options. From what I’ve seen, it’d be the perfect location.”

Jackie held her mug in her hands. “The Fairy Forest is a beautiful place, and I’m sure your event will be a huge success. If you’re looking for volunteers to help you, I’d love to put my name on a list.”

Aidan smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind. Once I have the venue booked, I’ll start planning the other details.”

“Daniella’s hosted a lot of events, not just weddings. She’ll have some good ideas for you to think about.”

“I hope so. Planning a fundraising event is a lot harder than working in our prosthetics lab.” He bit into his muffin and sighed. “This is good.”

Jackie laughed. “Andrea’s a superb cook and baker.”

“Unlike her fiancé,” Aidan replied with a smile. “I had dinner with David last night. When I told him I’d been to The Fairy Forest, he showed me some pictures of what they’re doing for their wedding. He said you’re one of Andrea’s bridesmaids.”

Jackie took another sip of her hot chocolate. “I am. Andrea was one of the first people I met when I moved to Sapphire Bay. We’ve become great friends. I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t met her.”

“It’s amazing the difference a good friend can make. It’s nice to see Andrea and David so happy.”

Jackie nodded and smiled at the thought of Andrea in her wedding gown, standing beside her future husband. “While

we're talking about Andrea and David's wedding, can you help me with something?"

"I'll try. What do you need?"

Jackie wiped her mouth on a paper napkin. Talking about the statement piece David wanted might look less professional if she had a chocolate mustache. "David wants something amazing behind the bridal table, but no one knows what he wants. I'm hoping you can give me an insight into what he likes and what he doesn't."

Aidan's eyebrows rose. "We don't spend a lot of time talking about his wedding reception."

"It doesn't have to be specifically about the reception, more about the colors and shapes of furniture and art that he prefers."

Now Aidan looked confused. "We don't talk about interior decorating, either."

"What about during the design phase of the new research facility? Was there anything he was particularly proud of? I'm desperate for any insight into what he thinks will make an incredible statement piece at his wedding."

Aidan ran his hand along his jaw.

Jackie's gaze followed his fingers. There was no early morning stubble, no shadow from yesterday's beard growth covering his jaw. He must have woken up early to shave before leaving for his run.

Aidan's eyebrows rose, and she bit her bottom lip.

"Sorry," she muttered. "Your...watch distracted me." Crossing her fingers, she hoped he hadn't noticed the note of desperation in her voice. It'd been a long time since she'd been attracted to anyone, and she wasn't altogether comfortable with the feeling. Or what it might mean.

Aidan looked at his watch and frowned.

A stillness settled around him like a heavy, dark cloak. Jackie didn't understand what was wrong. "Are you all right?"

The smile he sent her was so forced she knew something was terribly wrong. “My watch belonged to my brother. He died when he was twenty-two.”

“I’m sorry. It isn’t easy losing someone you love.”

“It took a long time to come to terms with what happened.”

Jackie pushed her hot chocolate to one side and waited silently for Aidan to decide how much he wanted to tell her.

He looked at the watch and placed his hand over the old-fashioned face. “I was sixteen when he died. He was my superhero. Before he had a car accident, we did everything together.”

“Is that how he died?” Jackie asked softly.

Aidan shook his head. “No, but it was the beginning of the end. James lost his leg in the accident and he never came to terms with what happened. Two years later, he took his own life.”

Jackie’s eyes widened. “Oh, Aidan. That must have been so hard.”

“Mom couldn’t talk about James without bursting into tears. Dad didn’t say anything about him, and that made it worse for everyone.”

“How were you after your brother died?”

Aidan sighed. “I missed him so much I could hardly breathe. It took a long time to learn how to live without him.”

When he lifted his gaze to Jackie’s, her eyes filled with tears. Even after all this time, she could see that the grief and trauma of what had happened was still there. “Is that why you design prosthetics?”

“I wanted to make artificial limbs that were so lifelike, no one would know the difference. Compared to what we offer people today, James’ prosthetic was archaic. If he’d had something that made him feel better about himself, he might not have become so depressed.”

“It must feel good knowing you’re making a huge difference in other people’s lives.”

“It does, especially when I’m designing prosthetics for children.” A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “We’ve even had requests for pink and purple sleeves that cover an entire prosthetic. Our design team had fun creating a colorful range of limbs for teenagers, too.”

Jackie smiled. “It must be a real talking point amongst their friends.”

Aidan took a deep breath. “I imagine it is.”

Andrea hurried across to their table. “Sorry to interrupt, but I just had a call from Paris. She wanted to remind you about the next order of dried flowers. Can you still pick them up this morning, Jackie?”

“I can. I’ll let her know I haven’t forgotten.”

“That’d be great. Can I get you anything else to eat or drink?”

Jackie and Aidan shook their heads.

Andrea smiled. “In that case, I’ll get back to the kitchen.”

Aidan looked over Jackie’s shoulder at the book group. “It looks as though everyone’s enjoying themselves. I didn’t realize a book group could be so exciting.”

Jackie shrugged. “I suppose it depends on the book you’ve been reading. Are you going to Andrea and David’s wedding?”

“I wouldn’t miss it. You’ll have to save a dance for me.”

She winced. “As long as you don’t ask me to waltz, we’ll be fine. I took some dance lessons once, but all I did was stand on my partner’s feet.”

“You’re in safe hands with me. I don’t know how to dance either.”

Jackie grinned. “After watching the rest of the wedding party, I was thinking everyone knows how to waltz and foxtrot.”

“Maybe they do in Sapphire Bay.”

Jackie’s grin widened. “You could be right. The people here are different from other places I’ve lived.”

“Have you lived in a lot of places?”

“More than I can remember,” she said evasively. If Aidan knew how much she’d moved with her mom, he’d wonder how she ever got an education or did anything other than survive.

“Have you ever wanted to do something else besides being a florist?”

A knot of apprehension settled in Jackie’s stomach. She worried her dream might sound trivial compared to what Aidan was doing. “I’ve thought about opening my own knitting store, a place where people can gather and share their love for the craft and enjoy each other’s company.”

Instead of being amused by what she wanted to do, Aidan nodded thoughtfully. “You’d be turning something you enjoy into a new career.”

“I’m not sure it’ll ever happen, but I’d like to think it could.”

Aidan smiled, his gaze warm and reassuring. “You have a talent for creating beautiful things, and that includes knitting. There’s no reason it couldn’t work.”

As they continued to talk, Jackie found herself lost in the conversation, enthralled by the way Aidan opened up to her. There was an undeniable connection between them. If it were anyone else, she might hope their newfound friendship could grow into something more.

But that wouldn’t happen. Aidan wasn’t staying in Sapphire Bay, and she wasn’t leaving.

CHAPTER 4



*B*y Monday afternoon, Jackie was still thinking about her conversation with Aidan. He was doing something he loved, something that was making a difference in his life and other people's. She enjoyed working with Paris, she really did. But being a florist wasn't something she'd dreamed about. Before she moved here, she hadn't even seen many floral arrangements.

For so long, she'd consoled herself with the fact she was earning enough money to have a comfortable life. In Sapphire Bay, she'd found the peace and security she'd always craved. Just thinking about risking everything she'd worked so hard for to open a knitting business made her feel sick.

But each time she walked past the empty cottage beside Shona's quilting store, she imagined what it might be like to do something amazing with her life. Unfortunately, amazing came at a cost, and she couldn't afford to do more than imagine what the store could become.

Paris brought a flower stand inside and turned the sign on the door to 'Closed'. "It's so cold outside. I can't believe how quickly the weather's changed."

Jackie straightened a display of gift cards. "Mr. Jessop's been telling everyone for the last few days to make the most of the weather. His arthritis always gets worse before a storm."

"Thank goodness for the greenhouses. Without them, he wouldn't be able to grow all the lovely vegetables for The

Welcome Center. Are you coming to the Christmas meeting tonight?"

Jackie took the tray of money out of the cash register. "I wouldn't miss it." Tonight, they were discussing the Christmas events that Sapphire Bay had become famous for. Mabel was giving everyone an update on the carol competition and Shelley wanted to go over the project plan for the Santa Parade and the Christmas markets. "Do you know if Andrea's going?"

Paris shook her head. "I spoke to her at lunchtime. She's been so busy with work and organizing her wedding that she's spending time with her boys."

"They deserve some time together. Do you know how the meeting with the caterer went?"

"They're able to do everything Andrea wants. I can't believe how lucky they are to have found a caterer so close to their wedding."

Jackie leaned against the counter. "I think Daniella might've had something to do with that. The catering company is the same one that works on events at The Fairy Forest. They have a deal with Daniella where they're happy to prioritize her clients over other people."

Paris smiled. "That makes sense. And, talking about deals, I saw Penny today."

"If what you're about to say has anything to do with the empty cottage beside The Cozy Quilt Shop, I don't want to hear it. You know I can't afford to open my own business."

Paris smiled. "I know I said I wouldn't mention it again, but you have to hear this. The county has agreed to subsidize the rent for twelve months. It'll be half what Penny originally told us."

Numbers bounced around in Jackie's head. Considering the cottage's size and location, the rent was always reasonable. But to halve it...that was incredible.

"I don't know, Paris. It's still a lot of money to invest, and I don't know if I'm ready to take that kind of risk." Jackie's voice was uncertain as she tried to sort through her thoughts.

Paris placed a reassuring hand on Jackie's arm. "I understand that it's scary, and I don't want you to leave The Flower Cottage. But I know how much you enjoy knitting. Opening your own store is what you've always wanted to do."

"I want to do a lot of things, but that doesn't mean I can do all of them."

"I can't tell you what to do, just like we can't tell Andrea what she should do with her wedding. Just ask yourself if you're truly happy with where you're at right now. If not, then maybe it's time to take a chance."

Paris was right. Jackie couldn't deny the longing she felt every time she walked past the empty cottage. The thought of turning it into a wonderful knitting shop filled her with excitement, especially after talking with Aidan.

"Okay, I'll think about it. It's just a big decision, and I don't want to make a mistake."

Paris's eyes sparkled with excitement. "That's all I can ask. If you'd like any advice about setting up a business, I'm here."

"That means a lot. Thank you." With a grateful smile, Jackie hugged her friend and then moved the cash drawer into the safe.

Maybe it was time to take a chance, follow her dreams, and see where the road took her.



AIDAN HURRIED up the steps of The Welcome Center. Pastor John had invited him to tonight's Santa's Secret Helpers meeting to discuss the two fundraisers he was organizing.

When he'd first heard the name of the group, he'd smiled. He'd imagined a roomful of people making wooden toys and delivering them to unsuspecting children on Christmas Eve. But there was nothing quaint or old-fashioned about this group of volunteers.

The gifts they gave the community were more than children's toys. Whether it was a wheelchair for a teenager who'd been born with cerebral palsy, a new washing machine for a single mom who'd arrived in Sapphire Bay with nothing, or a weekly box of groceries for parents who'd lost their jobs or fallen on hard times, Santa's Secret Helpers were always there, making sure everyone in the community was safe and cared for.

He opened the door to the meeting room and sighed. With a table full of sweet pastries and muffins, and the smell of freshly ground coffee filling the air, the room was warm and inviting—a lot like the people inside.

The first person he saw was Jackie. She was sitting next to Paris, a pair of knitting needles in her hands and a ball of yarn bobbing inside a tote bag as she finished each stitch.

Pastor John sat at the head of the table, his kind eyes scanning the faces of everyone as he talked about the Santa parade. Shelley, his wife, was giving each person a brightly colored folder. Mabel, Andrea, Paris, and Jackie listened attentively. The room buzzed with anticipation as they discussed their plans to spread joy during the festive season.

Pastor John looked up and smiled. "It looks as though our special guest is here." He beckoned Aidan forward. "Come and have a seat with us. In case you haven't noticed, we aren't all that strict on meeting protocols."

Jackie stopped knitting, and her eyes widened.

When she smiled, a warmth spread through his chest. "It's good to see you again," he said. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"I didn't think to mention it," she replied, placing her knitting needles aside. "But I'm glad you're here."

"So am I. It sounds as though you're doing a lot of wonderful things in the community."

Mabel leaned forward. "A lot of people need our help. We're trying to make a difference in whatever way we can."

Aidan nodded. “From what Pastor John told me this afternoon, you’re making a big impact.”

Paris pointed to a seat opposite her and Jackie. “And we’re always looking for volunteers. Even if it’s only for a few months.”

“We’d love to have you on board,” Pastor John added as Aidan took a seat. “But before you make any commitments, you’d better tell the group about the fundraisers you’re organizing. I have a feeling you’ll be too busy to do anything other than those events for the next few months.”

Aidan cleared his throat and looked at everyone’s expectant faces. “Pastor John invited me to your meeting. He thought it was a good opportunity to keep you up to date with BioTech’s plans for a fundraising event before Christmas and the official opening of an adventure camp for children who wear prosthetics.”

Mabel smiled. “David mentioned BioTech was interested in supporting the community. Whatever you can do would be gratefully received by everyone.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. We were thinking of having a pre-Christmas gala in Sapphire Bay. There’d be Christmas music, a catered meal, and an auction that will benefit the adventure camp and The Christmas Wish Program.”

Jackie frowned. “No one knows who organizes the Christmas wishes. Will you be able to keep our identities a secret?”

“That won’t be a problem. BioTech will give John the donation and tell everyone he’ll make sure the check gets to the program.”

Mabel placed her hand over her heart. “That’s a big relief. You don’t know how difficult it is keeping all our wonderful adventures to ourselves.”

Paris nodded. “You wouldn’t believe the number of people who come into The Flower Cottage after they see me delivering a gift. Everyone wants to know who’s in charge of The Christmas Wish Program.”

Aidan opened the folder he'd brought with him. "We won't tell anyone the names of the people who are in this group. If we need to talk about The Christmas Wish Program and Santa's Secret Helpers, I'll run everything past John first. I've made a spreadsheet of some ideas for each of the events. If you have other suggestions on how we can make them better for the community, I'd love to hear them."

Over the next ten minutes, he shared a more in-depth look at what BioTech proposed. Everyone seemed thrilled that he'd approached Daniella for a quote for using The Fairy Forest as the venue for the Christmas fundraiser.

Halfway through his discussion, he pulled out a pen and notebook and started taking notes. Everyone had ideas about what he could do and how both events could work.

As they continued to bounce ideas off each other, Aidan felt a sense of belonging wash over him. The people here tonight were dedicated to making the world a better place, one small act of kindness at a time. Being a part of this group would make anyone's life richer and more meaningful.

When their discussion ended, everyone invited him to stay for the rest of the meeting.

"You never know," Paris said half-jokingly, "You might want to be an honorary Santa's Secret Helper after you've organized the two events."

After their enthusiastic response, he didn't have the heart to tell them he wouldn't be here for much longer. Unlike the other times when he thought about going home, tonight it left him feeling hollow.

His newfound friendship with Jackie would be over before it began. Even if they wanted to spend more time together, long-distance relationships rarely worked. Especially when they both had busy lives.

Pastor John rubbed his hands together. "All right, let's get started on our next topic. With Christmas just around the corner, we have a lot to cover tonight."

As the meeting continued, Aidan listened carefully to the secret gifts the group planned to give to people in the community—food packages, toys for the children, a mobility scooter, and warm clothes for the people who arrived at The Welcome Center. The list was endless.

Through it all, he heard the soft click of Jackie’s knitting needles as she created another small outfit. And made another dream come true.



THE NEXT DAY, Jackie stood outside the fourth cottage on Anchor Lane, waiting for Penny to show her inside the building.

Wrapping her scarf tighter around her neck, she admired the wide front porch and the wood siding painted a cheerful shade of yellow. Snowflakes gently fell, dusting the ground and the eaves of the cottage with a delicate white blanket.

“Sorry I’m late,” Penny said as she approached the cottage, her breath visible in the crisp winter air. “Diana needed an extra pair of hands to help at the inn. Checking-in our new guests took longer than we thought.”

“That’s okay. I haven’t been here long.” Jackie had met Penny more than a year ago. Moving back to Sapphire Bay had been a big decision for Penny and her sisters—especially after the sudden death of their grandmother. But renovating their grandparents’ home into a boutique bed-and-breakfast business was the best thing they’d ever done.

After the inn was complete, Penny put her previous career as a property developer to good use. The cottages she was remodeling on Anchor Lane were like jewels in the small town. Not only were they creating job opportunities for the community, but tourists loved the old-fashioned charm they added to Sapphire Bay.

“Thanks for showing me the cottage, Penny.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s go inside before we get frostbite.” Penny opened the gate. “Be careful on the path. Our sub-contractors shoveled the snow off the cobblestones, but they could still be slippery.”

Jackie nodded and stepped more cautiously toward the front door. Her breath caught as Penny took a key out of her pocket.

“You’ll have to use your imagination,” Penny warned as she opened the door. “The cottage is totally bare of any furniture and decoration.”

Jackie sighed when she saw the cozy interior with wooden floors, exposed beams, and large windows that let in an abundance of natural light.

As soon as she stepped into the large room on the right-hand side, she could see the space filled with skeins of colorful yarn, knitting needles, and customers happily browsing her wares.

Penny picked up the remote control for the air conditioner and turned it on. “We kept the fireplace for ambience, but it’s the air conditioner that’ll make the cottage nice and warm in the cooler months. The cottage is almost a replica of Paris, Andrea, and Shona’s stores. They used this side of the cottages for their main retail space, but you could organize it however you like.”

Jackie ran her hand along the original window frame of the hundred-year-old cottage. “If I opened my knitting and yarn store in this cottage, I’d do the same. In the summer, sunlight will pour through the windows on this side of the building.”

“It’s my favorite side of the cottage, too.” Penny pointed to the back of the room. “Come and see the kitchen.”

As she followed Penny, Jackie looked up at the pressed tin ceiling. Unlike the other three cottages, the pretty, white-painted tiles weren’t confined to the entryway. They were through this entire space, and their heavily embossed design made the cottage even more irresistible.

Penny walked into the kitchen and smiled. “We couldn’t salvage anything from the kitchen. So, everything you see is brand new.”

Jackie’s heart raced with anticipation when she saw the white cabinets and stainless-steel counter. “There’s more than enough room for what I’ll need. Even if I had special events in the store, I could still prepare food and drinks for everyone.”

Penny nodded. “That was our goal. Do you have any questions so far?”

Jackie had so many she didn’t know where to begin. “If everything works out, when would you want me to sign the lease?”

“I don’t have anyone else interested in the cottage, so there’s no rush. But the sooner you know what you’re doing, the better it’ll be for everyone.”

Jackie bit her bottom lip. “If someone else asks about the cottage, would you give me the first option to lease it?”

“Of course, I will,” Penny said. “Did Paris tell you about the rent reduction?”

Jackie nodded. “That’s really generous of you.”

“I know what it’s like to start a small business. There can be lots of expenses you don’t expect when you’re starting out.”

Penny showed Jackie the bathroom, the storage area, and the retail space on the left-hand side of the building. While they were moving around the cottage, Jackie pulled out her cell phone and found the notes she’d made last night. Over the next few minutes, she asked Penny a few questions. There were probably a lot of things she hadn’t considered, but she’d never opened a business before.

Apart from having an extra window, the left-hand side of the cottage was a replica of The Cozy Quilt Shop. Shona had created her retail counter and work area on this side of the building, and Jackie thought she could do the same.

Penny pointed to the walls. “If you’d like something other than white walls, you’re more than welcome to change the color.”

“I don’t mind the color of the walls,” Jackie replied. “It makes the rooms seem larger than they are. I really like the cottage.”

“Enough to open a business here?” Penny asked.

“I’d love to, but I still need to work out how much it will cost for the furniture and everything else I’ll need.”

“I understand, but don’t take too long to decide what you’ll do. This is the last cottage on Anchor Lane that’ll become a retail store. Once it’s gone, I’m not sure when another building will become available for what you’d like to do.”

Jackie knew how difficult it was to find any type of building to rent in Sapphire Bay. Even finding somewhere to live had been a long, drawn-out process. “I should be able to let you know what I’m doing by the end of next week.”

“That sounds great. If you decide you’d like to lease the cottage, we’ll work out the details and get you set up in no time.”

Jackie nodded. “Thanks for showing me the cottage. It was good to see what it looks like instead of imagining what’s inside based on the other cottages.”

“That’s more than okay. I’ll email you a copy of the building plans. It might help you work out what furniture you’ll need.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Jackie’s thoughts were already racing with ideas for her store. All she had to do was find a few thousand dollars to make those ideas a reality, and earn enough money to cover her business and personal expenses.

When she thought about it like that, opening a knitting store sounded totally achievable. It wasn’t until she factored in the wages she wouldn’t be getting from The Flower Cottage that she panicked.

Was she really doing the right thing by risking everything she'd saved to open a knitting store? After she'd finally built a life that wasn't filled with stress, she was doing something crazy that could take her straight back to the reason she'd come to Sapphire Bay.

But there was a voice inside of her, telling her this could be the beginning of something truly wonderful. All she had to do was believe in herself.

And that was even harder than finding the money to open the store.

CHAPTER 5



Jackie knocked on Paris' front door. With a little over a week until Andrea's wedding, they were about to see their friend's wedding gown for the first time.

Paris opened the door and smiled. "Come in before you catch a cold. Richard and Jack have gone out for a couple of hours, so we've got the house to ourselves."

As soon as she walked into the living room, Jackie felt her tense muscles relax. Today had been a roller coaster of emotions. She'd wavered between hopeful optimism and sheer terror whenever she thought about opening a knitting store.

Paris held out her hand for Jackie's coat. "Make yourself at home. Andrea's changing into her wedding gown. She shouldn't be too long."

"Have you seen her dress?"

"No, but I can't wait. Would you like a cup of coffee or a mug of hot chocolate?"

Jackie sighed. "Hot chocolate would be wonderful. I've been working on a business case for my knitting store and my brain's ready to explode."

Paris took a moment to absorb what she'd said. "Oh, my goodness. Have you really decided to open a store?"

"If I can apply for some funding to help with my start-up costs, I will."

"That's amazing! Congratulations."

“I’m trying not to get too excited,” Jackie said ruefully. “I’ve got a long way to go before I can sign the lease.”

“Are you still looking at the cottage on Anchor Lane?” Paris asked.

“That’s the only store I’m interested in. It’s so perfect, it’s scary.”

“What’s scary?” Andrea asked from the doorway.

Jackie and Paris turned around.

Andrea was wearing the most stunning creation Jackie had ever seen. The long, satin gown shimmered as she walked into the room. A layer of delicate lace covered in sparkly beads swirled across the fabric, giving it the romantic feel Andrea had wanted.

“You’re absolutely beautiful,” Paris said softly.

Jackie couldn’t believe Andrea had found such an amazing dress. “You look gorgeous. The dress is lovely.”

A soft blush made Andrea’s eyes gleam. “It wouldn’t have looked this good without Kathleen. She had to reshape the entire bodice and take three inches off the length of the skirt.”

Paris hugged Andrea. “You wouldn’t know it hadn’t been made for you.”

Over the last few weeks, the hunt for the perfect wedding gown had taken so many wrong turns that none of them had expected to find one. When they’d seen the photo that Tess, one of the founding members of The Bridesmaids’ Club, had sent Andrea, everyone was excited. Apart from being two sizes too big, the dress was everything Andrea was looking for.

“Can you believe it’s finally happening?” Jackie asked Andrea.

“I never thought I’d fall in love again, let alone get married,” Andrea said with tears in her eyes. “But when I met David, I knew he was special.”

“Are Charlie and Andy excited about the wedding?”

Andrea laughed. “They are now. I took them to The Fairy Forest today and Daniella showed them photos of the chocolate fountain in action. If they go missing, I know where they’ll be.”

Paris smiled. “They won’t be alone. Jack had the same idea as your boys.”

“I guess chocolate has that effect on most people.” Andrea frowned at Jackie. “You still haven’t told me what’s scary.”

After taking a deep breath, Jackie said, “I’ve decided to open a yarn and knitting store.”

“That’s fantastic! I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist the cottage beside Shona’s. It’s adorable.”

“Even though I don’t know what I’m doing, a lot of people have offered to help me. And if all my planning doesn’t work out, at least I’ll have a better understanding of what it takes to start a business.”

“Think positive thoughts,” Andrea told her. “There are so many different ways of achieving your dreams. All you have to do is stay open to the opportunities that come your way.”

“I’ll do my best, but we’re not here to talk about what I’m doing. I want to take another look at our beautiful bride.”

Andrea glowed with excitement. “You haven’t seen the best part, yet.” Picking up the train of her dress, she hurried to a green clothes bag that was hanging from the curtain rail. Carefully, she pulled down the zipper. “I still have to de-wrinkle the veil, but at least it’s here.”

Jackie helped her lift it out of the bag. “Did you get this from The Bridesmaid’s Club, too?”

Andrea nodded. “It isn’t the same veil that came with the dress, but Tess thought it’d look lovely.”

As soon as they unwound the yards of tulle, Paris sighed. “It’s so delicate.”

“And I love the glittery crystals,” Jackie added. “They match the beads on the dress.”

Andrea held the veil out to Jackie. “Can you attach it to the back of my head?”

As she lifted the veil over Andrea’s dress and slid the pretty pearl comb into her hair, tears prickled the back of Jackie’s eyes. After a harrowing first marriage and raising her two boys on her own, Andrea deserved an amazing life.

She’d found that and so much more with David.

Jackie looked across at Paris and smiled when she saw her dabbing her eyes. “Is the veil in the right position?”

“It’s perfect,” Paris replied, her voice thick with emotion. “David will be speechless.”

Jackie took a few steps back and sighed. “Paris is right. You look absolutely beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Andrea said, her cheeks flushed with happiness. “I couldn’t have done any of this without your help.”

“That’s what friends are for,” Paris told her as she studied the clip that held the veil in place. “Would you like me to sew some rosebuds onto the top of the comb? They’d look lovely with the tiny pearls that are already there.”

Andrea nodded. “If you have the time to do it, that’d be wonderful.”

“It won’t take long,” Paris said. “I could do it on Saturday morning before you get dressed. When are your parents arriving?”

Andrea smiled. “Mom and Dad fly into Montana on Wednesday. I’m taking the afternoons off work so I can spend some time with them and the boys.”

“Thank goodness you were able to use The Fairy Forest’s caterer,” Paris said. “Otherwise, you’d be juggling the baking for the café with what you’re having at the wedding reception.”

Jackie sighed. “I wouldn’t mind if all we ate were Andrea’s chocolate chip muffins. They’re divine.”

Andrea grinned. “It’s funny you should say that. Have a look in the kitchen while I get changed.”

“Do you need help with your dress?” Paris asked.

Andrea unhooked the veil and handed it to her friend. “I’ll be okay. If you could put this away, that’d be great. I’m glad I’m not the only person making last-minute wedding decisions.”

“What do you mean?”

Andrea smiled at Jackie. “David said you’re bringing Aidan to the wedding as your partner. Good for you.”

Heat rushed to her face. “We aren’t going together, but he did ask me to save a dance for him.”

Paris’ eyebrows rose. “As long as he wears safety boots, he’ll be fine.”

Jackie laughed. “I don’t have to worry about stepping on his toes. He doesn’t know how to waltz, either.”

Andrea held the train of her dress in her hands. “There’s still a week to go. You might be surprised by what the two of you can learn in that time. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

After Andrea left, Jackie sighed. “It’s not what Andrea thinks.”

“Of course, it isn’t,” Paris said. “She’s only teasing you. But there is something sitting on my kitchen counter you’ll want to see.”

“Chocolate chip muffins?”

Paris nodded. “And they’re enormous. It’s just as well we aren’t worried about a few extra calories.”

“I’ll second that,” Jackie said happily as she followed Paris into the kitchen.

By the time Andrea returned, Paris had made everyone a hot drink to go with the delicious muffins.

As they sat in the kitchen, surrounded by love and friendship, Jackie felt a sense of belonging that she’d only

dreamed about. Knowing she'd be there for her friend on her special day, working alongside Paris and the rest of the wedding guests, she couldn't help but feel grateful for the life she'd found in Sapphire Bay.



THE SCENT of freshly cut flowers filled the air as Aidan walked inside The Flower Cottage.

Jackie was standing behind the front counter, carefully arranging a bouquet of roses and daisies for a customer.

He watched from the back of the store as she smiled brightly, her words drawing a grin out of the woman she was speaking to.

Her auburn hair was pulled back in a loose bun, tendrils framing her oval face. She was in her element surrounded by the flowers Paris had bought at the market and it showed.

When the lady left with the colorful bouquet, he stepped closer to the counter.

“Hi, Jackie. It looks as though you made your last customer very happy.”

“That was Betty. She owns the best ice cream store in Sapphire Bay. Her mom’s ninety today and she wanted to buy her a pretty bouquet. What brings you into town at this time of the day?”

He grinned. “I wanted to tell you I’ve just signed a contract with Daniella. BioTech’s having the Christmas gala at The Fairy Forest.”

“That’s wonderful! I knew it’d be the perfect venue for what you wanted.”

“Hopefully, the charitable trust BioTech’s starting will make a lot of children’s dreams come true.”

“I’m sure it will, especially if you’re involved. Speaking of dreams coming true...” she began hesitantly, her fingers

fidgiting with the edge of her apron. “I’ve decided to open a knitting store in the cottage beside Shona’s.”

“Congratulations. What made you decide it’s what you want to do?”

Jackie picked up a pair of heavy-duty scissors and put them in a drawer. “My friends convinced me I need to believe in myself more. And what you said made sense. I already have plenty of customers who love my baby clothes and there are a lot of knitting groups around Flathead Lake. At the moment, there’s nowhere to go if you want to buy wool or any other supplies. What’s even better is that a lot of people want somewhere to sell their knitting. My store could help them, too.”

“You’d have a niche market.”

Jackie nodded. “That’s what I’m hoping, but it still hinges on making my finances work. I know it’ll be difficult for the first year or so, but I still want to have a life and be able to go out for the occasional meal.”

He knew how much opening the store meant to her. After learning a little more about her life, he also guessed that she valued the stability she’d found in Sapphire Bay. Starting a business was a daunting process for anyone, especially if they were taking a great leap into the unknown.

“Have you finished the business case you told me about?”

“Almost,” Jackie replied. “It just needs a few finishing touches and then it’s ready to go to the bank.”

He studied her for a moment, his mind racing. “Before you submit your application, I might have a solution that helps your money issues,” he said carefully, not wanting to overstep any boundaries.

“Really?” She looked up, curiosity and hope mingling in her eyes. “What is it?”

The doorbell jingled as another customer entered the store.

Aidan stepped to the side of the counter. He’d already taken up a lot of Jackie’s time and he didn’t want to interrupt

what she was doing. “Are you busy after work? We could talk about my idea at The Lakeside Inn at five o’clock. I think it’ll help with your bank application.”

“If it could, that’d be great.”

“And bring your business case,” Aidan added before leaving. “I’m happy to look at it if you think I could make a difference to what you already have.”

“I will. Thanks.”

As Aidan left the store, he glanced at the fourth cottage sitting at the end of the row of small businesses. With a little luck and a lot of planning, Jackie could open her store before Christmas.

All he had to do was convince her that helping him could be the answer to all her prayers.



JACKIE TOOK a deep breath as she approached The Lakeside Inn. The large, two-story building was built by Penny Terry’s grandparents as their retirement home. Last year, after the death of their grandmother, Penny and her sisters had transformed it into a boutique bed-and-breakfast business.

With a limited supply of accommodation options around Sapphire Bay, the opening of The Lakeside Inn had caused quite a stir, but it wasn’t the building that had attracted busloads of people to town.

During their remodeling project, one of the Terry sisters had found a letter written by Abraham Lincoln to his son. The contents of the letter had stunned the country and sent ripples of excitement as far as Washington, D.C.

Everyone had enjoyed the extra people visiting Sapphire Bay but, since the first story hit the headlines, everything was slowly returning to normal.

In a lot of ways, that suited most businesses better than being run off their feet and not being able to restock their

shelves. The laid-back lifestyle that most of the community remembered had slowly returned, along with the usual families, fishing enthusiasts, hikers, and artists coming here to unwind.

The red wooden door welcoming visitors to the inn opened, and Aidan stepped onto the veranda. “Hi, Jackie. I’m glad you could make it.”

His tall frame was bundled up in a dark coat, but she could still make out Aidan’s short-cropped dark hair and piercing blue eyes. From the first time they’d met, she’d been attracted to him. After spending most of her life around people who had no sense of purpose or plans for the future, she was drawn to his confidence and determination.

A lot of good that would do her. She had a five-year plan she was halfway through, and none of her options included falling for a man who had no intention of staying in Sapphire Bay.

“Hi, Aidan.” Jackie greeted him with a warm smile. “It’s been a while since I’ve been here. The inn looks gorgeous.”

“David picked a great place for me to stay.” He held open the door and gestured for her to come inside. “Diana said we could use the small living area at the end of the hallway for our meeting.”

She followed him into the room. The tall ceilings and ornate fire surround made her think of the cottages on Anchor Lane. Although this home was a lot newer and bigger than the older cottages, it still had the same cozy feeling of a building that had enjoyed being lived in by people who cared about it.

Aidan took off his coat. “I hope I didn’t sound too mysterious when I asked you to come here.”

“It did make me wonder what ideas you’d had.” The truth was more extreme than that. Jackie hadn’t stopped thinking about what he’d said all afternoon. After he hung their coats on a stand, she sat beside him and sank into the big, overstuffed cushions.

Aidan cleared his throat. “I spoke to David last week. We have a few issues we’re working through at the research facility. Because of that, I don’t have enough time to deal with contractors and organize the Christmas gala for BioTech.” He paused, studying Jackie for a moment before continuing. “I’d like to ask you if you’re interested in organizing the Christmas gala for us. It’ll allow me to focus on making sure the labs are functioning properly for when our staff arrives.”

Jackie’s eyes widened. “I haven’t organized any corporate functions before.”

“We don’t want it to feel like a corporate function. Even though quite a few people will be coming from New York City, the gala should be something the community will enjoy being part of. Daniella will decorate The Fairy Forest, so that’s one less thing you’ll need to do. She’ll report to you, and you’ll have the final say on what the event looks like. We’d meet regularly to make sure everything’s on track and to fix any issues.”

“I don’t know, Aidan. If the bank lends me the money I need, I’ll be busy getting everything ready for the opening of my own business. What about asking Penny or one of her sisters? They have much more project management experience than I have.”

Aidan handed her a large brown envelope.

She frowned when she looked at it. “What’s this?”

“A contract for organizing the gala.”

“You’ve been thinking about this for a while?”

“For long enough.” Aidan sat forward. “I realize it’s not the best timing as far as your workload goes, but I couldn’t think of anyone I’d trust more than you.”

Jackie hesitated. It was a huge commitment on top of everything else she was doing. “Would you really trust me with something so important?”

“Absolutely,” Aidan replied without a moment’s hesitation. “All the details are in the contract, including payment.”

She opened the envelope. The contract seemed fairly straightforward. There was a list of objectives and bullet points that spelled out exactly what BioTech expected of her and the event.

When she reached the last page, her heart pounded at the sight of the large sum of money attached to the job. It was more than enough to make it easier to get a loan from the bank and inch closer to her dream of opening a knitting and yarn store.

“This is too much money,” she told Aidan. “You could employ a professional event planner for that amount.”

“I don’t want a professional event planning team. I want you.”

It was just as well Jackie wasn’t a die-hard romantic. Otherwise, she’d have had heart palpitations when she saw the sincerity in Aidan’s eyes.

It was a sad fact of life that no one had ever told her they wanted her, except for now, when she didn’t have the time to be wanted.

“Even if I had enough experience to organize the gala, it doesn’t mean you wouldn’t be overpaying me. This is more than I’d earn in four months working for Paris.”

Aidan didn’t seem surprised by what she’d said. “It’s money well spent. I only have about seven weeks to get everything ready. I need someone like you. Most of the people living in Sapphire Bay know who you are, and you enjoy helping others. It’s much better having me focused on the lab and not what canapés we’ll serve at the gala.”

Jackie placed the contract on the coffee table. “I’m not a canapés type of woman. My idea of an expensive night out is eating at the bar and grill in town.”

Aidan leaned forward, his gaze never leaving hers. “I promise you won’t be alone in this. We’ll work together. If you have an unexpected problem, you can call me whenever you like. Next year, I’ll be able to organize the opening of the adventure camp. But, for now, I need your help.”

Jackie took a deep breath, letting his words sink in. The opportunity to earn a lot of money in a short amount of time was really appealing. But could she work at the flower shop, organize the thousand and one things she'd need to do to open the knitting store, *and* give BioTech the Christmas gala they wanted?

“If something happens and I can't do everything on my own, can I ask someone to help me?”

Aidan nodded. “As long as we discuss it first, I'd be happy for that to happen.”

Jackie bit her bottom lip. If she turned down this opportunity, she'd never make the amount of money Aidan was offering her in the flower shop or anywhere else. Her old fears of letting people down still lingered, but so did hope.

“All right,” she finally said, meeting Aidan's intense gaze with a renewed sense of purpose. “I'll do it. I'll organize a Christmas gala no one will forget and make the charitable trust very happy.”

Aidan grinned. “That's fantastic. Did you want me to look at the business case for your knitting store now?”

Jackie took a folder out of her bag. “I won't need such a large loan if I'm organizing the gala, but if you could look through everything, I'd appreciate it.”

Aidan took the folder from her and quickly scanned the first few pages. As he turned to another page, she thought about all the help everyone in Sapphire Bay had given her. And now, a man she'd met only a short time ago, was willing to give her some valuable advice.

For the first time in years, everything seemed to be falling into place. But, a little voice whispered, it could be the beginning of a perfect storm. Just when she thought everything was going smoothly, something always happened to ruin it. But this time it would be different. She had too much at stake, including the happiness of the children who'd benefit from the prosthetics Aidan and his team created.

CHAPTER 6



The following day, Aidan pulled over to the side of the road and checked his cell phone. Jackie had sent him a text with her address and, if he was correct, he was parked outside her home.

Her house looked remarkably like the cottages on Anchor Lane, except it wasn't as old. With a wide front porch, a wooden swing, and containers waiting for next season's flowers, it'd make the perfect spot to wind down after a day at work.

Opening his door, he grabbed his laptop and a folder off the back seat of the truck he'd rented. Before he left work, he'd checked the project plan for the Christmas gala to make sure it was up to date. The more information he gave Jackie today, the easier it'd be to organize.

With a light dusting of snow everywhere, it was hard to imagine what her home would look like in the summer but, knowing Jackie's love of flowers, the garden would be as colorful as the store where she worked.

He made his way to her front door and rung the bell. He didn't have to wait long for her to answer it.

"Hi, Aidan. Come on in."

Her warm smile made him feel better about asking her to help with the Christmas gala. He'd known she was busy, but of all the people he'd met in Sapphire Bay, he couldn't think of anyone who would do a better job or appreciate the extra money.

Stepping inside, he followed her into her living room. “I hope it’s okay coming here this afternoon.”

“Of course, it is. The sooner you show me what you’ve already organized, the faster I’ll be able to get everything else in place.”

Her living room was warm and inviting. Painted in a soft pastel yellow, with comfortable, well-worn furniture spaced around an open fire, it was the kind of room you could spend a lot of time in.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Jackie asked, gesturing toward the kitchen.

Aidan nodded. “A coffee would be great.”

“Make yourself at home. I won’t be long.”

He took a seat on the couch. As she disappeared into the kitchen, he looked around the room. Two baskets of knitting were sitting on top of a cabinet, and more skeins of wool were beside them. The shelves were filled with books, and photos adorned the walls. He spotted a picture of her at the beach, laughing with a group of people. She looked carefree and happy, and so much of everything that was missing in his life.

When Jackie reappeared with two mugs of coffee, he pointed to the photo. “It looks like you were having fun.”

“We had an amazing time,” Jackie said as she handed him a mug. “I never had a lot of school friends, but Sasha was special. She invited me to St. Augustine last summer to stay with her family. That photo was taken on my last day there.”

“Did you go to school in Florida?”

Jackie’s smile slipped. “Only for a year. Mom and I moved around a lot.”

“That’s the complete opposite of me. My parents have lived in the same house for over thirty-five years. I don’t think they’ll ever leave their house or Denver.”

“It must be nice to have that kind of stability. Sapphire Bay is the closest I’ve come to feeling as though I belong

somewhere.” She sent him a forced smile. “I’m ready to look at the project plan whenever you are.”

Aidan frowned. The happy person who’d greeted him at the door had retreated into someone with sad eyes. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Jackie hesitated, as if carefully weighing what she’d say next. “You didn’t upset me, not in the way you mean. I had a complicated childhood. Mom was sixteen when I was born. Her parents were horrified she was pregnant and told her to leave home. She had no savings, no job and, within a few months, no boyfriend. Having somewhere to call home has always been important to me.”

“That makes sense. How did your mom cope with having a baby?” Aidan asked softly.

“She stayed with friends for a few months after I was born and they helped. After that, she said it became harder to find somewhere to live. For a while, we lived in different shelters, but Mom wasn’t happy in them. After that, we mostly lived in trailer parks. Sometimes, when it was really tough, we slept in our car.”

Aidan placed his mug of coffee on the table. After that kind of childhood, it was a miracle she’d achieved so much with her life. “I’m sorry it was so hard for you and your mom.”

Jackie shrugged, as if it didn’t matter what her life had been like. “It was okay. Mom found jobs where she could. When I was eleven, we moved into our first apartment. Mrs. Green lived next door. I used to stay with her when Mom was working.”

Aidan tried to imagine a younger version of Jackie learning how to live in a world that must have seemed to have abandoned her. “Is that the lady who taught you how to knit?”

A smile returned to her eyes. “It was. Mrs. Green’s son had moved, and she didn’t see him very often. She used to call me her adopted granddaughter and bake me cookies and help me with my homework. When we had to leave our apartment, it

was hard. Mrs. Green wanted me to stay with her, but Mom didn't. I've never forgotten her or her kindness."

"Have you seen her since then?"

"A couple of times. She lives in a retirement village in Florida, which was another reason I was happy to meet my friend in St. Augustine. Mrs. Green doesn't like using the Internet, so I write her letters and send her photos of what I'm doing."

Aidan studied Jackie's face. The stubborn tilt to her jaw that told him she wouldn't have chosen the life she'd had, but she was proud of who she was. "Mrs. Green must be impressed with what you've achieved."

"She is, and she'll be even happier when she hears about the Christmas gala we're organizing." Her gaze dropped to the folder he'd brought with him.

He held back a smile. She was finished talking about her past and it was time to get back to business. "Thanks for telling me about your life."

Jackie's eyes widened. His comment had surprised her. "I wasn't going to tell you, but it seemed important now that I'm helping with the gala. If I'd needed a prosthetic, Mom couldn't have afforded it. I'd like to think that, in some small way, I could be helping someone else who's in the same situation I was in."

The connection he felt with Jackie tightened. They had more in common than he thought, more reasons to be grateful for who they were and what they could do. He handed her the folder, hoping she realized how much of a difference she'd make.

"We're both emotionally involved in what the trust's doing."

"Which is why we need to do a great job," she said softly.

Aidan watched her go through the project notes he'd made. He'd spoken to a lot of people in town, found businesses who were happy to donate goods and services to the auction, but there was still a long way to go.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“You’ve been busy. Can you show me the spreadsheet you mentioned?”

He opened his laptop and found the document. Jackie leaned closer to him, her arm brushing his as he pointed to the things he thought were the most important.

“The timeline’s critical,” he told her. “The people who are coming to Sapphire Bay from New York City have other pre-Christmas commitments that we’re working around. If we don’t have the gala ready for our December 6 deadline, we’ll miss a lot of potential funding.”

Jackie nodded. “That’s good to know. Can you email me a copy of the spreadsheet? I’ll go through everything tonight and make some notes.”

“If there’s anything you don’t understand, call me. I’m happy to help as much as I can.”

Jackie pulled out a basket from under the coffee table. Hidden beside some knitting was a pen and a notepad. She scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to him. “This is my email address. Email me and I’ll send you a reply to let you know your message arrived safely. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Nothing that stands out. If organizing the gala becomes too much, let me know.”

“I should be okay. Even if the bank lets me know if I have the funding, I should be fine.”

“If you need a hand with anything to do with your business, I’m happy to help, too.”

Jackie laughed. “You might regret that you offered. Setting up the store will take a lot of time. Your muscles might come in handy, though.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time I’m at the gym. What are you doing for dinner?” The spontaneous question seemed to surprise Jackie as much as himself. He hadn’t intended to ask her out to dinner, and he didn’t know how she’d react.

“I was going to make soup and toast,” Jackie told him. “Then catch up on some knitting. You’re welcome to join me.”

“How about I take you to the pizza place in town? To celebrate what you’re doing for the gala.”

That made her look happier about his suggestion. “I suppose I could, but I can’t stay too long.”

It was probably the least excited anyone had been about going out with him, but he’d take it. Before she changed her mind, he closed his laptop and picked up his jacket. “If we leave now, we’ll beat the rest of the dinner crowd.”

Jackie collected the folder. “I’ll be back soon. I’ll just get my coat.” And with a shy smile, she left the room.

He didn’t know what the future held, but if he could discover more about Jackie over a pepperoni pizza, he wouldn’t complain.



JACKIE WALKED into The Fairy Forest and grinned at the group of seven- and eight-year-olds leaving one of the special event rooms. Dressed in pretty, rainbow-colored tutus and glittering wings, they were the cutest fairies she’d seen in a long time.

Daniella greeted her with a beaming smile. “I miss not having you here. The children loved it when you read them stories.”

When Jackie first moved to Sapphire Bay, she’d met Daniella at The Welcome Center. At that stage, The Fairy Forest hadn’t been open for long and Daniella was desperate for someone to help her.

Jackie hadn’t thought it could be too hard reading to groups of children, so she’d volunteered to give Daniella a hand. Six months later, and a huge number of parties and holiday programs later, she’d earned a pair of golden wings in recognition of all her hard work.

“Some days, I miss being here, too. Especially when I see everyone’s smiling faces. You make a lot of people’s dreams come true.”

Daniella linked her arm through Jackie’s and walked toward the main events room. “That’s why I started this business, and it’s worked. How are the plans for your knitting store coming along?”

Jackie sighed. “I’ve submitted my application for a business loan. I should know in the next few days if it’s successful.”

“They’d be crazy not to lend you the money. If the loan officer could see the potential in a woman dressing as a fairy and serving honey nectar juice with magical meadow cupcakes, they’ll see the benefit of approving your application.”

Jackie laughed. “You had an unfair advantage. The loan officer was looking for a venue for her daughter’s sixteenth birthday and you guaranteed she could have the weekend she wanted.”

“That’s very true,” Daniella said. “But how do you know the loan officer isn’t a knitting fanatic? She could be dying to get her hands on the latest patterns and knitting needles.”

Jackie tightened her grip on Daniella’s arm. “I’m glad I came to see you today. I needed someone to make me smile.”

“Is it the stress of wanting to open your store or the amount of work you have to do that’s the problem?”

“A little of both,” Jackie admitted.

Daniella stopped in front of the ancient oak door and smiled. “It’s your lucky day, then. Did you know this room is full of special magic? It makes you feel better as soon as you step through the door.”

Jackie pretended to be in awe of Daniella’s magical room. “Are you sure?”

“I’m one thousand percent sure,” Daniella whispered. “Come with me and see for yourself.”

Daniella tiptoed through the door and stopped in front of a red, sparkly toadstool. “Hold my hand and close your eyes. I’m going to tell you the secret fairy blessing. As soon as you hear it, all your worries will disappear.”

Jackie smiled. “I didn’t know there was a fairy blessing.”

“That’s because it’s a secret and you haven’t needed it before. Are you ready?”

With her eyes closed, Jackie nodded. “But if it involves pirates with sharp swords, you might have the wrong blessing.”

Daniella sighed. “Sometimes, you have to have a little faith.”

Jackie couldn’t remember a time when she’d believed in something so much that all logical explanations flew out the door. She couldn’t afford to let whimsy carry her through each day. It didn’t put food on the table or pay her utility bills.

“You’re overthinking things again,” Daniella whispered from beside her. “Here comes the blessing.”

With her eyes firmly closed, Jackie blocked her thoughts and focused on the feel of Daniella’s fairy dress brushing against her arm.

Daniella’s hand tightened around hers. “May the twinkling stars light your path, and may the gentle breeze carry your dreams. May every flower petal you touch bring you joy, and may laughter and kindness surround you like a protective charm. With the flutter of fairy wings, I bless you with luck that sparkles and shines, illuminating your days with enchantment and filling your heart with endless delight.”

Jackie opened her eyes and Daniella tapped her sparkly fairy wand on each of Jackie’s shoulders.

With a gentle smile, Daniella asked, “How do you feel?”

“Like all my worries have melted away,” Jackie said slowly. “That’s so lovely.”

“Mom used to tell me the fairy blessing before I went to sleep each night. It’s probably why I wanted to start The Fairy

Forest.”

Jackie hugged her friend. “I’m glad she did. After that lovely blessing, are you ready to tell me what ideas you’ve had for the Christmas gala?”

Daniella sent her a contagious grin. “I’m so ready, I’m almost bursting with excitement. I think we can use a lot of the movie props for the event. Come and tell me what you think.”

After grabbing her planner from her desk, Daniella hurried across the room and opened a hidden door. With the flick of a switch, an enormous storage area was filled with light. “I’d forgotten what I have in here, but I found some treasures.”

Over the next half-hour, she showed Jackie some giant snow globes, shelves of over-sized decorations, a collection of blow-up snowmen, and boxes of fairy lights shaped like snowflakes.

Daniella opened a box of table decorations and handed a miniature Santa sleigh to Jackie. “I used these for a Christmas party last year. They looked so pretty with a little tea-light in the center.”

“They look gorgeous,” Jackie agreed. “Let’s use them for the gala.”

Daniella added the sleighs to her growing list of decorations. “I spoke to Ben, and he’s happy to donate a large Christmas tree for the event.”

Jackie frowned. “That’s too generous. BioTech has given me a budget for the gala.”

Andrea shook her head. “There’s no point telling him you’ll pay for it. I’ve already tried, and he won’t listen. The county’s paying for the Christmas tree for the regional Christmas Carol Competition. That’s happening nine days after your event in The Fairy Forest, so it’s all taken care of. If we need other decorations for the gala, Mabel and Allan Terry are happy to source them through their contacts at the general store. But I really feel that what we’ve got here will be enough.”

On their way out of the storage area, Daniella picked up a box and smiled. “I have a toddler’s christening here tomorrow. These decorations will look super sweet with the others I’ve already put aside.”

Jackie closed the doors behind them. “I’m amazed by what you do here.”

“It’s nothing you haven’t done.”

Jackie knew it was much more than she’d ever managed but, with a little help from the bank, she could make more of a difference, too.

As they walked around the main event room discussing seating arrangements and how best to make use of the decorations, Jackie made notes on her phone and breathed a sigh of relief. With Daniella’s help, organizing the gala wouldn’t be such a daunting process.

“Let’s talk entertainment,” Daniella suggested, bringing Jackie back to the task at hand. “I was thinking we could ask the local Christmas carol group to perform. Mila Butler, Steven and Bailey’s daughter, might want to sing, too.”

Jackie had heard Mila sing a few months ago. She had the voice of an angel and, if she sang at the gala, it’d be fantastic. “I’ll ask her dad first. She might already have a performance booked. What about Willow? Wouldn’t it be amazing if she could perform as well?”

“That’s a great idea. I’ll reach out to her,” Daniella replied, already making a note in her planner.

The conversation shifted to catering, and Daniella pulled out a list of caterers she’d used in the past. “Aidan said there’d be about 240 guests,” she said, scanning the list. “I have a preferred caterer, but if they can’t do what we want, there are other companies that could help. We can meet another day to look at each menu, if that suits you better.”

Jackie checked her watch and nodded. “Paris and I are having dinner with Andrea and her parents tonight, so leaving the catering issue for another day sounds perfect. How does four-thirty on Monday sound?”

Daniella looked at Monday's schedule. "That'd be perfect. The after-school fairy program finishes at four-fifteen and I don't have anything else booked. I saw Andrea and her mom yesterday. They came to have a look around The Fairy Forest."

Jackie slid her phone into her pocket. "Was Andrea's mom impressed?"

"That'd be an understatement. She said if she lived in Sapphire Bay, she'd volunteer to help me."

Having met Andrea's mom a couple of times, Jackie knew exactly how excited she'd have been. "Wait until she sees the room on Saturday. Andrea and David's wedding will be stunning."

"That's what I'm hoping, too. But it doesn't matter how many events I've organized, I need to be super careful nothing goes wrong."

"And if it does," Jackie added, "find a solution fast."

"That's exactly right." Daniella tapped her pen against her chin. "I can't think of any other questions I have for you. I'll type up what we discussed and email you everything. Is there anything else you need from me?"

Jackie looked through the project plan. "Not at the moment. If I think of anything, I'll send you an email and we can discuss it on Monday."

"That sounds great." Daniella looked around the room and sighed. "When you see this room on Saturday, it'll be transformed into the most incredible wedding venue you could imagine."

"How will you set everything up in time?"

Daniella picked up her wand and waved it in the air. "I have a special group of construction fairies to help me. All I need is a little pixie dust to make them appear."

Jackie almost asked Daniella if she had some extra pixie dust to spare. By December 6, she might need some.

CHAPTER 7



Aidan was sitting at his desk, reviewing some reports from his team back in Manhattan, when the door to his temporary office burst open.

David rushed in and took a deep breath. “Thank goodness you’re here. I tried calling your phone, but you didn’t answer.”

“I leave it off when I come into work before everyone else. I get a lot more done that way. Is everything all right?”

David gripped the back of the visitor’s chair. “Mike was in a car accident last night on his way to the airport. He can’t make it to the wedding. Would you be my second groomsman instead?”

Aidan blinked in surprise. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fractured his right tibia and broken two ribs. I don’t know when he’ll be out of the hospital, but his wife’s keeping me up to date.”

With the wedding tomorrow, that was the last thing David or Mike would have expected or needed.

“Of course, I’ll stand in for him. But I’ll need to get a suit before tomorrow. There’s no way Mike’s will fit me.”

“I’m already on to it.” David checked his watch. “I called the after-hours number the suit company gave me. They said as long as we’re there by eight-thirty, they’ll make any adjustments we need to another suit and have it ready by lunchtime.”

Aidan glanced at the time. “We’d better leave now.” He grabbed a couple of folders off his desk before hurrying to David’s truck.

As they drove out of the parking lot, Aidan pulled out his phone. “I’m clearing my schedule for the day in case we’re longer than we think. I’ll push the meeting we had with my team out to Monday.”

David glanced across the cab. “Good idea. Thanks for doing this.”

Aidan grinned. “Considering you still owe me for coming second in our sprint around the lake, I’d say you owe me big time.”

For the first time since they’d left work, David smiled. “I thought you’d forgotten about our bet.”

“I never forget the promise of your extra smoky barbecued spare ribs. How’s Andrea? She must have been worried when you told her about Mike.”

“She’s okay, but it’s a stressful time. Even before Mike’s accident, she’d had more than one sleepless night.” David checked the rearview mirror. “Her parents arrived on Wednesday and her mom’s grilling her on every wedding detail. It’s taking Andrea ten times longer to accomplish anything.”

“And the boys?” Aidan prodded.

“They’re keeping Grandpa entertained, dragging him to The Christmas Shop and Betty’s Creamery every day.” David turned onto the highway. “Andrea’s looking forward to Sunday when everyone can relax and enjoy each other’s company.”

Aidan thought of his sister’s wedding. She almost hadn’t made it down the aisle after her mother-in-law-to-be decided she didn’t like the table favors or the color of the tablecloths the day before the wedding.

“I know what you mean about the stress a wedding can create. It’s just as well you’re not a last-minute change type of guy.”

David glanced across the cab and frowned. “Is that a not-so-subtle reference to the decoration I wanted behind the bridal table?”

“It wasn’t a run-of-the-mill request. You had half the wedding party *and* the owner of The Fairy Forest stressed to the max. It’s just as well I can read your mind.”

David grunted. “Or show me a photo of what your sister had at her wedding. Thanks for that.”

“What I can’t understand is why you wanted such a large backdrop.”

“I was nervous,” David admitted. “In a moment of stupidity, I thought we needed something dramatic behind us. By the time I realized how stressful it made Andrea, it was too late.”

Aidan put his phone away. “We all do stupid things.”

“Talking about things that are more sensible, how was your date with Jackie the other night?”

Aidan tensed. “It wasn’t a date. We ate pizza while we discussed business.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t a date?”

“I’m positive,” Aidan told him. “And before you tell me how great Jackie is, I already know. She’s sweet, kind, intelligent, and funny. But I’m not dating her.”

David’s eyebrows rose. “Why on earth not? You’re both single *and* you shared a meal together without regretting it. You obviously like her, so what’s the problem with dating her?”

Aidan stared straight ahead. “It’s complicated.”

“What’s the harm in one date? You can’t judge everyone by your past.”

David didn’t understand the risks. Aidan had almost proposed to his last girlfriend before he discovered she was seeing someone else. At first, he hadn’t believed it. Call him gullible, but he’d really believed Shannon was the woman for

him—and the diamond ring in his drawer was a testament to how deeply he'd loved her.

“Shannon wasn't the first person who cheated on me. I'm over trusting someone who isn't who she appears to be.”

“It happens to us all,” David said with a sigh. “But you can't let that stop you from finding someone who makes you happy. Look at Andrea and me. In some things, we're like oil and water, but it works.”

Aidan didn't say anything. Andrea and David were perfect for each other. Even Andrea's sons had accepted him into their lives as if it was always meant to be.

It wasn't easy finding someone who loved you for who you were. After Shannon left, he'd deliberately kept to himself. He'd second-guessed himself and thought there was something wrong with him to be attracted to women who only wanted short-term relationships. But one glance at Jackie, and her warm smile had threatened to crumble his defenses. He'd started to think they could be much more than friends. That maybe she wasn't like the other women he'd met.

“Why don't you take Jackie somewhere that doesn't involve work?” David asked gently. “What do you have to lose?”

Everything, Aidan thought. “I'm not staying in Sapphire Bay. There's no point getting to know each other if I'm living hundreds of miles away from her.”

David glanced at him. “I'm not the best person to give anyone relationship advice. I've made so many mistakes it isn't funny. But you haven't dated anyone since Shannon left. Maybe it's time you enjoyed spending time with another woman. It doesn't have to be a date.”

“If I tell you I'll think about it, can we talk about something else?”

David smiled. “As long as it doesn't involve over-the-top backdrops to bridal tables, I'm all yours.”

Aidan breathed a sigh of relief. Jackie hadn't seemed excited when he'd asked her to go out for pizza with him. He

just hoped that by the end of the night she'd enjoyed herself.

Because he had—more than he wanted to admit.



JACKIE AND PARIS stood in the living room at Paris' house, waiting for Andrea to come out of the bedroom. It was the morning of the wedding and, so far today, nothing unexpected had happened. After Mike's accident yesterday, David and Andrea had been worrying about his injuries and everything else that could go wrong.

Jackie smiled at Paris. Sunlight streamed through the window, casting a warm glow on her elegant bridesmaid's dress. Its fitted bodice, made from deep ruby-red satin, seemed to come alive in the light, while the double-beaded straps delicately framed the square neckline.

Jackie adjusted the straps of her gown and sighed. "Can you believe it's finally Andrea's wedding day, Paris?"

"It feels like she's been planning this day forever, but it's only been six weeks."

The door creaked open, revealing Andrea in her gorgeous wedding dress. A collective gasp filled the room as Jackie and Paris took in the sight of their friend, looking ethereal and radiant.

"Oh, honey..." Paris breathed, blinking back tears. "You're even more stunning than when we saw you last week."

Jackie's eyes filled with misty tears. When Andrea had shown them her dress, she wasn't wearing makeup and her hair was pulled into a ponytail. Today, she was breathtakingly beautiful, and every bit as emotional as they were.

"Hey, don't cry!" Jackie warned playfully, wiping at her own eyes. "You'll ruin your makeup!" She dashed to find tissues, handing them around to prevent any further damage.

Andrea dabbed at her eyes, laughing through her tears. “I can’t help it,” she said, her voice trembling with nerves. “I’m just so happy—and terrified.”

“Everything will be all right,” Paris reassured her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Just take deep breaths and imagine David waiting for you in The Fairy Forest.”

“I’ll try,” Andrea replied with a shaky breath. “Has he left home with the boys yet?”

Jackie shook her head. “He sent me a message a few minutes ago to say he was leaving in ten minutes.” She didn’t dare tell Andrea they couldn’t find Charlie’s shoes.

“Ten minutes?” Andrea’s panicked gaze connected with Jackie. “I still have to attach my veil and that could take—”

Paris gave Andrea a hug. “We’ve got plenty of time. But your veil isn’t the only thing we have to do. We have a gift for you.”

Jackie took a small box off the table. “We didn’t want to leave anything to chance, so Paris and I have something for the ‘something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue’ rhyme.”

Paris nodded. “We thought your mom’s pearl necklace you’re wearing could be the ‘something old’. And the ‘something borrowed’ could be your dress from The Bridesmaids Club.”

Jackie handed Andrea the box. “That left us with the ‘something new’ and ‘something blue’.”

Andrea’s eyes widened as she touched the white satin ribbon tied around the blue box. “Is this what I think it is?”

Paris grinned. “If you’re thinking Tiffany’s, it is.”

Andrea’s mouth dropped open. “I’ve only seen pictures of their boxes in magazines.”

“Well, now you have one of your own,” Andrea said softly. “Open it and see what’s inside. We hope you like it.”

With infinite care, Andrea undid the ribbon and lifted the lid off the box. “Oh, my goodness. It’s beautiful.”

The platinum bracelet with a small, blue sapphire and a red ruby was exquisite in every way imaginable.

Andrea touched the gemstones. “This is gorgeous, but I can’t accept it. I’ve looked at their website and it would’ve been expensive.”

Paris took the bracelet out of the box and placed it around Andrea’s wrist. “It was worth every cent. And if you want to feel better about accepting it, it was on sale.”

Jackie smiled. “We have great taste on a budget. The blue sapphire is for the ‘something blue’. The ruby represents love and the color you chose for your flowers and wedding decorations. We hope it reminds you of today each time you wear it.”

Andrea held out her wrist so they could both see the bracelet. “It’s gorgeous. Thank you.”

Jackie smiled. “It looks lovely. Now, let’s get your veil into place before your dad arrives.”

Checking her watch, Andrea frowned. “Where *is* my dad?” she asked, worry creeping into her voice. “He should’ve been here by now.”

Jackie had everyone’s contact details on her phone, so she quickly sent Mr. Smith a text.

“Your dad said he’s on his way,” she announced after receiving a reply. “And your mom’s just left David’s house with the boys.”

“We told you everything would be okay,” Paris said, smiling encouragingly at Andrea. “And it’ll only get better. If you feel worried or overwhelmed, just remember how much David loves you and the boys.”

Nodding, Andrea took a deep, calming breath.

While Paris lifted Andrea’s veil off the hanger, Jackie gathered their emergency makeup bags off the table and picked up their shawls.

With the flick of her wrist, Paris placed the veil over Andrea's dress and lifted it into place on her head. "Have a look in the mirror."

Andrea sighed when she saw her reflection. "I can hardly believe it's me."

More tears filled Jackie's eyes. "If David doesn't fall instantly in love with you again, there's something wrong."

Taking another tissue out of the box, Paris blew her nose. "Everyone needs to take a deep breath. If we keep crying, we'll have to redo our makeup."

Andrea sent her friends a wobbly smile. "And we definitely don't have time for that." With one last look in the mirror, she collected her bouquet from the coffee table and handed Jackie and Paris theirs.

A light tap on the door made everyone jump.

"That must be dad," Andrea whispered.

Jackie hurried across the room to open the door. Andrea's dad was wearing a lovely charcoal-colored suit with a crisp white shirt and red tie.

"You look very handsome, Mr. Smith," Jackie told him.

"Thank you. Andrea's mom chose the suit for—" His words trailed off when he saw Andrea, and his eyes lit with pride. He walked over to her and gently held her hand. "Honey, you look beautiful."

Paris stood by, smiling softly as she reached for a box of tissues.

Mr. Smith wiped away a few tears. "I can't believe my little girl's getting married today." He gave Andrea's hand a squeeze. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, her eyes shining with excitement. "I'm ready, Dad."

He turned to Jackie and Paris. "Thank you for all your help today. I don't know what we would've done without you."

Jackie smiled. “It was our pleasure, Mr. Smith. You raised an amazing daughter, and we’re honored to be a part of her big day.”

Paris nodded. “We wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

Andrea’s dad chuckled. “Well, come on, then. We don’t want to keep David waiting.”

With Jackie holding their makeup bags and bridesmaids’ bouquets, and Paris holding the train of Andrea’s dress, they made their way outside to the waiting car.

Even though Jackie didn’t believe in happy-ever-afters, she did believe in love. And Andrea and David were so in love it made her heart ache.

CHAPTER 8



Aidan stood beneath the canopy of the large oak trees inside The Fairy Forest. Daniella had transformed the venue into an enchanting oasis for Andrea and David's wedding. If anything, it was even more spectacular than the last time he'd seen it.

Flowers in every shade of the rainbow filled the gardens, and the tables had vases full of deep red roses and glittering hearts. Glowing lanterns strung across the ceiling added an old-fashioned charm to the enormous room. If that wasn't enough to set the scene, soft music played in the background as the wedding guests chatted with each other.

He smiled when he saw some of the younger guests noticing the little fairies hidden throughout the garden. More than one child had abandoned their parents to go exploring.

Aidan adjusted his tie, feeling the weight of responsibility as he stood beside Andrea's two boys, Charlie and Andy.

"When will Mom be here?" Charlie asked.

David looked at his watch. "She won't be too far away. Your mom doesn't like to be late for anything."

The music changed, and the gentle notes of violin music filled the air, signaling the arrival of the bridal party.

Andy and Charlie turned around and stood on tippy toes, hoping to see their mom.

Aidan glanced at David. He was almost in tears and the wedding had only just begun. Bryce, the other groomsman,

must have noticed how David was feeling. He whispered something to him, and David nodded. Taking a deep breath, David focused on the bridal party moving toward them.

Paris was walking along the rose-covered aisle, her long hair cascading down her back and her smile radiant. But it was Jackie who held Aidan's attention. As she stepped into the aisle, her dress floated around her legs and her auburn hair shone in the glow of the lanterns. She was stunningly beautiful and, even from this distance, her eyes were sparkling with joy.

Something deep in his chest clicked into place. There was an honesty about her that made him wish he lived in Sapphire Bay. Made him wish for a lot of things he'd never thought would be possible.

When Andrea appeared beside her dad, everyone seemed to sigh. She was breathtaking. Her gown flowed gracefully behind her, sparkling under the lanterns, as she approached her soon-to-be husband.

David's expression softened with awe, and Aidan couldn't help but feel a pang of envy.

As Pastor John spoke, Aidan's gaze kept drifting back to Jackie. He thought about his previous girlfriend and the things he'd taken for granted in their relationship. Though he worked long hours, he doubted Jackie would have acted how his last girlfriend had. There was a resilience about Jackie that he admired. She'd had a difficult childhood, but she'd used those experiences to make a better life for herself.

Aidan knew that no matter what challenges she might face, she'd never shy away from them or step on anyone else to make her dreams come true.

Charlie and Andy stood patiently beside their mom as Andrea and David exchanged wedding vows. When it was their turn to speak, Charlie waited for Aidan to hold the microphone in front of him before talking in a firm, clear voice.

"Mom and David. We promise to be super good kids. We'll listen and be nice, even when things are different. If

we're worried about anything, we'll talk to you. We want to be a happy family and do lots of fun things together. But, most of all, we're glad David's part of our life."

When he'd finished speaking, Andy smiled at his younger brother. "You did good," he whispered.

Charlie stood a little taller as Pastor John started speaking.

They were great boys, and Aidan knew they'd be very happy in their new family.

After more music and a touching poem written by David's sister, Pastor John smiled at the wedding guests. "This is the part of the ceremony I like the best." Holding his bible close to his chest, he said, "By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Applause erupted around them as David and Andrea shared their first kiss as a married couple.

Aidan watched Jackie talk to Charlie and Andy. Today was all about the power of love and the ability to let go of the past and start again. Everyone deserved a second chance, and David and Andrea had found theirs in each other.



JACKIE LOOKED around The Fairy Forest as the last table of guests moved toward the dessert buffet. The caterers had done a great job of organizing the food for Andrea and David's wedding. Everything had been delicious and exactly what they wanted.

David had told them that the statement piece behind their table was every bit as spectacular as he'd imagined. He was so impressed by the large, heart-shaped frame that was smothered in roses, sparkling crystals, and fairy lights, that he'd asked Aidan if they could have something similar at BioTech's Christmas gala.

Most of the guests had posed in front of the decoration, sending the photos to their Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, or creating funny TikToks. Some of the posts Jackie

had seen were so sweet that she'd been tempted to ask Aidan to take her photo, too.

“Attention, everyone!” Mr. Smith’s voice boomed across the room. “While you’re enjoying dessert, the bride and groom will move to the dance floor for the first waltz of the night!”

Jackie looked closely at Andrea. After being worried about stepping on David’s toes, she’d insisted they practice dancing each night after work. No one looking at the confident way she walked toward the dance floor would know just how worried she’d been.

As David twirled his bride into his arms, Jackie’s heart began to race. She’d be next on the dance floor with Aidan, a fact that filled her with excitement and dread. Her fingers fidgeted in her lap, betraying her nervousness.

“Hey,” Aidan said softly, his piercing blue eyes catching hers. “Don’t worry. It’s only a dance.”

“What if I trip over my feet and fall flat on my face?”

Aidan grinned. “Unless you think I’ll fall over, too, it won’t happen. I’ll hold you so close that you won’t be going anywhere except with me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. Have you heard the saying, ‘we’ll fake it till we make it’?”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Jackie replied, attempting a weak smile. “How can we do that with a hundred pairs of eyes watching us?”

“Trust me,” he said, his confidence unwavering. “I’m the master of the slow shuffle. If you follow my lead, we’ll be fine.”

Jackie sighed, remembering the dancing lessons she’d tried years ago. “That’s my biggest problem. I can’t follow someone else.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Aidan asked with a smile.

Jackie sighed. “I’ll admit I can be a little too assertive sometimes, but dancing’s different. I feel so out of my depth it isn’t funny.”

Aidan nodded toward the dance floor. “Look at David and Andrea. No one cares if they miss a beat or step in the wrong direction. They’re in love and enjoying their time together.”

Jackie frowned. “There’s a problem with your theory. We aren’t in love and dancing isn’t enjoyable.”

Aidan leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “Maybe it isn’t enjoyable because you haven’t danced with the right person.”

A blush warmed her face, and she nudged Aidan away. “You’re teasing me.”

When David and Andrea separated and gestured for the rest of the bridal party to join them, Andrea panicked. “Have I told you I don’t like being the center of attention, either?”

Aidan pulled her to her feet. “Don’t worry, I’ll look after you. Just lean into me and close your eyes.”

Taking a deep breath, Jackie placed her hand in Aidan’s and walked onto the dance floor.

As he pulled her into his arms, she felt a sense of calm wash over her. Pressed against his body, and with her eyes closed, they shuffled slowly around the dance floor, their movements in sync despite her earlier concerns.

“See?” Aidan whispered in her ear. “You can do this.”

“Not without you.”

She felt his chest rise as he laughed. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me. It’s okay to open your eyes. Everyone’s watching Charlie and Andy.”

Jackie looked over his shoulder, scanning the dance floor. Aidan moved so she could see Andrea’s two sons. They were dancing disco style with two of their friends from The Welcome Center. Their infectious laughter filled the air, drawing everyone’s attention.

“They’re so cute. I wish I could’ve had that much fun when I was their age.”

Aidan steered them away from a collision with Paris and Bryce. “What were you like when you were younger?”

“Much too serious,” Jackie murmured.

“In what way?”

“When I was Andy’s age, Mom and I were living in the apartment I told you about. We didn’t have a lot of money, so I used to deliver newspapers to help pay for our groceries. Without the free school lunches, and Mrs. Green’s baking, I wouldn’t have had a lot to eat. The kids in my school used to make fun of me, so I did everything I could to stay away from them. I only talked to one or two people the whole time I was there.”

Aidan’s hand gently rubbed her waist. “That must have been horrible.”

Jackie thought about the times she’d refused to go to school because of their taunts. The mornings her mom had gone to work and left Mrs. Green to convince her that going to school was important.

“They were mean and unforgiving, but I didn’t help myself, either. We moved around so much that I found it hard to make friends. So, I didn’t try. As soon as Mom fell behind on the rent or her current boyfriend left, we’d pack our bags and go somewhere else.”

Aidan pulled her closer. “You don’t have to worry about any of that now.”

She rested her head against his, closed her eyes, and wished it were as simple as that.



AIDAN STOOD beneath one of the towering oak trees, listening to a little girl tell her parents about a small fairy hidden behind some flowers.

To keep the children occupied after dinner, Daniella had organized a fairy treasure hunt. Instead of taking the fairies away with them, all the children had to do was mark on a map where they'd seen them in The Fairy Forest.

Unsurprisingly, it wasn't only the children who were loving the activity. Many of the adults had picked up a map and were busy scouring the trees, flower beds, and fountains, looking for the elusive fairies.

Jackie stopped beside him. "I only have one fairy left to find," she whispered. "But I need help with the clue."

He grinned into her sparkling eyes. "I'm not much of a treasure hunting expert."

"But you have a quick mind, and you don't like fudge," Jackie said, teasing him.

That was news to him. Especially after he'd just enjoyed far too many chocolate-dipped strawberries from the chocolate fountain. "Who told you I don't like fudge?"

"David. He said to ask you about the clue before someone else does. That way, I don't have to share any of the prize if I get all the answers correct."

Brooke, from Sweet Treats, had donated bags of freshly made fudge to give to the first thirty people who found all the fairies. Given how popular Brooke's fudge was, it was no wonder there were so many people holding copies of the map and staring into the trees.

Aidan turned around and picked up his dessert bowl to show Jackie. The smears of chocolate showed her just how much he'd enjoyed his dessert. "David's wrong about me not having a sweet tooth, but I'm willing to compromise. I'll help you with the clue if you give me three pieces of fudge."

Jackie considered his offer. "One, and I'll let you choose the flavors."

"Two, and you choose the flavors," Aidan countered. He hadn't tasted a piece of fudge he hadn't liked, so it was a safe bet.

Jackie looked at the children and adults already lining up to collect their prizes. “It’s a deal, but we’d better be quick or neither of us will be going home on a sugar high.”

Pulling a piece of paper from her pocket, she moved closer to him. “This is what it says: Fairies love to shine and sparkle! Look for any areas in the garden where you see twinkling lights or a magical glow. That’s a sign that fairies might be nearby with their friends.”

Aidan looked at the lights strung between the branches of the trees. “That’s not much of a clue. The entire room is lit up like the fourth of July.”

Jackie sighed. “And you think I don’t know that? Look at all the little children who’ve already found the fairies. They managed to find them, but I can’t.”

Aidan plucked the sheet of paper out of her fingers and studied the clue. “Where did you find the last fairy?”

Jackie pointed to the chocolate fountain. “It was here.”

“Let’s have another look in that area.”

“I already have, and I couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

Aidan’s eyebrows rose. Nothing about The Fairy Forest was ordinary. He looked at where Jackie had found the other fairies and knew the next one probably wasn’t far from the fountain. “The clue says the fairies are nearby with their friends. There’s only one area you haven’t circled.”

Jackie glanced at the map. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You were too focused on eating the fudge. Come on.” Aidan held her hand as they wound their way across the dance floor. This time, she had no trouble following his lead, especially when it involved candy.

When they reached the fountain, he turned left and looked into the trees. “It has to be here somewhere.”

Jackie dropped to her knees and looked through the plants. “If it’s not, we’ve run out of time. The fudge will be gone soon.”

Aidan joined her on the floor. “Look for a glow as opposed to a twinkle.”

She glanced at him and smiled. “At any other time, I’d think we were crazy.”

“Along with a third of the wedding guests,” Aidan muttered as he crawled toward a suspicious log.

“Excuse me, Mr. Remington,” came a hesitant voice. Aidan turned and looked up at the couple behind him.

He pulled himself to his feet and held out his hand. “You can call me Aidan.”

“Hi, Aidan. I’m Josh Wilson,” the man said as he shook Aidan’s hand. “And this is my wife, Sandy. I didn’t want to interrupt you, but Mabel Terry told us who you are, and we had to see you.”

The expressions on Sandy and Josh’s faces were a mixture of hope and desperation.

“We heard about the trust you’re setting up for people who need prosthetics,” Sandy said. “Our daughter, Grace, she... well, we were wondering if you could help.”

Jackie stood up and joined them.

Aidan saw the concern in her eyes. He turned to the Wilsons and gave them his full attention. “What happened to Grace?” he asked gently.

“Last year, there was a car accident,” Sandy explained, tears glistening in her eyes. “We were driving, and, um... it was our fault. We hit another car, and Grace lost her leg. She’s only eight years old.” She paused, her voice choked with guilt. “Our insurance covered the basic prosthetic, but it’s not enough. Her specialist recommended a better one, but we can’t afford it.”

As they spoke, Aidan’s heart pounded. He could have been having the same conversation with his parents many years ago. The pain and guilt etched on the Wilsons’ faces mirrored the emotions his mom and dad had experienced after James’ accident.

“What kind of care plan does Grace have?” Aidan asked, needing to know more details. “And what type of prosthetic is she using?”

“Her care plan includes regular physical therapy sessions, but the current prosthetic just isn’t enough,” Josh replied, wringing his hands. “Even though Grace is small for her age, she needs something more suited to her needs, something that can grow with her. The prosthetic is uncomfortable and digs into her stump.”

“Most of the time, she uses a wheelchair,” Sandy added. “That creates other health implications. We didn’t know what to do. Then, last week, Josh read an article about the program that’ll be funded by a trust BioTech has created. Grace needs your help.”

Aidan swallowed the lump in his throat. He knew what a difference the neural-gel prosthetics could make in Grace’s life.

He looked at the Wilsons, wishing he could do more to help them. “We haven’t set up the program yet,” he told them, “but as soon as we open the applications for funding, I’ll make sure you get a form sent to you.” Taking a business card out of his wallet, he handed it to them. “Send me an email so I can add your details to my contact list. If you don’t hear from me before Christmas, give me a call.”

“Thank you so much,” Sandy whispered, her voice filled with gratitude.

Jackie reached out and gently squeezed her hand, silently offering her support.

As the Wilsons walked away, Aidan couldn’t shake the image of their anguished faces out of his mind. He knew deep down that he had the power to change lives, but the weight of that responsibility felt heavier than ever. He glanced at Jackie, and she gave him a reassuring smile.

“I don’t envy you,” she said softly. “Once the trust starts, it’ll be difficult deciding who gets the prosthetics and who doesn’t.”

Aidan looked at the map he was holding. “At least I don’t have to make that decision.”

Jackie placed her hand on top of his. “Don’t worry about finding the last fairy. It doesn’t matter.”

“We might as well keep looking. I can’t help the Wilsons tonight, but I can—” A flicker of light came from behind the log. He waited for another second or two and it happened again.

Grabbing hold of Jackie’s hand, he led her toward the edge of the garden and lowered himself to his knees. Hidden inside the log was a fairy who was smaller than the palm of his hand. Dressed in a green tunic with golden wings, she was just as sweet as the other decorations inside The Fairy Forest.

Jackie kneeled beside him and frowned. Her eyes widened when she finally spotted the answer to her last clue. “David’s right about one thing. You *are* an expert fairy spotter.”

“Especially when there’s fudge involved,” he whispered. “Let’s hurry to the line before someone beats us to the last bag.”

And with the stealth of a pair of elephants, they rushed to join the line of guests who’d already found the fairies. He wasn’t able to give the Wilsons what they wanted tonight, but he had made Jackie extremely happy.

CHAPTER 9



Jackie flicked crumbs off the front of her sweater as she walked toward the front door. Someone had rung the doorbell and she assumed it was Aidan. Before they'd gone their separate ways after the wedding, they'd agreed to meet today to discuss the Christmas gala she was organizing.

Most people wouldn't have discussed business on a Sunday but, with everything else that was happening, she didn't have a choice. With only about nine weeks left until Christmas, she had a small window of opportunity to open her knitting store before the busiest time of the year. And that meant organizing the gala as quickly as possible.

She opened the door, and an enormous yawn almost locked her jaw in place. "Sorry," she said to Aidan from behind her hand.

"Still tired from last night?" he asked with a gentle smile.

"I'm exhausted," Jackie admitted, "but it was worth it. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun." She ushered him inside and led him into the living room, where they both took a seat on the worn but comfortable couch. "Did you go for a run this morning?"

"I slept through two alarms. When I woke up, I decided to give it a miss."

"You must've been tired, too. Have you heard how Mike's doing?"

Aidan placed his laptop on the coffee table. "David texted me this morning. Mike's second surgery went well and he's

recovering in the hospital. He's lucky he wasn't killed."

Jackie nodded. There was a fine line between having a car accident with major injuries and one with hardly any. "I hope he recovers soon. I've only met him once, but he seemed like a nice person. Would you like a cup of coffee or do you want to talk about the gala? Everyone Daniella and I have spoken to is interested in being part of the event."

"Let's talk about the gala and have a drink later. I'll make notes on my laptop."

"Don't worry about writing anything down. I've already put a document together with all the details." Jackie handed him a folder. "Here's a copy I printed off for you."

Aidan looked at the first page. "You've been busy."

"I wanted to contact the people who could help us as quickly as I could. Early November is close to when everyone plans their Christmas events. I didn't want you to miss out on having some great options."

Jackie hoped Aidan liked what he was reading. Between her and Daniella, they'd spent a lot of time organizing this part of the gala. "I've incorporated what you had in your project plan and added more options. We have a fantastic line-up of local groups and people who'll donate their time and talents for the event."

Aidan nodded when he saw the details about the first group who'd volunteered. "David suggested contacting Mabel about the Christmas Carol Choir. He said they've won the regional competition."

Jackie nodded. "They sound amazing. I heard them last year and couldn't believe the choir's made up of people from Sapphire Bay. Mabel said she'd love them to sing at the gala. They'll use it as practice for this year's competition, but they'll sing different songs. She's worried another choir might discover what they're singing and copy them."

Aidan grinned. "Espionage in a small town?"

"Believe me," Jackie sighed. "It's a real thing. Mabel's paranoid about not letting anyone know what the choir's

singing. Even the Christmas baking we're giving the audience has been classified as top secret."

Aidan looked back at the list. "We should be grateful they're willing to sing, then. Who's Willow?"

"Willow's married to Zac, our local doctor. She used to tour around the world with a band, but she gave it up to live here. As well as being a talented musician, she's an incredible photographer. She's happy to sing and provide a framed print for the auction."

As they went through the list of entertainment options, Jackie didn't know which artists Aidan preferred. "What do you think of Mr. Jessop making balloon animals for the children?"

"They'll love it. Where did he learn to make them?"

"I didn't ask, but he's really good."

Aidan nodded. "I like the idea of having a range of activities for everyone to enjoy before dinner. That way, the guests can mix and mingle, and look at the auction items before they go under the hammer."

Jackie grinned. "As far as the auction goes, we've got painters, photographers, and sculptors happy to donate auction items. Ben's even donating a Christmas tree. Brooke's putting together a huge Sweet Treats hamper filled with her fudge and candy, Megan's donating a voucher for a decorated cake, Cassie's contributing some jewelry, and we've got meals at restaurants, steamboat rides in Polson, fishing and tramping adventures, and even an all-expenses paid weekend in Las Vegas."

Aidan's eyebrows rose. "I should've asked you to organize this sooner."

"I couldn't have done it without Daniella," she admitted. "She's been an enormous help."

"So, what's next?" Aidan asked.

"After you've had a chance to go through my suggestions, I'll make any changes, then contact the people who've said

they can help. As soon as they confirm they'll be at the gala, I'll book any other equipment we'll need. The biggest costs will be the audio-visual items and the drinks and food."

"That doesn't matter," Aidan assured her. "We'd budgeted a sizable amount to launch the project, and this won't come anywhere near that. Any money we have left over will go straight into the trust. This'll be an incredible event, and it's all because of your hard work."

Jackie smiled. "Daniella and I don't mind how much time it's taken to get this far. The trust will make a huge difference in many people's lives."

Aidan frowned. "Like the Wilsons. I talked to David before he left with Andrea. Josh and Sandy are his cousins. Josh was driving his work vehicle when he hit a concrete truck. The impact of the accident crushed one side of the vehicle. Grace was in the back seat and almost didn't survive."

"That's terrible. They must be under so much stress."

Aidan nodded. "They've used all their savings to pay for their medical expenses."

Jackie studied the worried expression on Aidan's face. "How do you feel about what they said last night?"

"It brought back a lot of memories about my brother's accident." He sat back and sighed. "I dreamed about James last night. He was sitting with me in my living room in Manhattan, talking about losing his leg. He wasn't upset or angry. I guess he'd accepted what had happened and had moved on with his life."

Jackie tilted her head to the side. "He's at peace."

"I guess he is," Aidan said slowly. "Do you think it's unusual to talk to my dead brother?"

His question surprised her. "I think it's wonderful. There's so much about the world that we don't understand, so anything's possible. When we're sleeping, our mind is relaxed and open. It would be nice to think that people who've gone to heaven can pop back and say hello."

“Has the same thing ever happened to you?”

Jackie shook her head. “I wish it had, but no. Apart from Mrs. Green, Mom and I didn’t stay anywhere long enough to get that close to anyone. How did you feel about your dream when you woke up this morning?”

Aidan thought about her question. “Sad. James has been gone for nearly twenty years and I still miss him.”

“It’s because you love him. How you feel about a person doesn’t disappear just because you can’t see them. He’ll always be an important part of your life. I bet he keeps a careful eye on what you’re doing.”

A smile softened the grief on Aidan’s face. “Knowing James, that’s a definite possibility. Are you ready for a cup of coffee now?”

“More than ready. If you want something a little more decadent, I have a special blend of hot chocolate powder that’s amazing.”

Aidan held out his hand. “That sounds good to me.”

Jackie placed her hand in his and stood in front of him. “This reminds me of our impressive shuffle around the dance floor.”

Aidan chuckled. “And we didn’t step on each other’s toes once.” He looked into her eyes and his smile disappeared. “I had fun last night.”

“I did, too,” Jackie whispered. A warmth spread through her body, and she felt an overwhelming urge to kiss Aidan. So she did, soft and sweetly.

His arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer as he deepened the kiss. The hot chocolate and gala preparations faded from her mind as she lost herself in the moment.

Her hands traced the muscles of Aidan’s back while his lips moved to her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

They broke apart, gasping for air, and Aidan rested his forehead against hers. “I’m not sure that was the wisest thing to do.”

“Neither do I,” Jackie admitted, her heart beating wildly in her chest. Aidan wasn’t staying in Montana, and rushing into a relationship wasn’t good for either of them. “You’ll be leaving Sapphire Bay soon.”

“Would you consider moving to New York?”

Jackie kissed his cheek and stepped out of his embrace. “This is my home. I’ve never felt like that about any of the cities I’ve lived in. New York City is too big, too much of everything I’ve never wanted in my life. Even if I could afford to move there, I wouldn’t.”

Aidan’s eyes filled with disappointment. “I thought you’d say that, but I had to ask.”

“We could still be friends. It’ll just be more difficult to see each other once you go home.”

With a gentleness that didn’t surprise her, Aidan held her hands. “Would that be enough?”

Jackie took a deep breath. “Probably not, but it’s a start. I don’t want to let go of what’s between us, but I can’t see any way we can make it work.”

Lifting his hand to her face, he brushed a lock of hair off her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere for a few months. Why don’t we stay friends and see what happens?”

She liked that idea, but she needed to be clear about her intentions. She’d worked hard to get where she was and she wouldn’t give that up, even if Aidan was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

“I won’t change my mind about leaving,” she gently told him.

“I don’t expect you to. Who knows? If we spend more time together, we might decide we’re better off as friends and nothing more.”

Jackie couldn’t see that happening, but his smile took away some of her disappointment. “You could be right, especially if we have to dance together again. I didn’t step on

your toes last night, but I can't guarantee you'll be safe next time."

"We'd better cross ballroom dancing off our list of date options, then." He grinned and let go of her hands. "If you show me where you keep the chocolate powder, I'll make our drinks. And while I'm doing that, you can tell me how the plans for your knitting store are coming along."

Jackie walked into the kitchen with him and took a container off the counter. A relationship with Aidan might be doomed to failure, but she enjoyed spending time with him. All she had to do was focus on each day and forget about tomorrow.

But, for someone who didn't leave anything to chance, spending time with Aidan was more than a leap of faith. It was like jumping off a skyscraper and expecting to fly.

CHAPTER 10



On Tuesday afternoon, Jackie sat with Daniella in her office at The Fairy Forest. They were hunched over a wooden table, going over the menu options for the upcoming Christmas gala. The scent of the cinnamon cookies Jackie had brought with her filled the air as they debated between white chocolate and cranberry bliss balls or gingerbread cookies for dessert.

Daniella tapped her pen against her chin. “We’re already having cheesecake, red velvet cake, and apple pie, but so many people enjoy Brooke’s bliss balls that I’d love to include them.”

“Maybe we can have both? We could serve the bliss balls with the gingerbread cookies after dessert,” Jackie suggested. “The children will enjoy them, and they’d be a nice option for the adults to have with a cup of eggnog or coffee.”

Daniella smiled. “That sounds like a good plan. Can we afford to have both?”

Jackie studied the budget they’d allocated for the catering. “Easily. By using local caterers, we’re saving a lot of money.” The company that usually provided the food for the events at The Fairy Forest was busy on the night of the Christmas gala. So, they were splitting the contract into two. The church’s hospitality class would provide the dinner buffet, and Megan and Brooke from Sweet Treats would provide dessert and coffee options. It would make working from The Fairy Forest’s kitchen a little hectic, but it would give the local economy a boost.

“It’s a deal, then.” Daniella picked up the menus spread around the table and grinned. “It was more fun choosing a menu than I thought. Usually, it takes ages for people to decide what they’ll have.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the luxury of time. Whenever I’m not working with Paris in The Flower Cottage or doing this, I’m knitting.”

“How are the plans going for your new business?”

“Slowly. I can’t do anything until I hear from the bank.”

Daniella frowned. “When were they supposed to get back to you?”

“I thought it would’ve been yesterday, but I haven’t heard anything.”

“Have you checked your emails this afternoon?”

Jackie shook her head. “Not since lunchtime.”

“Look now. You never know, they might’ve made a decision.”

Biting her bottom lip, Jackie took her cell phone out of her pocket. Each time she’d checked her messages, her heart had pounded out of control. “I’m worried they’ll say no.”

“I was the same. When you have your heart set on something, it makes waiting so much worse.”

With a trembling hand, Jackie opened her email account and scrolled through the messages. “Oh, my goodness. The email has arrived. Wish me luck.”

Daniella leaned forward. “You don’t need luck. You have an amazing opportunity that the bank would be crazy not to support.”

“I hope you’re right.” Taking a deep breath, she tapped on the email. As she read through it, her eyes widened, and a huge grin spread across her face. “I’ve got it! I got the loan I need to start my business!”

“That’s wonderful!” Daniella said as she hugged Jackie tight.

After taking a deep breath, Jackie smiled at her friend. “I’ll call Penny and let her know I can lease the cottage. I’ll feel less stressed when I know that’s done.”

“While you’re doing that, I’ll make us a hot drink.”

“That’d be wonderful. I’m really glad I saw you. I’d still be wondering about the loan if you hadn’t mentioned it.”

Daniella grinned. “You have more willpower than me. I would’ve been checking my phone every few minutes while we were talking.”

“I was worried they’d say no. It was better to focus on what I could control instead of being upset if they said no.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry anymore. Call Penny before someone else does.”

Jackie found Penny’s number and waited for her to answer. “Hi, Penny? It’s Jackie West. I just received the loan I need to start my business. If no one else has shown an interest, I’d like to secure the lease on the cottage on Anchor Lane.”

“That’s so exciting,” Penny replied. “Why don’t we meet at the cottage after you finish work, and we’ll go through all the paperwork?”

“That’d be amazing. I’m just having a meeting with Daniella, but I can meet you at the cottage in half an hour?”

“Half an hour is perfect. Congratulations on the loan. The store will be an amazing addition to Sapphire Bay.”

“Thank you so much! I’ll see you soon.” Jackie beamed as she ended the call. She turned to Daniella and shared the good news. “I’ll sign the lease this afternoon.”

“Congratulations! You’re officially a business owner.” Daniella cheered, raising her coffee cup in a toast.

“Almost,” Jackie corrected with a smile. “There’s still one more person I have to call.”

A mischievous gleam filled Daniella’s eyes. “Let me guess. He wouldn’t be tall, dark, and handsome with stunning blue eyes, would he?”

“How did you know I’m calling Aidan?”

“Because he didn’t take his eyes off you the entire night of David and Andrea’s wedding. I have a sixth sense when it comes to romance, and wedding bells chimed whenever I spotted the two of you together.”

“It’s not that serious. We like each other, so we’ll go on a few dates and see what happens.”

“That’s how most relationships start,” Daniella said. “Who knows what the future holds.”

Jackie did, and it involved living hundreds of miles apart and making lots of long-distance calls. With that sobering thought dulling her excitement, she called Aidan.

“Hey, Jackie,” he answered, his deep voice resonating on the other end of the line.

“Hi,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I wanted to tell you I got the loan for my store. I’m about to sign the lease on the building.”

“That’s fantastic news! Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Jackie replied. “I won’t take any more of your time. I just wanted to share the news with you.”

“I’m glad you did,” Aidan said sincerely. “It’ll be a wonderful store. Do you want to go out tonight to celebrate?”

“I can’t. I have to get more knitting finished, but you could come around to my house. Brooke and Megan are making some sample plates of the desserts we’ve selected for the Christmas gala. Daniella’s coming, too.”

“I’d like that. I’ll bring a bottle of wine to celebrate. What time would you like me there?”

“How about seven o’clock?”

“I’ll see you then.”

Aidan ended the call and Jackie sighed. She still couldn’t believe she was about to embark on the most amazing adventure of her life. And all because of a little cottage and a big dream.



AIDAN'S FINGERS drummed a gentle rhythm on the steering wheel as he pulled up to Jackie's home. The warm glow of the living room lights spilled onto the porch, and he could see shadows moving inside. Taking a deep breath, he stepped out of his car and made his way along the garden path.

He was thrilled the bank had approved Jackie's loan application. It was a big deal opening a business, even bigger when so much of her life had been a struggle. Her need to be connected to something bigger than herself was one of the things that most attracted him to her. She wasn't self-centered or focused on making the most amount of money from the least amount of work. Jackie wanted to make a difference in other people's lives, and she wasn't afraid of working hard to make it happen.

He didn't have to wait long for her to open the door. Her wide smile was just as cute as the bright red sweater and black leggings she was wearing.

"Come on in, Aidan. You've come at the right time. Daniella was about to eat dessert without you."

"I heard that," an amused voice called from inside the house. A few seconds later, Daniella appeared in the hallway. "Where dessert's concerned, I don't have much self-control, but I can wait for Aidan to join us."

He handed Jackie the bottle of wine. "I'm glad I left work when I did, then."

"So am I," she said softly. "Thanks for celebrating with us and thank you for the wine."

"You're welcome on both counts." He hung his jacket on the coat stand and walked into the kitchen with her and Daniella. When he saw the plates of food sitting on the table, his eyes widened.

Daniella giggled. "I know. I told Brooke she'd brought too much for us to try, but she said you can never have too much

dessert, especially when you'd be here, too."

Aidan sat beside Jackie at the table. "I don't know whether to be insulted or grateful."

Jackie popped the cork on the bottle of wine and grinned. "After you taste the desserts, you'll be grateful. They're our all-time favorites."

Daniella placed some glasses on the kitchen table. "I like the white chocolate and cranberry bliss balls. Brooke only makes them at Christmas, so they're in hot demand."

Aidan took one of the bliss balls off the plate Daniella held toward him. They looked like something his sister made with rolled oats and dried fruit, except these were drizzled in white chocolate. He ate a piece and sighed. They were so much better than his sister's.

Jackie smiled. "They're yummy, aren't they? You don't have to feel guilty when you're eating them, either. They're jam-packed full of dates, oats, flaxseed, and cashew butter."

"I'm hoping this means you're adding them to the menu?" he asked.

Jackie nodded. "Everything here has made our short-list."

"I'm looking forward to the gala even more now." Aidan picked up the glass of wine Jackie had poured for him. "Before we try another sample, I'd like to propose a toast. To Jackie and the start of a new part of her life. Sapphire Bay won't know what's happened to them when they see your store."

Jackie picked up her glass. "I'm hoping they'll be so impressed they'll join one of our knitting groups and keep coming back for more yarn."

"I'll second that," Daniella said, clinking her glass against Jackie and Aidan's. "Here's to a long and successful career as a small business owner."

A soft blush appeared on Jackie's cheeks. "Thanks, guys. I've got a long way to go, but I'm so happy the bank approved my loan."

Daniella handed Aidan a small plate. “So am I. They would’ve been crazy to turn you down. Have you thought about what you’ll call your store?”

Jackie nodded. “If it sounds corny, tell me.”

Daniella handed another plate to Jackie. “Considering I own a business called The Fairy Forest, my ability to spot a corny business name isn’t high.”

“You have the perfect name,” Aidan said. “It draws people to Sapphire Bay, even if they knew nothing about what’s inside.”

“That was the goal,” Daniella said, clearly pleased with what Aidan thought. “So, what are you calling your amazing store, Jackie?”

“I thought I’d call it ‘A Stitch in Time’. What do you think?”

Aidan repeated the name in his head. “I like it. It makes me think of a quaint, old-fashioned store that sells knitting wrapped in good memories.”

Daniella nodded. “It gives you an emotional connection to the store as soon as you hear its name.” She high-fived Jackie. “Great choice.”

Jackie seemed relieved. “I’m glad you like it. Now, what dessert do you want to try next?”

Daniella’s gaze roamed over the dishes. “Let’s try the cheesecake. It’s raspberry ripple but, if we don’t like it, we can order another flavor or something completely different.”

Jackie’s expression turned to delight as she had her first taste of the cheesecake. “Oh, my goodness. I’m glad I haven’t had this before. I’d be buying one each weekend.”

After trying the dessert, Aidan was already making plans to stop at Sweet Treats tomorrow. “That’s a definite winner.”

As they tried each option, Aidan felt the stress of a busy day melting off his shoulders. Conversation and laughter flowed easily between the three of them, almost as if they’d known each other their entire lives.

Jackie shared her plans for her knitting store, envisioning cozy nooks filled with soft yarns and a warm, inviting atmosphere. Aidan listened intently, his thoughts drifting between admiration for her determination and the lingering question of whether he should stay in Sapphire Bay or return to Manhattan.

“I almost forgot,” Daniella said suddenly, glancing at her watch. “I need to speak to Mabel and Allan at the general store. I’ll leave you two to enjoy the rest of the evening.”

Jackie seemed confused. “Can’t it wait until the morning?”

“I have two bus-loads of children arriving at nine o’clock. If I don’t talk to Mabel and Allan now, I’ll never get a chance.”

Jackie’s eyebrows rose.

“It’s true,” Daniella said with a grin. “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow. Thanks for an enjoyable night, Aidan.”

He watched bemusedly as she grabbed her hat and jacket off a chair and sent them a quick wave. “Bye.”

Jackie watched her friend leave the kitchen. “That was sudden. Do you think she needs to see them or is she playing Cupid?”

Aidan grinned. “I’ll go for the Cupid option. Someone who dresses as a fairy, owns a fairy-themed event business, and believes in happy-ever-afters, must have a romantic heart.”

Jackie sat back in her chair. “Would you be surprised to learn that Daniella moved to Sapphire Bay because of a promise she made to her brother?”

Aidan was surprised. “She knows so many people I thought she must have been born and raised here.”

“She only arrived three years ago. Everything Daniella’s done was started from scratch. She didn’t know anyone, had nowhere to live, and hadn’t stayed anywhere for longer than six months.”

Aidan studied Jackie’s face. “She sounds a lot like you.”

“Except she has a great family.”

He waited for Jackie to continue, but she didn't. “Have you told your mom about the loan?”

Jackie picked up the empty plates and stacked them on top of each other. “Not yet.”

“Are you going to?”

“I'm still thinking about it. My mom has a habit of jinxing everything I do.”

Aidan picked up their empty glasses and joined Jackie at the kitchen sink. “What would stop her from jinxing your store?”

“Not telling her what I'm doing,” Jackie said half-seriously.

He knew her relationship with her mom was complicated, but it wasn't his place to tell her how she should communicate with her. “Whatever you decide to do is your choice.”

Jackie opened the dishwasher. “Now I feel guilty.” She sighed as she held out her hands for the glasses. “If I was a good daughter, I'd tell her what's happening. At least that's what Mom used to tell me. Which is hysterical considering I grew up being told I was a mistake and always made bad choices.”

Aidan didn't think there was anything funny about being told you weren't wanted, and neither did Jackie. If a person's eyes were the window to their soul, the defeated expression in their depths told him she'd tried hard to prove her mom wrong.

Opening his arms, he waited for Jackie to step into his embrace before holding her tight. “Parents can be hurtful sometimes.”

“All I wanted was to have a mom like I saw on TV. Someone who cared about what I was doing and looked after me. The only person who did that was Mrs. Green.”

“How did you meet her?” Aidan asked.

“I locked myself out of our apartment and was waiting for Mom in the corridor. Mrs. Green found me and gave me dinner. She was the sweetest lady I’ve ever met.” Jackie snuggled closer. “Thank you for being here.”

“I had to celebrate your good news. Your knitting shop will be a huge success.”

He meant every word but, as he stood with his arms wrapped around Jackie, he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling of uncertainty about his own future. Could he truly commit to staying in Sapphire Bay or would he miss his life in Manhattan?

There was only one thing he knew for sure. He didn’t want to let Jackie down like every other important relationship she’d had.

It would break both their hearts.

CHAPTER 11



Jackie sat at a makeshift front counter in the cottage that would become her knitting store. After struggling to organize anything for her store on Monday and Tuesday, she'd talked to Paris and arranged to have a week off work.

Over the last five days, she'd contacted all the people who'd wanted to sell their knitting in her store. Most of them she knew from the knitting group she'd started at the church. Those who were unfamiliar to her were sending her some samples of their work. She wanted to sell authentic hand knitted garments at reasonable prices and great quality. The last thing she needed was something that'd reflect badly on the other knitters' work.

After carrying some secondhand shelving into the store, she'd pulled her hair into a messy bun and started looking at her marketing plan.

Last weekend, Paris had shown her how to create basic ads on two different social media platforms. Today, she was creating more digital content and analyzing how those ads were doing.

Jackie had warned her friend that she was a complete novice, but that hadn't deterred Paris.

As Paris reviewed the results of last week's advertising, Jackie leaned over her laptop, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she added some information to her website and emailed a yarn supplier she'd discovered.

The dream of opening a knitting and yarn business was finally coming to life, but the fear of losing everything still gnawed at her.

“Jackie, have you tried boosting this post?” Paris asked, pointing to an advertisement for the store on her laptop. “This ad’s performing really well and it could help bring more people into your store.”

“What does boosting mean?” She expected Paris to roll her eyes, but she was just as patient as she was last week.

“Here, let me show you.” Paris sat beside her and opened Jackie’s Meta account. “With this platform, you can target specific audiences in individual countries, set a budget for your advertising, and even guide the ad toward a certain age group. It’s a great way to build your online presence.”

As Paris showed her what drop-down menus to use and how to find keywords that’d target her ads to people who enjoyed knitting, her mind raced. Until last week, the platform she’d used the most was TikTok, but that was only to see the latest puppy videos.

The thought of making videos to showcase her store was a little exciting, but mostly terrifying.

Paris grinned. “I know it seems daunting, but you’ll get the hang of it. In another week, we’ll look at how the ads we’ve created are performing. If they’re doing well, we’ll keep them going. If not, we’ll stop them.”

Next, it was A Stitch in Time’s website that got their undivided attention. As they continued working on the pages Jackie had added, her cell phone buzzed with an incoming call. Aidan’s name flashed across the screen, and her heart skipped a beat. He’d been wonderful this past week. After work each day, he’d joined her in the cottage, helping to move furniture around, unpack boxes, and even make some prefab furniture she’d bought from the general store.

Despite their growing connection, his uncertain future made her keep a part of her heart guarded. She’d be devastated when he left, but it was as inevitable as the sun rising each

morning. Aidan thrived on the pace and opportunities you could only find in big cities. She was just surprised he'd stayed in Sapphire Bay for so long.

“Hi Aidan, how are you?” Jackie asked.

“I’ve had a busy morning, but that’s not why I’m calling. Are you free this afternoon? There’s something I want to show you.”

She frowned at the urgency in his voice. “Um, sure. I’m at the cottage on Anchor Lane. Paris is helping me with my website, but we should be finished in half an hour.”

“Great. I’ll meet you out front in about thirty minutes. Wear warm clothes.”

Jackie frowned. “Where are we going?”

“I’ll explain everything when I get there. Enjoy working on your website.”

“I will,” Jackie said cautiously. “I’ll see you later.”

Paris grinned. “That sounded interesting.”

“That was Aidan. He’s taking me somewhere important in half an hour.”

Paris looked at the sheets of paper spread across the counter. “We’d better get a move on, then. We can’t hold up a man who’s got a surprise waiting for you.”

Jackie frowned. She would’ve been excited if she liked surprises. But, most of the time, she preferred to know exactly what was happening.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, Jackie grabbed her coat and scarf and met Aidan outside the cottage on Anchor Lane.

“Are you ready?” he asked as he opened the passenger door for her.

Jackie nodded and climbed in, eager to get out of the cold wind. When Aidan was inside the cab, she smiled. Along with a thick padded jacket, he was wearing a black beanie with the New York Yankees logo on the cuff. “You look ready for anything the weather can throw at us.”

He smiled back at her. “Before I flew to Sapphire Bay, David told me to bring the warmest clothes I own. When I first arrived, I thought he was exaggerating about how cold it gets, but not anymore. It’s freezing outside.”

She pulled on her seatbelt. “I’m guessing the reason you told me to dress warm is because we’ll be outside?”

“Only for some of the time.”

As Jackie tried to think of any places Aidan had talked about wanting to visit, he started the truck and turned onto Main Street. “The steamboats won’t be running if we’re going to Polson. It’s too late in the year.”

“We aren’t going that far away. It’ll only take us twenty minutes to get there.”

Jackie had been living in Sapphire Bay for long enough to know what was within a twenty-minute drive of where they were. Apart from the stores in town, The Fairy Forest, the church, and the old steamboat museum, there were only homes and a few businesses that organized outdoor adventures that close to town.

Aidan grinned. “Do you want to guess where we’re going, or do you want me to tell you?”

Jackie smiled at the teasing note in his voice. “You know I don’t like surprises, don’t you.”

“Yeah, I do. But, sometimes, it pays to live a little dangerously. I’m taking you to The Horseshoe Adventure Camp.”

It took Jackie a few seconds to work out what he meant. “Is that the camp you’re creating for children who wear prosthetics?”

Aidan nodded. “There were a few issues BioTech’s lawyers had to sort out with the vendors, but the sale’s finally gone unconditional.”

“You must be relieved.”

“More happy than relieved. The issues they were dealing with weren’t huge, but they would’ve made a difference to the activities we can offer. How’s the store going?”

Jackie smiled. “I’m getting there. Paris has been an amazing help with my marketing plan. I’m still trying to find furniture that has bucket-loads of character but doesn’t cost a fortune.”

“What are you looking for?”

Jackie thought about the antique dressers, overstuffed furniture, and secondhand tables she’d seen in a catalog. “Something that’s worn and dented with age, but still charming. I want A Stitch in Time to look and feel like somewhere you can sit with your friends and enjoy an hour of knitting together.”

Aidan glanced across the cab. “That sounds very relaxing. We’re going for the rustic farmhouse look for the camp.”

“That’ll be perfect. The children will already be imagining spending time with cowboys. Something with rustic charm will only add to their experience.”

“That’s what the architect and interior designer said, too.”

Jackie’s eyes widened. “You’re really going all out to include an interior designer in your plans.”

“We’re spending a lot of money to get the camp up and running. The better we can meet the needs of the children, the more popular it’ll be.”

As they drove farther out of town, Jackie enjoyed the winter wonderland around her. The snow-covered mountains and trees reminded her of every Christmas card she’d seen when she was younger. “Living in Montana is so different from anywhere else I’ve been. How does it compare to Manhattan?”

Aidan kept his gaze on the road. “Apart from being cold and more remote?” he asked half-jokingly.

“A lot of people come here for those things.”

“That’s something I’m beginning to appreciate. I haven’t seen a lot of Montana, but Sapphire Bay has a relaxed feel to it. I’m enjoying the scenery and meeting different people. I can’t visit my favorite Manhattan restaurants and stores but, the longer I’m here, the less it matters. Winter is more restricting than I thought, and I have no idea what will happen when it gets really cold.”

Jackie smiled. “Wait until a big storm hits us. The first time for me was terrifying. I thought the roof of The Welcome Center was going to blow off.”

“How long did you stay at The Welcome Center?”

“I was there for about eight months. Rental accommodation is so scarce that people are put off living here. Buying a house isn’t much better. I was lucky to find my cottage when I did.”

“It’s in the perfect location—close to work and near town.”

“That’s what I thought when I saw it, too.”

Aidan pointed to a barn and a group of outbuildings in the distance. “That’s the first view of the camp our guests will get.”

Jackie peered into the distance. “The barn must be huge.”

“From what I’ve seen of others in the area, it is. Inside, we’ll have the camp kitchen and dining room, additional guest accommodation, bathrooms, an indoor events area, and separate quarters for the property manager. It’ll be three floors of rustic charm.”

Jackie was looking forward to seeing it. “When will it be ready for your guests?”

“We’re hoping it’ll be finished by next May. Luckily, the previous owners were halfway through converting the barn into rental accommodation, so most of the plumbing’s already been done.”

When Aidan turned off the highway, Jackie's excitement mounted. The closer they came, the more impressive the property seemed. "This is gorgeous. It must be spectacular in the summer."

"I brought the architect's plans with me so you can see the images they've included. It'll give you an idea of how everything will look without the snow."

Jackie looked at the driveway. "Someone's been busy plowing the road."

"The contractors were out here this morning. We start remodeling the barn tomorrow."

That was a lot sooner than Jackie imagined. Aidan parked his truck and led her across to the barn. With each step, she felt the anticipation building inside her, curious to see what BioTech had planned.

"Here we are," Aidan announced, spreading his arms wide as they reached a large, weathered barn and an adjoining ranch hand accommodation wing. "This is the beginning of the guest living quarters for the camp."

Jackie's eyes widened in admiration, taking in the rustic charm of the structures. She could already envision families settling into the cozy buildings after a long day of activities, sharing stories and laughter late into the night.

"It's beautiful, even without the remodeling," she told him.

"I thought the same thing when David showed me the photos of the property. We'll be building additional cabins around this area, creating a communal area in the center of everything. It'll be perfect for campfires and family-friendly events."

"That sounds wonderful," Jackie murmured, her mind racing with thoughts of children roasting marshmallows and singing songs under the starry skies. It reminded her of her own childhood dreams, the things she imagined other families did.

Aidan took a key out of his pocket. "We've secured a contract with the equestrian center next door. They'll provide

horse riding experiences and other horse-related activities for the families. And that's not all. There'll be an adventure playground, a high-wire course in the trees, an impressive zipline, and fishing, canoeing, and rock climbing."

As she listened to Aidan's plans, Jackie was impressed with the scope of the project. She knew how much this camp would mean to the families of children who'd lost a limb, especially those like Sandy and Josh Wilson who wanted the best for their daughter but didn't have a lot of money.

Aidan pushed open the door. "We want to create a place where children and their families can escape their everyday lives and make lasting memories."

Jackie admired what he was doing. She knew he could have returned to Manhattan, but he'd chosen to invest his time and energy into creating something meaningful for other people. "BioTech's lucky to have someone like you helping with this project."

"It'll be even better if we can raise enough money to bring people here at no cost. Have a look at the plans."

As Aidan walked into the barn, Jackie's mouth dropped open. It was the most awe-inspiring building she'd been in."

Aidan grinned. "I felt the same way when I first came here. That's one of the reasons the previous owners spent a lot of money remodeling it." He placed the plans on an old table and opened them to the second page. "This is what we'll create."

Jackie studied the plans, then turned to the next page. Compared to what she was doing at her store, this project was massive.

But looking at the plans became insignificant as they wandered through the cavernous rooms. The view of the surrounding land was spectacular. You could stay here forever and never get tired of the scenery, regardless of the time of the year.

Aidan's enthusiasm for what he was helping to create was infectious. If they could bring some of that excitement to the Christmas gala, she'd be thrilled.

As they made their way to the top floor, Jackie knew Aidan was making a difference—not just in the lives of the children who'd attend the camp, but in her own life as well. And for that, she was grateful.

CHAPTER 12



Aidan stood in the doorway of Pastor John's office at The Welcome Center. He glanced around the room at the framed photos of the small-town community and tokens from his life before he came here. Like a lot of people living in Sapphire Bay, John's life included many years in the military.

From what Aidan had learned, John had created programs that helped people with PTSD in ways that traditional therapeutic programs couldn't. And that had earned him a special place in the hearts of many people.

With a light tap, he knocked on John's office door.

"Ah, Aidan, come in," Pastor John said with a warm smile. "Shelley mentioned you were coming here to discuss The Christmas Wish Program. Unfortunately, she's had to leave the office for a while, so you're stuck with me."

"That works equally as well," Aidan replied with a smile. He took a seat, appreciating the comfortable familiarity of being here. "I wanted to make sure you have enough funds for this year's Christmas wishes."

"That's thoughtful of you. We've had double the number of wishes coming into Santa's Secret Helpers this year. Life's tough for most people. Even providing food for families is getting more difficult. For the first time since the program started, we've had to prioritize who receives funding."

That didn't surprise Aidan. "I spoke to Mabel Terry when she was preparing some meals in The Welcome Center. It's bad enough trying to have a comfortable life when you have a

job, but she said a lot of the people who come here have nothing.” He took two envelopes out of his pocket and handed them to John. “The top envelope contains a donation from me. I’d like it to go toward the running costs at The Welcome Center. The second envelope contains a donation from BioTech. We’d like the money to go toward The Christmas Wish Program.”

John opened the envelope containing Aidan’s check and frowned. “This is a lot of money. Are you sure you want to donate so much?”

Aidan leaned forward, his hands clasped together. “I’ve spoken to a lot of people since I’ve been here. Each person told me a story about someone who’d come to Sapphire Bay looking for a new start. Just having The Welcome Center’s doors open, with hot meals, and rooms where people can safely stay, makes a huge difference. To provide that level of care is expensive, even with half the town helping. I wanted to make the next few months a little easier for everyone.”

“I won’t say no,” John said, “because this donation will make a huge difference. But as for the other donation, are you sure BioTech wants to give The Christmas Wish Program some money now? The gala isn’t that far away.”

Aidan sat back in his chair. “This is on top of what they’ll donate after the gala. As you said, people are finding it tough. There’ll be a lot of unexpected expenses people can’t afford, especially as we head toward Christmas. BioTech doesn’t know who needs help, but you do.”

John opened the second envelope and let out a low whistle. “This will help a lot of people. Thank you, Aidan.”

“It’s the least BioTech could do. If you need a hand to deliver any of the Christmas wishes, let me know. I’m happy to help.”

“I’ll do that.” John looked once more at the checks as if not believing they were real. Aidan couldn’t blame him. BioTech’s check for \$20,000 wasn’t as much as some donations the company made, but it would have a significant impact on what Santa’s Secret Helpers could provide.

John placed the checks back in the envelopes. “Shelley will take these to the bank as soon as she returns. How are the plans for the gala going?”

“Everything’s on schedule. Jackie and Daniella have come up with some great ideas for the event and the items people are pledging for the auction are incredible. I’ll send you an updated project plan when I get back to my office.”

“I’ll look forward to seeing it,” Pastor John said, his eyes twinkling. “Have you heard from David lately?”

“It’s funny you should ask. He sent me a photo of Andrea and the boys outside the entrance to Dollywood. They’re having a great time in Tennessee.”

“That’s wonderful,” John said, sounding genuinely pleased for the newlyweds. “I had a good feeling about David as soon as I met him.”

“He’s a great person.” As they talked about some of the other programs the church was running, the sound of singing drifted into the office. Aidan glanced toward the door.

“It sounds like the choir’s practicing for the gala,” Pastor John explained, standing up. “Would you like to watch them for a while?”

Aidan thought about the reports sitting on his desk, but they could wait. “Sure,” he agreed, following John out of the office and into the dining area.

The choir members stood in neat rows, their red T-shirts and reindeer ears adding a festive touch to the rehearsal. Aidan spotted Mr. Jessop standing proudly in the back row, his booming voice carrying over the others. A little girl rang some bells in time with the music. If he remembered correctly, her name was Nora, and Emma Devlin’s twins, Molly and Dylan, were standing beside her.

“By the way,” John whispered to Aidan. “If you’re looking for someone to promote the Christmas gala, Emma owns a successful marketing company right here in Sapphire Bay.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Aidan said, making a mental note to reach out to her later.

As they continued listening to the choir, John asked, “How’s Jackie’s knitting store coming along?”

“Slowly but surely,” Aidan replied, thinking of Jackie’s warm smile and determination. “She’s working hard, but she’s struggling to find furniture for the store. She wants something with character that doesn’t cost a fortune.”

Pastor John’s eyebrows rose. “I might be able to help her. There’s some old furniture stored at the steamboat museum. If she needs some pieces, she might want to look in there. If Jackie sees something she likes, let me know and she can have it.”

“Are you sure?” Aidan asked.

“She’ll be doing me a favor. We desperately need more room for the businesses who work from the old museum. Even having extra storage areas would make a difference. Finding a new home for some of the furniture would give me one less thing to do.”

“I’ll be sure to let her know. Thanks again, John.”

“You’re welcome.”

As the choir started another song, Aidan felt a growing sense of belonging to this tight-knit community—a feeling he’d never experienced anywhere else. As his thoughts turned to Jackie and her dream of creating a knitting store, he began to wonder if he could make a permanent difference here, too.



JACKIE LOOKED through the window of Aidan’s truck at the old steamboat museum. He’d called her an hour ago, asking if she wanted to go with him to look at some old furniture. After scouring the Internet and leaving messages on the community Facebook page, she’d almost given up on finding any furniture that would give extra character to her store.

Aidan turned off the ignition and released his seatbelt. “Richard said he’d leave the front door open.”

As well as working part time on the tiny homes, Richard owned a furniture making business. He rented space inside the old steamboat museum and created amazing tables and chairs for his clients.

Jackie opened her door and pulled up the zipper on her jacket. “Did you know a letter written by Abraham Lincoln was found in a dresser that was stored here?”

Aidan’s warm hands wrapped around hers. “I know about the dresser, but not where it was stored. We’ll have to make sure we do a thorough search of any furniture you like.”

Jackie grinned. “Imagine if we found some other priceless treasure.”

“I’m sure someone’s already thought the same thing and looked through everything.”

“Maybe, but it’s nice to think there could be a bigger mystery waiting to be solved.” Jackie opened one of the large front doors and peeked inside. She’d driven past the old steamboat museum many times, but never stopped. “This is lovely.”

Aidan followed her into the large foyer. His gaze lifted to the vaulted ceiling, then traveled down the red-brick walls and across the wide reception desk. “Penny told me about a friendly ghost who used to prowl the corridors of this building. Everyone called him Old Man Biggins.”

Instead of being worried, Jackie felt even more at home. “At least he enjoyed this lovely old building when everyone else had given up on it.”

Aidan looked at her strangely. “You aren’t even a little worried?”

“Not about a friendly ghost. There are worse things in life to get stressed about.”

“That’s true.” Aidan took his phone out of his pocket. “Pastor John said Richard’s still here, so we don’t need to worry about locking up after we’ve finished. If we walk straight ahead, then take the second door on our left into another corridor, the storage rooms will be down there.”

Jackie took a flashlight out of her bag. “That sounds pretty straightforward.”

Aidan’s eyes crinkled at the corners when she turned on her handy-dandy flashlight. “There’s electricity in the rooms.”

“You *hope* there’s electricity,” Jackie said. “I’ve visited so many buildings where we were supposed to set up floral arrangements, but someone forgot to tell us where the main power switch is. Especially when it’s a building that’s this big.”

His eyes focused on her large tote bag. “What else do you have in there?”

“Just the usual equipment I take to a client’s venue.” She opened the bag and looked inside. “Spare batteries for the flashlight, a measuring tape, notebook, pencil, ruler, magnifying glass—although that shouldn’t be in here. A pair of florist’s scissors, a coil of florist’s wire, and a face mask.” She pulled out a card and frowned. “And a loyalty card for Starbucks. I don’t know why that’s there.”

Aidan laughed. “At least you have good taste in coffee.”

She walked toward the first door they had to go through. “Andrea’s café is much better than Starbucks.” When Aidan didn’t say anything, she grinned. “Are you still hankering after their grande cappuccinos with cinnamon swirls on top?”

“I might be a little homesick for their coffee.”

Jackie opened the door and stepped into a dim corridor. Feeling rather pleased with herself, she flicked on her flashlight, then turned it off when Aidan found the light switch.

He grinned. “I told you there’d be electricity.”

“We haven’t found the storage rooms yet.” With excitement building inside her, Jackie stopped in front of another door. “How many storage rooms did Pastor John say there were?”

“Four off this corridor,” Aidan replied. “If we don’t find anything in these rooms, he said to ask Richard to show us the

others.”

Placing her hand on an old wooden handle, Jackie opened the door. When she turned on the light switch, two bare bulbs dangling from the ceiling cast a pale glow across the covered furniture in front of them.

“Oh, my goodness,” Jackie whispered, her breath sending puffs of dust swirling around them. “I doubt many people know these storage rooms exist. Look how far back it goes.”

She swung the beam of her flashlight toward the back wall. Her entire cottage would easily fit inside the cavernous space. And what was even more exciting were the drop cloths covering all sorts of shapes.

Aidan lifted the edge of the drop cloth closest to them and showed Jackie the dark brown mahogany dresser. “It’s like stepping back in time.”

Before he moved onto the next piece of furniture, she pulled out her measuring tape. Quickly, she made a note of the length and height of the dresser. “It’s a little too small for the cottage, but if we can find another one that’s longer, it could be perfect.”

Clutching the measuring tape in one hand, she moved to the next drop cloth. After Pastor John had so generously offered her any of the furniture, she was determined to make the most of the opportunity.

Aidan wiped a cobweb away from where he was about to walk. “Let’s see what we can find.”

They maneuvered through the room, uncovering ornate armchairs and sturdy wooden tables. Jackie carefully measured each piece, meticulously calculating how they might fit into her store.

“Look at this old sewing machine.” Aidan lifted a dusty sheet to reveal a cast-iron Singer. “Do you think you could use it?”

“I might be able to,” Jackie mused, running her fingers over the intricate metalwork. “It would add a nice touch of history to the store.”

Aidan took the drop cloth completely off the sewing machine. “Let’s move it into the hallway. If you think you’ve still got room for it after we’ve looked at everything, we can take it back with the other furniture.”

“That sounds good.” The sewing machine was heavier than it looked, but they wiggled it out of the room without too much drama.

As they continued their search, Jackie was surprised no one had collected the pieces they were looking at. Even the scratched and dented furniture was gorgeous.

“Jackie, come and look at this,” Aidan said, pulling back a sheet to reveal a beautifully carved oak bookcase. “This would be great for displaying your yarns and knitted items.”

She made her way across to him. “It’s beautiful.” Her tape measure clicked as she stretched it across the bookcase, praying it would fit. When she checked the size against the floor plan of the store, she smiled. “It’ll fit perfectly beside the fireplace.”

“That’s wonderful. Pastor John said to take a photo of the pieces you like and leave a yellow Sticky Note on them. If they’re too heavy for us to take, John will ask Richard to organize some of the students in the construction program to take them to Anchor Lane.”

Jackie snapped a picture with her cell phone. “That makes it easy.”

Together, they found several pieces of furniture, each one a testament to the town’s history and a symbol of Jackie’s bright future. As they added a Sticky Note to the last table, she felt she was one step closer to achieving her dream—a dream that, until very recently, had felt just as unreachable as the moon.

CHAPTER 13



Aidan stepped out of his truck in his running gear, his cheeks flushed from the warmth inside the cab. A light dusting of snow covered the ground, making the landscape around Flathead Lake even more picturesque than usual.

David was waiting for him by the lake's edge, hands shoved into his pockets to keep warm. When he saw Aidan, he jogged across to meet him. "It's good to see you. I've missed our runs."

Aidan grinned. "Welcome back, honeymooner. How was Tennessee?"

"Amazing. We all loved the Great Smoky Mountains, but Dollywood was Andy and Charlie's favorite. They went on all the roller coasters at least three times."

Aidan stretched out his calf muscles. "I thought they'd enjoy them. When I went there with my sister's family, her twins loved the rides, too. Are you ready for a run?"

"Don't go too fast. I didn't hit the gym once while we were away."

Aidan's eyebrows rose. "There wouldn't be many people who'd want to spend an hour or two in the gym on their honeymoon."

David grinned. "It wasn't quite like you're imagining. Although Andy and Charlie kept us on our toes. I don't know whether they were more excited about being away from school or seeing somewhere they'd never been before."

“I vote for being off school.” Aidan started jogging, his breath visible in the cold air as he began their familiar route around the lake.

“What’s been happening in Sapphire Bay?” David asked.

“You’ll be happy to know that Daniella and Jackie have been hard at work planning the Christmas gala,” Aidan shared, breathing faster as they picked up the pace. “It’ll be an incredible event. The items are already coming in for the auction.”

“Did you find somewhere to store them?”

Aidan nodded. “Daniella has some space in The Fairy Forest. I’ll send you a list of what’s being donated and an updated project plan on Monday.”

“I’ll look forward to seeing them. Has anything happened about Jackie’s store?”

Aidan smiled. “The bank’s lending her enough money to start the business. A few days ago, she signed the lease on the cottage beside Andrea’s café. It’ll be tough for the first year or two, but she’s doing everything she can to make it work.”

David started the timer on his watch. “She must be excited.”

“She can’t wait to open the store. Two knitting groups have already booked in to have their weekly meetings in the cottage.”

Aidan was proud of what she’d achieved and hoped that everything worked out for her.

For the next few minutes, he ran in easy silence beside David. With their breath coming in steady bursts, he slowly increased their pace and was pleased to see his friend keeping up with him.

“I’ll never get tired of this scenery,” David murmured as their shoes pounded against the boardwalk.

“I’ll second that,” Aidan said. “Some days I have to pinch myself when I look around me. I took Jackie out to the

adventure camp the other day. It was even more spectacular than the last time I was there.”

“Was that because Jackie was with you or because of the scenery?”

“It was probably a bit of both.” Aidan looked ahead of them and frowned. “I like her a lot, but I’m not sure what we’re going to do.”

“In what way?”

Aidan glanced at his friend. Of all the people he knew, David would understand the most about how difficult it was to have a relationship with someone who lived halfway across the country.

“How did you and Andrea get to know each other when you were still working most of the time from Manhattan?”

David slowed to a jog. “It wasn’t easy. And I still miss her when I go back to catch up with the rest of the team.” He looked into the distance, and then glanced at Aidan. “You have to work out if the potential in what you’re feeling is worth the risk. And you need to be honest with each other. Andrea told me from the beginning she wouldn’t leave Sapphire Bay. She was opening her own business and the boys were happy.”

Aidan frowned. “Did you think she’d change her mind once you spent more time together?”

“A part of me wanted her to, but that was wishful thinking. She has as much right to choose where she wants to live as I do, possibly more when you take the boys into consideration. Has Jackie said she wants to stay in Sapphire Bay?”

Aidan nodded. “I can understand why she likes living here, but I’m going back to Manhattan.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“As sure as I can be. Half of my team will still be working from our head office. I like New York City. It’s close to my family and friends, and has everything I’ll ever need.”

David increased his pace. “Except Jackie.”

As David's feet flew along the boardwalk, Aidan followed him at a slower pace. He thought about his life in Manhattan and tried to imagine it without having Jackie living close by. He'd miss her easy smile and the things she said that made him laugh. He'd miss dropping into The Flower Cottage and taking her out for dinner at one of the family-owned restaurants on Main Street. But was that enough to make him want to sell his apartment and move here?

David turned around and called out to him, "Are you coming or will I win our race again?"

Picking up his pace, Aidan caught up to him. "I'm buying coffee afterward, anyway. It's the least I can do for a man who has a wife and two boys to look after."

David grinned. "It's called marital bliss. One day, you might know all about it."

If thinking about leaving Jackie behind made Aidan feel sick, marrying her or anyone else, terrified him.

As they ran side by side, he knew he had a lot to think about. He didn't want to lose Jackie, but he also wasn't sure he was ready to uproot his life in Manhattan.

And, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find an easy compromise that would suit either of them.



JACKIE STOOD in the middle of the organized chaos of her soon-to-be knitting store. For the last forty minutes, a group of men from the church's construction program had been lifting the furniture she'd found at the old steamboat museum into the cottage.

As she asked two muscly men to move a sideboard a foot to the right, she wondered if she'd get everything in the correct place before they had to leave.

Holding the plan of where everything would go in her hand, she hurried across to the front door. Another four men stood on the veranda, about to lift the oak bookcase Aidan had

found into the cottage. Bending in unison, they picked up the heavy piece of furniture and carefully maneuvered it through the doorway, their brows furrowed in concentration.

“Watch the door frame!” Jackie called out as they struggled to fit it inside. They exchanged glances and reluctantly backed out of the door and started again. “You’re doing a great job,” she told them. And they were. None of the furniture was light and, apart from the old-fashioned chairs she’d found, everything was an awkward shape.

She hurried across to another two men who were moving a large, rectangular table across the room. “Let’s put it here,” she told them, pointing toward a corner near the window. “If you sit it about four feet from the wall, it’ll be perfect for a knitting group to use.”

The men nodded and set to work. As they lowered the last piece of furniture into place, Andrea arrived with a tray of takeout coffee and cookies. She beamed at Jackie, her eyes twinkling with excitement.

“I thought everyone could use some fuel after all that hard work,” she said, setting the tray down on a just-assembled table.

The men who were helping were incredibly grateful. With a chorus of thanks, they left the cottage with their hands full of coffee and cookies, and smiles on their faces.

Jackie sank into a chair and sighed. “I’m glad everything could be lifted into the cottage in one piece.”

Andrea handed her a takeout cup of coffee. “It looks fabulous, and it didn’t take that long to get everything sorted.”

Taking a sip of her coffee, Jackie enjoyed the warmth and comfort it brought her. “This is divine. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’m dying to know where you found all this gorgeous furniture. It’s perfect for what you wanted to create.”

Jackie looked around the store. Even with the layers of dust and grime still covering each piece, they gave the cottage

a cozy feel that would have been hard to replicate with new furniture.

“Pastor John offered me some furniture from the old steamboat museum. Most of what you see came from there. But these chairs and a couple of the small coffee tables came from an estate sale in Bigfork. I bought the table from a house a few miles out of Polson. With a few modifications, it’ll make a wonderful sales counter.”

Andrea looked over her shoulder at the table. “You’re right. All you need is a shelving unit on each end, and it’ll be great.”

Jackie reached for a cookie. “Talking about great, how was Tennessee? The photos you posted on Facebook were amazing.”

“The boys loved every minute. David was so patient. It didn’t matter what Andy and Charlie wanted to do or how long it took, he was happy to stay with them if it made them happy. We ate some delicious meals and had so much fun.”

Andrea deserved all the happiness in the world. Her first marriage was an absolute disaster, and Jackie couldn’t imagine how scary it must have been starting a new relationship with David.

Andrea bit into a cookie. “Now, tell me how you’re doing. And, by the way, I love the name you’ve chosen for your store. A Stitch in Time conjures up everything you wanted your business to become.”

Jackie smiled at her friend’s enthusiasm. “I’m glad you stopped by. I needed someone to lift the doom and gloom off my shoulders. We’re so busy at The Flower Cottage that organizing my store and creating the Christmas gala for Aidan is almost too much.”

“It won’t be long until you finish working with Paris. After that, you can look forward to working in your own store.”

“That’s the part that worries me the most,” Andrea confessed. “All it will take is some unforeseen event and I could be bankrupt.”

Andrea squeezed her hand. “Don’t let it get you down. We’re all in the same boat, but we manage to keep our heads above the water.”

“I’ll try not to let it worry me. I’d like to show you something.” Jackie collected a box from the far side of the room. “Kathleen Armstrong showed me these sweaters she’d knitted. She wanted to know if I was interested in selling them.” Carefully, she lifted the first piece of knitting out of the box. The pale pink sweater was perfect in every way. “Isn’t it adorable?”

Andrea touched the arm of the sweater.

With its delicate lace-like pattern running from the neckline to the hem, it was one of the most feminine knitted sweaters Jackie had seen.

“The color’s amazing,” Andrea said. “And the pattern is pretty without being too flouncy. Does that make sense?”

“They were my thoughts, too. Here’s the next one.”

Andrea let out a soft sigh. “I *love* this one. The deep burgundy wool is so me. How much would you sell it for?”

Jackie had discussed the prices with Kathleen last night. Wanting to keep her commission as low as possible, they’d found a fair price that suited them both. Turning over the sales tag, she showed Andrea.

“Sold to the owner of The Starlight Café,” Andrea said with a grin.

Jackie’s eyes widened. “Are you buying this because you genuinely need a sweater or are you doing it to make me feel better?”

“I always need another sweater, especially at this time of the year. Besides, David’s taking the boys and me out to dinner tomorrow night. It’d be nice to wear something new.”

With a smile, she handed Andrea the sweater. “Pay me when it suits you. Kathleen’s giving me another four sweaters tonight. If you change your mind and want one of the other ones, we can switch them around.”

“That’s awesome. Thank you.”

As Jackie took another sip of coffee, she looked around the store. “If Pastor John hadn’t been so generous with the furniture, I’d still be hunting through second-hand stores and searching the Internet. Because everything’s almost ready, I’m considering opening the store a little earlier.”

“That’d be well worth it,” Andrea said. “Everyone in town notices a spike in sales from early November because of the pre-Christmas rush. What about your website? Will that be ready in time?”

“I’m sure it will be. Emma Devlin’s designing a Shopify store for me. She created Ben’s for him when he rebranded The Christmas Tree Farm.”

“His website’s fantastic. So, what do you have planned for the grand opening?”

Jackie hesitated, taken aback by the question. “Well, I hadn’t really thought about it. What if I just opened the store quietly?”

Andrea shook her head firmly. “Definitely not. This is a huge accomplishment, and you deserve to celebrate it properly. Let’s brainstorm some ideas to make your grand opening special.”

“As long as special doesn’t come with a huge budget, I’m happy to do it.”

“We don’t need a lot of money to organize something that’ll attract people to the store,” Andrea assured her. “Do you have a pen and some paper?”

As they sat together, sipping coffee and discussing plans for the grand opening, Jackie felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for her newfound stability, the support of her friends, and the chance to create something meaningful in Sapphire Bay.

CHAPTER 14



Aidan sat behind his laptop at The Lakeside Inn, staring at the job offer on his computer. The hum of people talking in the entryway faded into the background as he processed the reality of what was in front of him. He took a deep breath and allowed the scent of freshly brewed coffee to calm his nerves.

He'd met the owners of the company at a start-up expo earlier in the year. He was impressed with the technology they'd developed to give spinal injury patients the ability to move like everyone else. Unlike other products in development, their exoskeleton was lightweight and easily adaptable to whatever situation their clients needed. They'd had an interesting conversation about the industry they were both in, but he hadn't thought anything of it.

Until the phone call he'd had with their managing director yesterday. After restructuring their company, they were offering him a job that could take his career to a whole new level.

A few minutes ago, the job description they'd promised had arrived. He'd be leading a team of twenty-five bio-mechanical engineers and IT specialists. He'd earn significantly more money than he did at BioTech and have the use of a company apartment in Miami for a year.

Unfortunately, it would also mean leaving behind the redevelopment of his team's research area in Sapphire Bay and the camp for children who wear prosthetics—a project that held a special place in his heart. And, more importantly, it could mean the end of his relationship with Jackie.

Last night, even before he'd seen the job description, he'd tossed and turned, torn between his career and how he felt about her.

An early morning run hadn't helped, either. He'd thought that once he saw the job description, it'd be an easy decision. Nothing could motivate him more than the work he was doing with BioTech. But, as well as providing a job description, they'd outlined the progress they'd made in their clinical trials. And it was astounding.

Pushing back his chair, Aidan stood up. He needed advice from someone who wasn't as emotionally involved in the decision as he was. He wouldn't speak to Jackie. Not yet anyway. If he spoke to David, he'd be understandably upset. If he left the company, Aidan wasn't sure what would happen to the projects he was working on.

There was only one other person he could talk to. Hopefully, Pastor John could help him weigh the pros and cons of working with a new company. Because there was more at stake than the relocation costs to Florida. If he left BioTech, he'd be ending any chance of discovering if Jackie was the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Pulling out his phone, he called the church. If John was busy doing something else, he'd throw on his running gear and try to work through what he was going to do.

Because, right now, he didn't have a clue.



AS AIDAN APPROACHED John's office, the weight of the decision he had to make settled heavily on his chest. He knocked gently on John's open door before stepping inside.

"Hi, John. Thanks for seeing me."

John smiled and moved around his desk. "You caught me at the right time. Shelley's making sure everything's running smoothly with the new program we've started, so I've got time to talk. Would you like a coffee?"

Aidan shook his head. “No, thanks. I’ve had triple my daily quota already.”

“In that case, come and have a seat.” John gestured toward the comfy chairs on the far side of the room. “What’s on your mind?”

Aidan ran his hand through his hair. “A company that’s based in Miami has offered me a job that’s almost too good to turn down. It’s a senior manager’s position at another medical-technology company. They’re developing an exoskeleton for people with spinal injuries. It’ll transform people’s lives.”

John’s eyes widened. “I thought you enjoyed working for BioTech.”

“I do, but it’s an incredible opportunity,” Aidan replied. “But, if I accept the position, I’ll be letting a lot of people down if I leave BioTech.”

“That’s always a factor in any decision. Have you achieved what you wanted to do at BioTech?”

Aidan sighed. “Some days I feel as though I’m just beginning. Each month, we’re discovering another way to push the technology we’re using into areas that would’ve been impossible two years ago. The enhancements to the prosthetics we’re working on will blow most people’s minds when they see them.”

John looked at him thoughtfully. “Would you be happy leaving your job with BioTech?”

Aidan didn’t have to think twice about his answer. And that was the problem. “I could keep working with BioTech for the rest of my life and never be disappointed. The problem is, I’d enjoy working with the other company, too. I’m sure their engineering team’s developing software they’re excited about. But it’s not just the job that’s giving me sleepless nights. Jackie and I have just started dating and I’m worried about how this will affect our relationship.”

John nodded. “I saw you at the Bar and Grill the other night. It looked as though you were enjoying each other’s company.”

“She’s an amazing woman. Living here is important to her.” Aidan hesitated before continuing. “I think it’d be the end of our relationship if I took the job in Miami. I could work from Manhattan or Sapphire Bay with BioTech, but not with the new job.”

John leaned back in his chair. He studied Aidan for a moment before asking, “What’s your heart telling you to do?”

For a brief second, Aidan closed his eyes. Not knowing what he wanted was gnawing away at him. “I don’t know. I feel privileged to work for BioTech. We’re doing some amazing things with the prosthetics. The feedback we’re getting from our clients is incredible. I’d like to stay with BioTech, but opportunities like this don’t come along often.

John nodded. “Have you spoken to Jackie about the job offer?”

“Not yet. She’s stressed enough about the opening of her store. I don’t want to add to her problems.”

John looked at Aidan with a knowing expression. “I understand your concerns, but have you considered that Jackie might want what’s best for you? If this job is a dream come true for you, then she might encourage you to take it.”

Aidan frowned. “But what if it means the end of our relationship?”

“Relationships are about compromise,” John replied. “If you’re truly meant to be together, then distance won’t be an obstacle. But if it’s not meant to be, then it’s better to find out now rather than later.”

Aidan nodded slowly, considering John’s words. “You’re right. I need to talk to Jackie and see where we stand.”

“That would be my advice,” John said. “I know it won’t be easy, but you have a good heart, Aidan. You’ll make the right choice.”

By the time Aidan left the church, he felt better than he had before he’d arrived. As he crossed the parking lot, he looked around him at the picturesque small town that had become his temporary home. He thought about the people he’d

met, the connections that were pulling him deeper into a community where everyone truly cared about each other.

Returning to Manhattan would've been bad enough. But was he willing to give up everything he had for a job in Miami, even if it meant leaving behind the woman he was falling in love with?



JACKIE HAD BEEN THINKING about calling her mom for the last few days. Each time her friends asked if she'd told her, she'd felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Even though her mom wasn't the most supportive person in the world, Jackie tried to think the best of her.

Someday, her mom might even surprise her—at least that's what she told herself before she spoke to her. Jackie bit her bottom lip. If she didn't call her now, she'd have another sleepless night and find even more excuses not to tell her.

Clutching her phone, she pressed the call button. While she waited for her mom to answer, she paced back and forth in her living room, glancing at the yarn-filled baskets and boxes of knitting waiting to be taken into the store. There was still so much to do. So many things that could go wrong. Taking a deep breath, she tried to silence the doubts making her stomach churn.

“Hello?” Carissa's voice rang out from the other end of the line.

“Hi, Mom,” Jackie said, her voice wavering slightly. “I thought I'd call to see how you're doing.”

The silence on the other end of the phone was deafening. “It's been so long since you called that I thought you'd forgotten about me.”

Jackie's hand tightened around her cell phone. There was no point telling her mom she could have called her. That conversation would only end in an argument.

“I've been busy at The Flower Cottage.”

Her mom's half-hearted laugh wasn't a good sign. "I can't believe you're still there. I thought the novelty of living in a small town would've rubbed off already."

"I like living in Sapphire Bay," Jackie told her. "There are a lot of wonderful people here and everyone in the community helps each other."

"Are you still part of that little Christmas group?"

Jackie frowned. "Are you talking about Santa's Secret Helpers?"

"That's the one. It's so quaint delivering mystery gifts to people. Although I still don't know why it's a year-round thing. After all, Christmas only happens in December."

Jackie rubbed her forehead. She'd heard the same comment when she first told her mom about the group. "It's because people need things throughout the year. We want to make a positive difference in people's lives whenever they need help."

Carissa sighed. "Well, if you ask me, it's a waste of money and time. But who am I to judge what you're doing?"

Her mom was right. She didn't have a right to judge other people. Especially when she did as little as possible for anyone else.

Jackie took a deep breath and focused on a baby's jacket sitting half-finished on the coffee table. "I wanted to tell you something, Mom."

"I'm listening," Carissa prompted, sounding disinterested.

"When I started working at The Flower Cottage, I told you about the cottage Paris remodeled to create her store. Well, there were another three the county was turning into small businesses. The second cottage became a café, and the third opened recently as a quilting store. I've just signed the lease on the fourth cottage."

"Whatever for?" Carissa asked.

"I'm opening a knitting and yarn store," Jackie announced, trying to infuse her voice with confidence. "As well as wool,

needles, patterns, and everything else people need to get started, I'll sell my own knitting."

"Really?" Carissa's skepticism was palpable. "Has anyone told you your little hobby isn't the type of thing you can earn money from."

"People are already buying my knitting," Jackie reminded her. "I have a website and a loyal following. I've contacted other groups around Flathead Lake and a lot of people want to sell their knitting in my store. It'll be like a community co-operative."

Carissa huffed. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into. It takes more than loyalty to pay your rent and utilities. Who would want to buy all that wool and knitting stuff in a small town like Sapphire Bay?"

Jackie bristled but tried to keep her voice steady. "Well, there are a lot of people here who enjoy knitting, and that doesn't include the tourists who come to town."

"Jackie," her mother sighed, "you know I worry about you. It's a risky venture. What if it doesn't work out? You could lose everything and end up homeless again."

Feeling the sting of her mother's words, Jackie changed the subject. "So, how's Samuel? How are things going between you two?"

"Samuel?" Carissa scoffed. "We broke up months ago. I'm living with someone new now. His name's Taylor and he's such a honey. He's originally from Wyoming, but he's been living in Georgia for the last ten years. Next time he's flying home to see his family, we'll go a little farther and visit you in Montana."

Jackie's heart sank at the prospect of her mother coming to Sapphire Bay. She didn't need more doubt and negativity in her life right now. But she swallowed down her apprehension and forced a smile into her voice. "That sounds nice, Mom."

"Anyway," Carissa continued, "when is this store of yours opening?"

"In about three-and-a half weeks," Jackie replied.

“Is there anything you need from me?” her mother asked, though Jackie sensed the lack of enthusiasm in her tone.

Jackie shook her head, even though her mother couldn't see the gesture. “No, Mom. I just wanted to tell you about it. That's all.”

“Well, good luck with everything. And don't leave it so long between phone calls. I care about you.”

Jackie wondered if her mom's latest boyfriend was with her. It would make her sound as though she genuinely cared about what Jackie was doing. “I'll let you know how the store's going once I've opened.”

“You do that, but don't say I didn't warn you. You're not getting any younger. Being in debt isn't something you should take lightly.”

And with those depressing words ringing in Jackie's ears, her mother ended the call.

As Jackie stared at her phone, she felt a mixture of sadness and determination wash over her. It was clear her mother didn't believe in her dream, but she refused to let that stop her. She'd prove her mom wrong and make her knitting store a success, no matter what it took.

CHAPTER 15



Aidan walked toward Jackie's store, his breath visible in the crisp winter air. He watched her through the window as she lifted a box of knitting supplies onto the front counter, her auburn hair escaping from her knitted hat.

A growing sense of dread filled him as he looked around the store. Over the last few days, the tables and shelves had gradually filled with more knitting. The shipment of magazines and books she'd ordered must have arrived. They sat on the bookcase they'd found in the old steamboat museum, waiting to be displayed on the shelves.

Everything in the store had been carefully chosen to make her customers' experience better than they expected. And it showed. From the comfy chairs and wooden craft table, it was everything people could ever need.

As he pushed open the door, the familiar tinkling of the bell announced his arrival.

"Hello, stranger," Jackie said, her warm smile lighting up her face. "I haven't seen you in three days."

"Work has been hectic," Aidan replied, running a hand through his hair. He approached her, taking in the colorful yarns and delicate baby clothes sitting in another box beside her.

Jackie kissed his cheek. "While you're here, do you want to go over what's happening with the Christmas gala?"

Her eyes were full of excitement. He just hoped she was feeling as positive when he left. "Let's wait until we meet with

Daniella in a couple of days,” Aidan suggested, trying to delay the inevitable conversation he knew they needed to have. Jackie nodded in agreement. “That’s fine by me. You’ll be impressed when we tell you what we’ve organized.”

He ran his knuckles gently over her cheek. “I’m always impressed by what you’re doing.”

A soft blush filled Jackie’s cheeks. “And that’s why I like you.”

She frowned when he stepped away. This was going to be so much harder than he thought.

Jackie pulled the box of knitting closer and started to unpack it. “I called my mom today,” she mentioned casually, as if it wasn’t a big deal. “The conversation went exactly as I expected, but I’m glad I called her.”

Aidan leaned against the counter. From his perspective, it didn’t look as though she was glad. “What did she say?”

“To be careful or I’ll end up homeless again.”

Aidan’s eyebrows rose. Why would any parent say that to their child, especially when Jackie thought carefully about everything she did? “That sounds like the sort of conversation you didn’t need.”

“That’s my mom, for you.” Jackie turned to face him. “I don’t know whether her negativity is her way of saying she worries about me, or if she’s so caught up in her own life that she can’t see anything positive in mine.”

Aidan placed his hand on hers. “It’s probably a little of both. You’ve found somewhere you can call home and people who care about you. Maybe your mom is still trying to find her place in the world.”

Jackie forced a smile. “At the moment, her place is in Georgia with a man called Taylor. If he’s anything like her last few boyfriends, their relationship will be over by Christmas.” Jackie bit her bottom lip. “Sorry. That sounds mean, and I didn’t want it to.”

“It’s all right. From what you’ve said, your relationship with your mom hasn’t been easy.”

Jackie lifted her chin. “I try to do things that’ll make her proud of me, but whatever I do is never good enough. After I’ve spoken to her, I’m angry with myself for trying. I just feel disappointed and let down.”

Aidan rubbed her shoulder. “You’re a great person. Unfortunately, your mom’s missing out on being part of everything you’ve achieved.”

Jackie nodded. “I’ll have to remember that the next time I call her.” Taking a deep breath, she held up a baby’s jacket. “Let’s talk about something more enjoyable than my mom. Isn’t this adorable? A lady from Bigfork dropped it off with another two boxes of knitting from her craft group.”

The pale blue knitted jacket, with its hood and bright red buttons was cute, but not as important as the woman standing beside him, creating a better life for herself.

“You’ll have customers lining up to see the gorgeous hand-knitting you’re selling.”

“That’s the plan,” Jackie said with a genuine smile as she unpacked more baby clothes. “Tell me about your day.”

As much as he wanted to keep things light-hearted, Aidan couldn’t hold back the news any longer. With trepidation, he began, “Jackie, I’ve been offered a Job in Miami.”

Her hands stilled, and her face became blank, like a canvas suddenly wiped clean. “What sort of job?”

“I’d be working for a company that’s developing a product that allows people with spinal injuries to move like you and me. It builds on everything I’m doing at BioTech.”

Jackie cleared her throat. “I didn’t know you were looking for another job.”

“I wasn’t,” Aidan told her. “I met the managing director of the company earlier in the year. He told me what they’re doing and some of the challenges they’ve had to overcome. He must have remembered the conversation we had. A few days ago,

he called me and told me about a new position they were creating. He asked if I was interested in looking at it, and I said yes.”

Jackie’s eyes widened. “You’d move to Florida? What about the family and friends you’d miss in New York City?”

He looked uncomfortably at her. “I know that was one of the reasons I said I wouldn’t move to Montana, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of opportunity.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

He hesitated. “I don’t know. What do you think I should do?”

Jackie pulled another tiny outfit from the box. She wasn’t looking at him, wasn’t revealing anything about how she was feeling. “You should do what’s best for you.”

Aidan knew how much she valued the security she’d found in Sapphire Bay, and he didn’t want to be the one to disrupt it. “If I take the job, would you still want to be part of my life?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Jackie, please be honest with me,” he said softly. “I need to know how you feel about us and our future together.”

Her gaze locked on the box in front of her. “I really care about you, Aidan. But you can’t base your decision on me. You need to do what’s best for you.”

Her words hung in the air between them, as fragile as the snowflakes that were falling outside. Aidan’s heart ached, torn between the woman he’d found in Sapphire Bay and the opportunity waiting for him in Miami.



TWO DAYS LATER, Jackie tapped on the back door to The Starlight Café and poked her head around the door frame. Andrea was in the kitchen, wiping down the stainless-steel counter. “Is it okay if I come in?”

“Of course, it is. It’s nice to have someone here while I’m putting everything away.”

Jackie moved across to the commercial dishwasher. “Would you like me to empty this?”

“That’d be fabulous. How was work?”

“Busy, but not as busy as you were. I saw the people leaving the café half an hour ago. Were they all from the book club?”

“Most of them were. I don’t know how Mabel attracts such large numbers to the group, but I’m pleased she does.”

Jackie smiled. “I’m sure they enjoy the food at your café as much as the book discussion. Did they like your new menu?”

Andrea grinned, hands on her hips. “They loved it. They’re already planning the next get-together. Oh, and Mabel told me the Christmas Carol Competition is going to be bigger this year.”

“That’ll make it even better than it usually is.” Jackie took a stack of cups across to the open shelves. “I love that event. I can’t wait to see what everyone sings.”

“Me neither.” Andrea leaned against the counter, studying Jackie with concern. “How are you holding up? You look exhausted.”

Jackie rubbed her temples, feeling the weight of everything that was happening in her life. “I’m managing. Splitting my time between The Flower Cottage and organizing my store is difficult. Paris has been incredibly supportive, but it’s getting harder. I’ve been staying up late to work on things.”

“It shows,” Andrea said gently, her gaze lingering on the dark shadows beneath Jackie’s eyes. “You need to take care of yourself.”

Jackie sighed, knowing her friend was right. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” she admitted. “Aidan got a job offer in Miami. I’m worried he’ll take it and I’ll never see him again.”

“Wow, that’s unexpected,” Andrea murmured, her brow furrowed with sympathy.

“Tell me about it. I thought working from Manhattan would be bad enough, but at least he could’ve worked from Sapphire Bay for some of the time. But that’s not possible with the job he’s been offered.”

“Do you think he’ll accept it?”

Jackie lifted another dozen plates out of the dishwasher. “I don’t know. He’s seriously considering it, but he wanted to know what I thought.”

“What did you say?” Andrea asked.

“I told him he needs to make the right decision for himself.”

“Is that what you really think?”

Andrea’s gentle question brought tears to Jackie’s eyes. “I don’t want him to leave, but he will. It doesn’t matter whether it’s New York City or Florida, he won’t be happy living in Sapphire Bay.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Andrea said firmly. “From what I’ve seen, Aidan’s a wonderful man. As soon as he realizes what he’d be giving up by leaving, he’ll think carefully about his future.”

It was his future Jackie was worried about. “His team’s designing prosthetics that are better than anything else on the market. He wanted to make a difference in amputees’ lives, and he has. The camp he’s helping to create is just as important, but he’s already finalizing the design. Once that’s done, he won’t have as much involvement in that project. It’ll only be a matter of time before he gets bored and goes back to Manhattan.”

Instead of looking worried, Andrea smiled. “Are you sure you aren’t exaggerating? Aidan doesn’t seem the type to get bored easily.”

Jackie sighed. “I’ve been so busy that I don’t know what day of the week it is, let alone whether I’m reading too much

into the job he's been offered."

Andrea rubbed her arm. "Take it from someone who's been exactly where you are—if it's meant to work out, it will."

Jackie frowned. "What would you do?"

Andrea poured two cups of coffee. "I don't know. David wasn't going to stay in Sapphire Bay, either. But he decided he wanted to build a life here with me and the boys. He still flies back to Manhattan to see the rest of his staff, but most of the time he works from here. I'm not sure what would've happened if he didn't have the option of working remotely. Would you move to Miami?"

Jackie took the coffee Andrea gave her. "That's the last thing I want to do. I like my life here. I've made great friends and I'm safe. I've never felt that way before and I don't want to leave."

"Well, I'm glad you feel that way," Andrea said as she took a sip of coffee. "When does Aidan have to tell the company whether he's accepting the job?"

"I'm not sure, but I can't imagine it'll be too far away. Please don't say anything to David about the job offer. I don't know if Aidan's discussed it with him."

Andrea smiled. "My lips are sealed. Now tell me what you're up to with your store. Mabel said you've been sent a lot of boxes of hand-knitting."

"I have, and they're all amazing," Jackie told her friend. "Emma and I start my social media advertising next week, and the last set of neon lights I've ordered should arrive by then, too."

"I'll have to stop by the store. When does the signage for above the veranda arrive?"

"Next week. I can't wait to see it."

"Neither can I," Andrea said with a grin. "It'll be the most talked about store in Sapphire Bay."

"That's what I'm hoping, too. And after my customers buy their grandchildren some amazing outfits and restock on pure

Montana wool, they can have a coffee and something to eat at your café.”

“That sounds like a great idea to me,” Andrea said with a grin. “And if they visit Shona’s quilt store and Paris’ flower shop, everyone will be happy.”

Jackie wished it was that simple. Right now, the thought of Aidan leaving Sapphire Bay made her feel miserable. But there was nothing she could do to change his mind. Whatever decision he came to would have to be okay with her. Even if it meant saying goodbye to the man who could have changed her life forever.

CHAPTER 16



Aidan looked up when Sandy and Josh Wilson knocked on his office door. Grace's parents looked every bit as excited as he expected they'd be. "Come in. It's good to see you again. Is Grace with you?"

Sandy shook her head. "She's gone to school. We want to keep her life as normal as possible while we talk about the prosthetic."

"That sounds like a good plan," Aidan said. He shook their hands and gestured to the chairs opposite his desk. "Have a seat. I couldn't believe it when you called to say what had happened."

Sandy's eyes were glistening with unshed tears. "We couldn't believe it, either," she began, her voice quivering with emotion. "We thought we'd have to wait for months or even years for BioTech's trust to consider funding Grace's prosthetic."

Josh leaned forward. "Then, last night, Pastor John and Shelley came to our home dressed like Christmas elves. We thought they were collecting money for the church, but they presented us with this." He unfolded a piece of paper and handed it to Aidan.

The Christmas Wish Program was giving Grace Wilson a state-of-the-art prosthetic leg from BioTech Industries. The program would also pay for the implant surgery and the therapy she'd need afterward to get the most out of her new leg.

Aidan handed the certificate back to Josh. “It must’ve been incredible seeing this.”

“You have no idea how stunned we were,” Sandy said. “If Pastor John and his wife weren’t delivering the certificate, we would’ve thought it was a prank. We still can’t believe it’s really happening.”

Aidan looked at Josh. He seemed just as overwhelmed as his wife. “Believe me, it’s one hundred percent authentic. The people who fund the program have already been in contact with BioTech. They’ve authorized the payment for Grace’s new leg.”

Josh gripped his wife’s hand. “Can you explain how the process will work?”

“Of course,” Aidan replied. He kept his voice even, trying to calm Grace’s anxious parents. “The Christmas Wish Program will cover all expenses, including flights to Manhattan and your accommodation for the design phase of the prosthetic. You’ll be able to discuss the entire process with the experts in our head office. If you’re satisfied with everything, you’ll return to Montana while the 3D model of Grace’s stump is used to create the prosthetic.”

Sandy clasped her hands, hope shining in her eyes. “And after that?”

“Once the prosthetic’s ready, Grace will have the transmitter surgically implanted, and her new limb will be attached to her leg,” Aidan continued. “There’ll be extensive training to teach Grace how to get the most out of her prosthetic. It may take some time, but if she’s anything like the other children who’ve received similar prosthetics, she’ll adapt well.”

“We can’t believe this is happening,” Josh said, his voice cracking with emotion.

Aidan smiled as he thought about the impact this would have on Grace’s life. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? And I couldn’t be happier for you. This will change everything for Grace.”

As Sandy and Josh expressed their gratitude once more, Aidan felt a renewed sense of purpose. He still hadn't decided what to do about the job offer in Miami, but he knew helping people like Grace was what truly mattered.

"Thank you so much, Aidan," Sandy whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You're changing our lives."

The weight of those words settled on his shoulders. "It's an honor to be a part of Grace's journey. When did you want to start the process?"

Josh looked at his wife, and then at Aidan. "As soon as possible."

Aidan had expected them to say that. Taking a folder off his desk, he handed it to Grace's parents. It was the same information they gave each of their clients, except this one didn't have any prices attached. Inside, it outlined the itinerary for the family's first visit to Manhattan, what they could expect, and what BioTech needed Grace to do.

Sandy and Josh listened intently to what he said, their eyes widening as they must have realized the magnitude of the journey they were about to begin.

"Will the procedures be painful?" Sandy asked, worry creasing her brow.

"During the initial stages, there may be some discomfort, but our goal is to make the process as smooth and painless as possible," Aidan assured her. "And remember, you'll have someone from BioTech with you every step of the way. They'll answer any questions you have, book your flights and accommodation, and make sure Grace is comfortable."

Sandy frowned. "We thought that person would be you."

Aidan hesitated before answering them. If he knew he was staying with BioTech, he would've been their main contact person. But he might be working with another company when they needed him the most. "It's important your family has the same contact person throughout the entire process. I may be moving to another city, so I'm not the best person to look after you. The person who'll take care of you is called Rebecca. If

you're happy for me to share your cell phone number with her, she'll call you tonight."

Sandy nodded. "We'd love to speak to her."

After they'd discussed more details about the procedure, Sandy and Josh left Aidan's office with their hearts full of hope for the future.

For a few minutes after they left, Aidan leaned back in his chair, gazing through the window at the familiar landscape of Sapphire Bay. He'd miss this small town when he left. He'd miss the sincere smiles of the people he'd met, and the genuine warmth and care they felt for each other. But, most of all, he'd miss Jackie.

She was the one person who made his heart race with just a smile. One of the few people he could talk to about anything. And the only person he trusted with his deepest secrets. But he couldn't stay in Sapphire Bay just for her. He needed to consider his career and what was best for him in the long run.

And whether he could still make a difference in the lives of people like Grace if he moved to Miami.



JACKIE WAS TRYING to remain calm and professional, but her traitorous heart pounded in her chest as she walked around The Fairy Forest with Aidan.

This was supposed to be a catch-up meeting with Aidan and Daniella about the Christmas gala. But one of Daniella's staff members was off with a heavy cold, and she had to run an after-school fairy party for a group of ten-year-old girls. Hopefully, Daniella could join them before Aidan left.

Even the delicate scent of pine and cinnamon filling the air wasn't helping Jackie feel any calmer. The Christmas gala was just around the corner. Instead of being pleased with what they'd organized, she felt as though her life was falling apart.

"Everything will be magical," she said, her voice cautious as she spoke to Aidan. He'd become an important part of her

life, but the uncertainty of whether he'd keep working for BioTech or move to Miami left her feeling vulnerable. She knew all too well that heartbreak could follow love, and she wanted so desperately to protect herself from that pain.

She opened the folder of 3D images Daniella had created and pointed to a corner of the room. "We'll have a beautifully decorated tree surrounded by presents for the children over there. And, on the opposite wall, we'll have ice sculptures of Christmas bells and children's toys."

She turned the page and showed Aidan the next image. "As guests walk into the room, they'll travel down Candy Cane Lane. They can help themselves to peppermint candy canes hanging from two rows of small Christmas trees. At the end of the lane, there'll be a stand with a variety of Christmas-themed ice cream flavors, including eggnog delight, rum and cranberry, and vanilla snow. A cookie stand will be at the end of all that deliciousness, with someone handing out your favorite chocolate chip cookies."

Aidan frowned. "There should be a warning not to eat too much before dinner."

Jackie didn't know if he was being particularly grumpy or if she was more sensitive than usual. "There'll be so much to do that no one will want to spend a lot of time in the food areas."

Aidan nodded, his piercing blue eyes taking in every detail of the room.

He hadn't smiled since he'd arrived, and Jackie didn't know whether it was because he didn't like what they'd organized or if he was already distancing himself from her.

"Let's look at the auction items," Jackie said as she led Aidan into a storage room. It was filled with paintings, photographs, small sculptures, and lots of different gift baskets.

For the first time since they'd met this afternoon, he seemed genuinely impressed. "This is amazing."

Jackie nodded. “We’re adding each item to a spreadsheet. That’ll make it easier to organize everything for the auction. Allan Terry, Mabel’s husband from the general store, will be the auctioneer. He’s done the same thing at other events and keeps everyone smiling, regardless of whether they buy something.”

“You and Daniella have done so much. I’m incredibly grateful to you.”

“It’s for a good cause,” Jackie mumbled as heat rose to her face. Good grief. What was wrong with her? Aidan pays her one heartfelt compliment and she blushes like a schoolgirl. Quickly, she ushered him out of the storage room. “All the tickets have gone on sale, and we’ve already sold just over a hundred. Thirty tickets have been purchased by people who don’t live in Sapphire Bay.”

“That’s better than I thought,” Aidan said, seeming genuinely surprised.

“It’s because the gala’s at The Fairy Forest. People want to see for themselves how amazing the room will look.”

“It was a good choice of venue, then,” Aidan said.

He gazed into her eyes and Jackie remembered the first time they’d met. She was organizing the last of the flower decorations for a wedding. When she’d looked into his blue eyes, she’d felt the world tilt sideways. And it was no different now.

She cleared her throat and looked at the list of items she wanted to discuss. “Accommodation has become hard to find around Sapphire Bay. Some people are offering rooms in their homes for guests.”

Aidan’s eyebrows rose. “Isn’t that a little odd?”

Jackie shrugged. “Only if you’re from a city. It’s something we do whenever there’s a major event in town. There are still some hotel and vacation rental homes available in Polson, but everything’s filling up fast.”

Aidan nodded, but he didn’t look as though he was listening too carefully to what she said. “Would you mind if I

changed the subject? I want to talk to you about something important before Daniella arrives.”

Her heart raced as she braced herself for what was coming. “What is it?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“I’m flying to Miami tomorrow to meet with the management team about the job offer,” he admitted. “After that, I’m heading to New York City for meetings with my team at BioTech. I’ll be gone for at least a week.”

The news hit Jackie like a ton of bricks. She knew this day would come, but hearing it out loud made it even more real. Her heart sank, the weight of disappointment settling heavily on her chest.

“I care about you,” Aidan reassured her, reaching out to touch her arm gently. “Regardless of what happens, I promise I’ll be back for the opening of your store. You mean too much to me to just walk away.”

As Jackie looked into his eyes, searching for sincerity, she realized that despite the uncertainty of their future together, she couldn’t deny the connection they shared. But whether that was worth the risk of having her heart broken was an entirely different matter.

“You don’t have to come back for the opening of the store,” she told him. “It’s a long way to come, especially if you don’t need to be here for work.”

Aidan frowned. “You don’t want me to be here?”

“I didn’t say that.” Jackie took a deep breath. “I really care about you Aidan. But if you’re taking the job in Miami, it might be better if we have a clean break. There’s a lot happening in both our lives and—”

Aidan stepped forward and kissed her so deeply, so unexpectedly, that all she could do was melt into his arms. When they were both breathless, he cradled her in his arms.

“I don’t want to break up with you,” Aidan murmured.

Jackie sighed and stepped out of his arms. “I don’t want that to happen, either, but we might not have a choice.”

CHAPTER 17



A week later, Jackie stood outside her store watching three men lift the sign for A Stitch in Time into place above the veranda.

The morning sun cast a warm glow on the cream-colored background with deep red text. Jackie was glad she'd listened to the graphic designer when they'd suggested adding a picture of a pair of knitting needles beside a ball of wool. It added more interest and made it obvious what the store sold.

Shona emerged from The Cozy Quilt Shop next door. Her eyes were full of excitement as she looked up at the sign. "It's fabulous, Jackie."

"I'm happy with it, too. I can't believe my knitting store is almost open."

"I felt the same way before the quilting store opened. You work so hard to get to this point, that it seems like an anticlimax when the doors open to your first customers."

Jackie thought of the long nights she'd spent here, the days when she hadn't thought about anything else. It was just as well Paris was such an understanding boss. "It's been a lot easier since I finished work at The Flower Cottage. I can get a lot of work done during the day instead of working late each night."

Shona pulled her jacket closer. "Aidan must be excited about the store opening. I haven't seen him for a while, but he was so good at keeping you company while you set everything up."

“Aidan’s working from New York City. He hasn’t been here for a while.”

Shona frowned. “Is he coming back to visit you?”

“He’s working with his team, but he said he’d be here for the opening of the store.” She missed him so much it felt like a piece of her heart had gone to New York with him.

Shona gently placed her hand on Jackie’s arm. “What’s wrong?”

She bit her lip, hesitating before admitting her deepest fear. “I don’t know if Aidan’s coming back.”

“Has he called you while he’s been away?” Shona asked, her voice tinged with empathy.

Jackie nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “He’s called a few times to check on everything but, most of the time, we talk about the Christmas gala. It’s as if he’s avoiding any mention of coming back to Sapphire Bay.”

“Men can be so thoughtless sometimes,” Shona said softly, her grip on Jackie’s arm tightening in reassurance. “Maybe he needs time to figure things out. Or he could be so busy he didn’t think to remind you that he’s coming back.” She gave Jackie a warm smile and added, “He’d be a fool not to realize how wonderful you are.”

“Thanks, Shona,” Jackie whispered, forcing a small smile. Shona didn’t know Aidan had been offered a job in Miami or that he was seriously considering it. He’d told her the meeting with the management team had gone well, but not whether he’d accepted the job.

Someone walked into The Cozy Quilt Shop and Shona sighed. “That’s my few minutes in the fresh air gone. If you’d like some company tonight, come and have dinner with Joseph and me. He’s making his world-famous meatloaf and it’s delicious.”

Jackie sent her friend a grateful smile. “That’s lovely of you to offer, but I’m meeting Daniella to go over the last-minute details for the gala. Can I come another night?”

“Of course, you can,” Shona said happily. “You’re welcome any time.” After giving Jackie a quick hug, she hurried back to her store.

With a wave to the men fixing the sign into place, Jackie walked back into her cottage. If Aidan chose not to come back to Sapphire Bay, she’d be heartbroken. But at least she’d know what was happening with their relationship.

Because, at the moment, she had no idea. For now, all she could do was focus on the grand opening of A Stitch in Time, and make sure the Christmas gala was a success.



AIDAN STOPPED his truck outside Jackie’s house. While he was gone, she’d strung lights under the veranda and added a small Christmas tree in a bright red container beside the front door. Her home looked cheerful and festive—everything he wasn’t feeling.

He hadn’t been gone long, but it felt like a lifetime.

The stilted phone calls with Jackie hadn’t helped. He didn’t know what to say, how to break through the wall she’d placed between them.

Not that he could blame her. She craved stability and wanted to belong to this small community. He still had things he wanted to do, and he couldn’t do them if he moved permanently to Sapphire Bay.

He knew she wasn’t happy he was considering the job in Miami, but what the company was doing in Florida was astounding. Using intuitive software applications, they were re-imagining what movement meant. He hadn’t felt this inspired since he’d started working for BioTech. If Jackie knew how difficult it was to find a company that truly cared about its clients, she’d realize what a difficult decision it was for him.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his truck door. He didn’t know what to expect from seeing her, but he had a feeling it

wouldn't include a wide grin and a big hug. He knocked on the front door and waited.

When Jackie opened the door, his heart sank. Her smile disappeared instantly.

“Hi, Jackie. I just arrived in Sapphire Bay and thought I'd say hello.”

Thankfully, she stepped sideways. “Come inside. It's too cold to be talking outside.”

He unwound his scarf but didn't take off his jacket. He wasn't sure he'd be staying long enough to enjoy the warmth of her home.

The sweet scent of cinnamon and vanilla wafted through the entryway. “Are you baking?”

Jackie nodded. “I'm making cookies for the opening of the store. Paris and Andrea are baking some as well. Between us, we should have enough for everyone who visits.”

Aidan stuck his hands in his pockets. Even before they'd started dating, Jackie had never looked so unsure about talking to him. “I like the decorations on the outside of your home. I'd almost forgotten Christmas is only a few weeks away.”

“Allan Terry and Pastor John saw how busy I was and thought it would make me smile when I saw the twinkling lights when I came home each night.”

A beeping sound came from the kitchen.

Jackie frowned. “The next batch of cookie dough's ready to come out of the refrigerator. Do you want to come into the kitchen?”

“That'd be great. If you need a hand to roll out the dough, I'm happy to help.”

She sent him a flicker of a smile. “Thanks.”

While she unwrapped the dough and found another rolling pin, he took off his jacket and looked at the pile of cookies she'd baked. “You've been busy.”

“It’s the last thing I have to do. The store’s ready and all the knitting and other products I was expecting are sitting on the shelves.”

“Did you find more of the homespun wool you were looking for?”

Jackie nodded. “A family from Bozeman produces an amazing selection of wool on their ranch. They were excited about supplying my store with their yarn.” She placed a ball of cookie dough and a rolling pin on the counter. “Roll this to the same thickness as the sheet I was working on. Before you start, sprinkle a little flour on the counter to stop the dough from sticking.”

He washed his hands and stood beside her. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help get the last things ready for the store,” Aidan began, trying to bridge the distance between them. “I didn’t mean to leave so abruptly.”

Jackie shrugged. “It’s okay, I managed. Andrea and Paris helped me, and Shona was great too.”

Aidan rolled out the dough. He was glad she’d had support from her friends in Sapphire Bay. “How are you finding not working at The Flower Cottage?”

“I’ve been so busy that I haven’t had time to miss it.” She sighed, wiping her hands on a nearby dish towel. “I guess it won’t be until after A Stitch in Time opens that I’ll know how it really feels. Would you like a cup of coffee or a drink of hot chocolate?”

“Hot chocolate sounds good,” Aidan replied. When she poured hot water into his cup, her hands shook. The vulnerability in that small gesture stirred something inside him, and he knew he had to talk about what was happening between them.

“I’ll be in Sapphire Bay until the day after the gala,” he began, his eyes searching hers for understanding. “Then I’m flying back to New York City. I have another three weeks to decide whether I’ll accept the job in Miami, but I can’t stay

here for that long. There's an issue with a project my team's working on and I need to be in Manhattan."

She looked down at her coffee mug, her grip tightening around its warmth. "It sounds as though you'll be gone for a while."

"It could take a few weeks. If I accept the job in Miami, I'll start in the new year."

Jackie's eyes misted over with tears. "Is it what you really want to do?"

Aidan left the rolling pin on the counter. "I'm excited about what the company's doing. They're helping people live normal lives."

Her sad smile made his heart ache. "That sounds like what you're doing at BioTech."

He let her words settled inside him. She was right. It was similar. "That's one of the reasons my decision's so difficult. I'd be letting a lot of people down if I left BioTech. But it's you I'm most worried about."

Jackie put down her mug. "If you don't take the job because of me, you might regret it. I don't want that to happen."

"I still want to be part of your life," Aidan said as he held her hands. "What if I spent some weekends in Sapphire Bay? You could visit me in Miami."

Her eyes lifted up meet his, uncertainty clouding their depths.

His heart ached at the sight, knowing that in a few words, she could end any chance of them spending the rest of their lives together.

"I won't have time to leave Sapphire Bay," Jackie said sadly. "My store will be open six days a week. When it's closed, I'll be catching up on all the marketing and financial side of things. And you'll be busy, too."

Aidan lifted his hand to her face and wiped a tear off her face. "What should we do?"

Jackie forced a smile. “We keep baking the cookies and talk about something else. At the moment, I’m feeling too overwhelmed to talk about what we should do.” She picked up his rolling pin and handed it to him. “Have you made cookies before?”

Aidan sighed. “Not for a few years.”

Jackie kissed his cheek. “Well, you’ve come at the right time, then.” And with a gentle smile, she picked up a cookie cutter and pushed it into the dough in front of her.

For now, they were two friends enjoying each other’s company, and trying to forget about the uncertainty that lay ahead of them.

CHAPTER 18



Jackie took a moment to look around A Stitch in Time at the colorful yarns and knitting supplies that filled the shelves. Her heart swelled with pride as she watched people hunt through the books and magazines, compare different colored skeins of yarn, and admire the beautiful hand-knitting.

Vanessa, one of Andrea's part-time staff from The Starlight Café, was helping customers at the sales counter while Jackie answered questions and greeted familiar faces. The community had come together to support her dream, making today's grand opening even more special.

Andrea walked in and smiled. "I can't believe how many people are still here," she exclaimed. "You must be thrilled."

"More than I can say," Jackie admitted. For most of the morning, the store had been buzzing with the chatter of people as they searched the shelves for Christmas gifts and supplies to restock their knitting baskets. She'd sold many more things than she thought she would, making the extra effort she'd gone to even more worthwhile.

Andrea looked around at the people in the store. "Is Aidan still here?"

"He had to leave for a few minutes, but he'll be back soon." Aidan had arrived before the store opened and stayed for the worst of the rush. Jackie couldn't have managed without him restocking the shelves and helping with anything that was needed.

“I’m glad he’s here.” Andrea glanced over her shoulder and moved closer. “How are you holding up?” she whispered. “Opening day is a huge deal.”

“It’s better than I thought it’d be. Everyone has been so kind. People from as far away as Bigfork have driven here to support me.”

Andrea hugged her. “That’s because you’ve started something amazing. Have you heard from your mom?”

“She called me last night and had the flowers on the front counter delivered to the store. At least she didn’t forget.”

Andrea sent her a sad smile. “That’s better than nothing, I suppose. I’d better get back to the café. Come to my place for dinner tonight and bring Aidan. We can celebrate the opening of the store.”

Jackie smiled at a lady she’d spoken to before Andrea arrived. “I’m not sure what he’s doing, but I’ll let him know.”

“Make sure you do,” Andrea said with a worried frown. “Good luck for the rest of the afternoon.”

As soon as Andrea left, Aidan walked into the store. Beside him was a woman in her seventies with kind blue eyes and a warm smile.

Jackie’s eyes widened and filled with tears. “Mrs. Green!” Wrapping her arms around her wonderful friend, she whispered, “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“You have Aidan to thank for that. He found me at my retirement home and brought me to Sapphire Bay,” Mrs. Green explained, her voice quivering with emotion. “I wanted to see your lovely store.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Aidan booked me into The Lakeside Inn. I’m flying back to Florida tomorrow night.” She pulled Jackie into another hug. “Don’t look so disappointed. You’ll be too busy to spend more time with me. Can you spare a few minutes to show me around?”

“You can have as much of my time as you like,” Jackie said as she wiped her eyes. She sighed at the gentle expression on Aidan’s face. “Thanks for bringing Mrs. Green to Sapphire Bay. It was a really nice thing to do.”

Aidan smiled. “It took a little detective work to find Esme, but it worked out in the end.”

Jackie would have to ask him later how he’d found her. For now, she’d show Mrs. Green around the store and enjoy having her close.

“I’ll help Vanessa at the sales counter,” Aidan murmured as three women headed toward the front counter with baskets full of wool. “Let me know if there’s anything else you’d like me to do.”

“I will.” Jackie watched Aidan maneuver through the crowd. She’d never met anyone like him. He was everything anyone could ever want, but he didn’t want to live in a small Montana town.

“He’s a keeper,” Mrs. Green whispered.

With a sad smile, Jackie held her arm. “A keeper who wants to live somewhere else.”

Mrs. Green patted her hand. “Don’t let a few miles stand in the way of your happiness.”

It was more than the miles. It was the fear of losing the magic that happened when they were together. The way Aidan made her feel when he laughed or held her hand. It wouldn’t matter whether it was fifty miles or a thousand, a long-distance relationship wasn’t what she needed.

As they made their way past the knitted scarves on display, Mrs. Green stopped to admire them. “Seeing these reminds me of the first scarf you ever knitted, Jackie,” she reminisced fondly. “You were so careful to keep the tension even and not drop a stitch.”

“It had to be perfect,” Jackie said softly. Even from a young age, she didn’t want to disappoint the people she cared about. Opening *A Stitch in Time* was the first thing she’d ever done that pushed her comfort zone to the limit. The only

person she could disappoint was herself and, this time, it wouldn't happen. She'd worked hard, researched what people wanted to buy, and found niche markets no one else was supplying.

The front door opened and a group of tourists entered the store.

Mrs. Green turned to Jackie with a determined gleam in her eye. "Would you like some help?" she asked. "I don't know how to use your cash register, but I do know a thing or two about knitting."

Jackie chuckled, grateful for the offer. "That'd be wonderful, Mrs. Green. If you have any questions, just ask Vanessa, Aidan, or me."

As the day wore on, and the grand opening of A Stitch in Time continued to be a success, Jackie felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the support of her friends, her mother's distant but thoughtful gesture and, most of all, having Mrs. Green and Aidan by her side.



JACKIE HURRIED into The Starlight Café, eager to get out of the bitterly cold wind. When she'd first moved to Montana, she didn't know if she'd ever get used to wearing three layers of clothes to keep warm but, like most things in life, it hadn't taken long to adjust to the winter temperatures.

She stood beside the front counter, scanning the tables inside the busy room for Mrs. Green. Spotting her friend sitting by the window, Jackie said hello and gave her a heartfelt hug. "It's good to see you, Mrs. Green. Have you been waiting for long?"

"I only arrived a few minutes ago. It was so nice of Aidan to drive me here this morning."

Jackie looked around the café, half-expecting him to be having breakfast at another table.

“He’s not here. He wanted to see his boss. I think his name’s David—to talk about the job he’s been offered.”

Jackie’s eyebrows rose. “You know about the job in Miami?”

“Aidan told me about it when we were in Florida. It sounds like an incredible opportunity.”

“Aidan thought so.”

Esme frowned. “But you don’t?”

Andrea stopped beside Jackie and smiled. “It’s wonderful to see you again, Esme. Welcome to The Starlight Café.”

Last night, Mrs. Green and Aidan had joined Jackie at Andrea and David’s home for dinner. With Andrea’s boys and two of their friends there, it was like a mini party, complete with a cake Andrea had made to celebrate the opening of Jackie’s store.

Esme smiled at her new friend. “It’s lovely to be here. You’ve created a wonderful café. It’s perfect in every way.”

“I tried to make it as welcoming as possible.” Andrea looked at Jackie. “How’s the new business owner?”

“A little tired after everything that happened yesterday. I’m just happy everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.”

Andrea chuckled. “They definitely loved the store. A lot of your customers came here after they’d seen you. Everyone was super excited about what they bought and the knitting you’re selling.”

Jackie took the menu Andrea handed to her. “I had six people ask if they can submit a sample of their knitting to me. If everyone knits one garment a week, I’ll have more than enough stock to keep everyone happy.”

“They’ll knit more than one thing,” Esme told her. “I was talking to a woman who’s selling baby clothes in your store. She said she could knit three or four jackets a week.”

Jackie handed Esme another menu. “That’s even better. Are you ready for breakfast, Mrs. Green?”

“I’m more than ready, but I wish you’d call me Esme. You’ve been calling me Mrs. Green since you were eleven years old. It makes me feel old.”

Jackie smiled. They had this discussion at least once a year. “It wouldn’t seem right calling you anything other than Mrs. Green. Besides, it suits you.”

With a twinkle in her eyes, Mrs. Green said, “You’re being stubborn. If you called me Esme, you might be surprised by how much it suits me, too.”

Jackie sighed. “Okay, Esme. You win. Are you ready to try Andrea’s yummy breakfast menu?”

“More than ready,” Esme replied. After scanning the menu, she quickly chose scrambled eggs on homemade sourdough toast and a slice of bacon.

“I’ll have the ham and cheese omelet, and two coffees.” Jackie said to Andrea.

Andrea took the menus. “All perfect options. I’ll be back soon.”

Esme smiled as Andrea made her way toward the kitchen. “You’re lucky to have such wonderful friends. Andrea and her husband were very sweet to let me have dinner with everyone. It reminded me of the Sunday lunches we used to have before the boys left home.”

Jackie knew Mrs. Green missed her boys and their families. “Have you ever thought of moving closer to them?”

Esme waved away the suggestion. “If they stayed in one place, I might consider it. But they move so often I’d get dizzy.”

“Well, I’m glad you came to Sapphire Bay. You were wonderful yesterday. Everyone appreciated your help with the knitting questions.”

Esme beamed with pleasure. “I was happy to be there. I couldn’t believe it when Aidan knocked on my door and asked if I wanted to come to Sapphire Bay.”

Andrea arrived with two steaming mugs of coffee. “Here you go. Your breakfasts won’t be long.”

Esme smiled. “Thank you.” After Andrea left, she took a sip of coffee and sighed. “That tastes lovely. Aidan seemed quite protective of you yesterday. If you didn’t already know it, I think he’s very much in love with you.”

Jackie blushed, playing with her cutlery to avoid Esme’s probing gaze. “He’s... a good person,” she admitted, her voice faltering. “But he could be moving to Florida.”

“It sounds like he has a big decision to make. How do you feel about him?”

Jackie hesitated before answering. “I think I’m falling in love with him.”

Esme patted Jackie’s hand. “It’s okay to be happy about it.”

“I’m not sure I can. He wants us to keep seeing each other, but I don’t think it’ll work.”

“You won’t know until you try.” Esme studied Jackie’s face. “What happened to the little girl who never took no for an answer?”

Jackie sighed. “She grew up and realized she can’t have everything she wants.”

Esme’s eyes widened. “I think you’re more tired than you think. Put the same fighting spirit that got you through your childhood into action now. If you love Aidan, he’s worth fighting for. Tell him how you feel and be ready to compromise.”

“Compromise?” Jackie asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Esme leaned in closer. “The trouble with your childhood was that you never had to find a middle ground. Your mom was never there to disagree with you. And when she was, she gave in so she wasn’t the bad guy in your relationship. Life’s too short to regret not following your heart.”

Jackie added some sugar to her coffee. “My heart gets me into trouble.”

“Do you regret anything you’ve done because you listened to your heart and not your head?”

Jackie thought about moving to Montana, learning how to be a florist, working alongside Paris, and opening her store. None of those things were logical—she’d made spontaneous decisions that had changed her life forever.

“You’re right,” she told Esme. “I haven’t regretted any of those decisions.”

“Life is all about taking chances,” Esme said softly. “I followed my heart with my husband, and we had a wonderful marriage.”

“Did you ever consider remarrying after your husband passed away?”

Esme sighed, her eyes misting over. “I never met another man who made me feel as special as Joey did. But if I had, I would’ve held onto him and never let go.”

Jackie reached across the table, squeezing Esme’s hand in gratitude for her honesty and friendship. As they shared stories and laughter over breakfast, Jackie knew that no matter what happened between her and Aidan, she would be incredibly grateful to him for bringing Esme to Sapphire Bay.

CHAPTER 19



Aidan drove down the quiet streets of Sapphire Bay toward David's home, his fingers drumming nervously on the steering wheel. He couldn't shake the image of Jackie's warm smile at the opening of her new store just the day before, and he knew what he had to discuss with David could change everything.

Pulling up to his friend's house, Aidan studied the snow-covered front yard, the smaller footprints crisscrossing the driveway that could only belong to Charlie and Andy, David's stepsons. So much had happened in David's life in the last year that it made what was happening in Aidan's seem much less important.

But it wasn't. For someone who prided himself on having clear, measurable goals, Aidan's personal life was a disaster. After he broke up with his previous girlfriend, he'd vowed to tread carefully if he ever met anyone who made him believe he'd found the woman who could make his life complete.

For some reason, all that common sense had flown out the window when he'd met Jackie. Before he knew what was happening, he was head over heels in love with her and, at the same time, considering moving hundreds of miles away.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped out of his truck and walked up to the front door, giving it a firm knock.

"Hey, Aidan," David greeted him as he opened the door. "I got your message. Come on in."

“Thanks for seeing me so early. I need to talk about something and it couldn’t wait until tomorrow.”

David led him into the living room, where they sat on the comfy chairs. “You must have just missed Charlie and Andy at The Lakeside Inn. Diana’s teaching them how to bake healthy snacks for dogs. They want to buy a canoe and selling the cookies will help.”

Despite his nerves, Aidan grinned. “That sounds like they’ve learned something from you and Andrea.”

David smiled. “I just hope someone buys the doggy treats. Otherwise, we’ll have a two-year supply in the garage. How can I help?”

Aidan hesitated while he gathered his thoughts. “I’ve received a job offer from Nordic Technology in Miami,” he began, watching for any reaction from David. “It’s a great opportunity, but I wanted to talk to you about it before I make a decision.”

David’s eyes widened. “That’s something I didn’t see coming. When did they offer you the job?”

“A couple of weeks ago, before I went back to Manhattan. I’d be in charge of the team that’s developing a new exoskeleton for spinal injury clients. It’s ground-breaking work and has the potential to change the way everyone treats any diseases or accidents that impair a person’s movement.”

David nodded. “I saw a documentary about what they’re doing last year. Wasn’t their CEO a finalist in the Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award?”

“She ended up winning it. With the publicity the award generated, Nordic Technology secured funding for the prototype phase. The trials were so promising they’ve had approval to fast-track the project to the next stage. They’ve just started using the technology on people with severe spinal trauma. If that’s successful, they’ll move to full commercial production next year.”

David leaned back in his seat. “They must be offering an attractive package to make you want to leave BioTech.”

Aidan nodded. “They are, but it’s not the salary or the other conditions that’s making the decision difficult. I enjoy my job at BioTech. You’ve allowed me to try different things and encouraged my team to think outside of the box. You don’t find that in many organizations.”

“I want everyone at BioTech to be proud of what they’re doing and reach their full potential,” David told him. “And that includes knowing when it’s time for someone to leave. But I don’t get the impression you’re ready to leave.”

“I’m not. In an ideal world, I’d like to finish the camp and see it open before I move anywhere. If this job hadn’t come up, I would’ve been happy staying at BioTech.”

“If you accept the job, when does Nordic Technology want you to start?”

“At the end of January.”

David sighed. “Now I’ll take off my manager’s hat and speak as your friend. What on earth are you thinking? Your team has achieved so much in the last twelve months. They need you leading them to finish what you started.”

“They don’t need me,” Aidan insisted. “They’re more than capable of implementing the next update.”

“You say that as if it’s a standard upgrade. It isn’t. What happens in March will leave what we’ve done in the past looking like an old dinosaur. What about your brother and your promise to him?”

Aidan wiped his hand across his jaw. “I knew you’d mention that.”

“Someone has to. You’ve worked huge hours to stop what happened to James ending someone else’s life.”

“Once the camp opens, I’ll have achieved what I set out to do. James would want me to do what’s best for me.”

David frowned. “As much as I hate to say this, I want you to do what’s best for you, too. Just promise you’ll give me plenty of notice if you’re leaving. I can’t afford to have your position vacant for months on end.”

Aidan nodded. "I'll give you enough time to find someone else."

"What about Jackie?" David asked. "You seemed close at dinner last night. Does she know about the job offer?"

"She's known for a couple of weeks. We're still working through what the future holds for us."

David gripped the arms of the chair. "Take it from someone who tried a long-distance relationship with Andrea. It doesn't work. But, if you take the job, I'll still be your friend. Although I could be grumpy for a few days."

Aidan wouldn't have expected anything less from his friend. All he had to do now was figure out what he was going to do.



FIVE DAYS LATER, Jackie was at The Fairy Forest with Daniella and the volunteers who were helping to make the Christmas gala a success. Two hundred sixty people had bought tickets to the event and everyone wanted to make sure they had a wonderful experience.

With a clipboard in her hand, Jackie stopped in the middle of Candy Cane Lane, scanning each detail, and making sure everything was where it should be.

Daniella looked above them. "This is incredible. I'll have to ask Brooke where she found the fairy lights."

While Brooke was hanging candy canes on the Christmas tree in the gala's grand entrance, she'd thought there was something missing. An hour later, she'd returned with an amazing collection of fairy lights, shaped like the red and white candy she'd hung on the tree. They were the perfect finishing touch to a magical entrance.

Daniella turned in a slow circle. "Everything looks wonderful."

“I couldn’t agree more,” Jackie murmured. She waved at Pastor John. He’d volunteered to serve everyone an ice cream on their way into the gala. When they saw how many tickets had been sold, he convinced Shelley, his wife, to help him. Dressed as elves with pointy hats and red and white-striped tunics, they were super-cute and would make a lasting impression on their guests.

Aidan walked toward them.

When Jackie had first seen him in his tuxedo, she hadn’t been able to speak. If she thought he was gorgeous in his every-day clothes, he was stunning in a suit. It was just as well Daniella had been beside her. She’d filled the awkward silence with questions about the gala and last-minute issues they needed to fix.

Aidan smiled. “The chocolate fountain’s working.”

“What was wrong with it?” Daniella asked.

“A wire connected to the pump was loose. Without that working, the chocolate wasn’t moving.”

“Thank goodness you’re here,” Jackie said with a relieved sigh. “Are the ice sculptures okay?”

“They’re fine. The extra row of plants around them should stop anyone from getting too close.”

Jackie hoped so. The last thing they needed was a trickle of melted ice on that side of the room.

Daniella looked at her watch. “We’ve got ten minutes until the doors open. I think it’s time to start the music.”

In a rustle of tulle and fairy wings, Daniella hurried across to the DJ.

Aidan frowned at the clipboard. “Did you see the three children’s names that were last-minute additions to the guest list?”

Jackie nodded. “I bought them presents from the general store. They’re just as lovely as the other gifts we found.”

He looked across the room at the enormous Christmas tree, and then at the round tables decorated with baskets of festive treats. “I don’t know how you and Daniella did this. It’s fantastic.”

“We had a lot of help from the community. There were twenty people here this afternoon, all pitching in to create a magical experience for everyone.”

Aidan held her hand. “I know I told you this before, but you look beautiful. I hope you’ve saved a few dances for me.”

Jackie grinned. She’d borrowed the red ballgown she was wearing from Paris. And, even if she said so herself, it looked lovely with the Christmas necklace she’d found in town. “You can have as many as you like, but I have a feeling you’ll be too busy talking to the guests.”

“And making sure the chocolate fountain doesn’t break down again.”

Jackie’s cell phone beeped and she checked the text. Mrs. Green had sent her a message.

“Is everything okay?” Aidan asked.

Jackie nodded and showed him her phone. “Esme sent me a picture of Cinderella and Prince Charming. Do you think she’s trying to tell us something?”

“She might want us to find our happily ever after moment.”

His serious expression made Jackie’s heart race. “Or it could be to make sure we’re home by midnight or your truck will turn into a pumpkin.”

His lips twitched. “And that definitely isn’t an option in this weather. Are you ready to open the doors to the masses?”

Jackie took one last look around The Fairy Forest. Pastor John and Shelley were standing behind the ice cream cart, the DJ was playing a Christmas Carol, and Daniella and a team of volunteers were waiting to welcome everyone into the biggest Christmas gala Sapphire Bay had ever seen.

With an excited grin, she nodded. “I hope the gala’s as successful as I think it’ll be.”

“So do I.” Aidan held her hand as they walked down Candy Cane Lane. With a flourish, he opened the doors and greeted the first guests.

Jackie took a deep breath and smiled at Allan and Mabel Terry.

They’d done everything they could to support The Christmas Wish Program and The Horseshoe Adventure Camp. Now it was down to good planning and lots of generous donors to see how much money they could raise.



AIDAN STOOD beneath a canopy of fairy lights, watching as the auction in The Fairy Forest unfolded before him. He couldn’t believe the generosity flowing from the community. Everyone was excited, whether they were bidding for a basket of fresh vegetables from Mr. Jessop’s garden or a stunning Christmas star, hand-carved by a local teenager.

Natalie Armstrong’s vibrant painting of the rocky shoreline had sold for an astonishing twenty-five thousand dollars. Aidan had received a lot of enquiries from international buyers about the painting, but no one expected it to sell for that amount of money. A simple photograph by a local artist had sold for four thousand dollars, and a travel voucher for an all-expenses-paid vacation to Bali went for three times its actual value. The guests who’d bought tickets for the gala were willing to spend a lot of money to support The Christmas Wish Program and the camp BioTech was building.

“Sold to the pretty lady in row three!” Allan Terry declared, his voice booming through the room. He lifted his gavel and knocked it against the wooden block with a satisfying thud. The audience erupted into applause, and Aidan couldn’t help but join in, clapping enthusiastically.

As the volunteers hurriedly brought the next item onto the stage, Aidan scanned the crowd for Jackie. She was standing

beside the dessert tables, arranging a tray of pastries for the last course of the night.

“Next up, we have a lovely basket of hand-knitted baby clothes, generously donated by our very own Jackie West!” Allan announced, holding up the intricate creations for everyone to see.

Aidan knew each piece was made with love and care, and so did the audience if the bidding was anything to go by.

“One hundred dollars!” a woman shouted, raising her paddle high.

“Two hundred!” yelled another, much to Aidan’s surprise.

“Three hundred!” came the next bid.

He looked across at Jackie. She’d stopped adding more desserts to the table and was standing with a stunned expression on her face. When their eyes connected, he smiled.

Jackie grinned at him before returning her attention to Allan.

With a decisive thud, the gavel hit the block of wood.

“Sold!” Allan said happily. “For Three hundred fifty dollars to our new mom, Kelly.”

It was at times like this that he wondered if he was crazy to want to move to Miami or even stay in Manhattan. There was something about this small town, about the close-knit community, and the sense of belonging that he’d never experienced before. And there was something about Jackie that made him reluctant to leave her behind.

A light tap on his shoulder made him turn around. Josh and Sandy Wilson stood behind him with a little girl in a wheelchair.

“We thought we’d say hello before the auction ends,” Josh said. “And thank you again for all you’re doing for Grace.”

The little girl looked up at Aidan and smiled. “That’s me. Thanks for helping to find a new leg for me.”

He kneeled beside the wheelchair and smiled. “That’s okay. Did your mom and dad show you the pictures I sent them?”

Grace’s pigtails bobbed as she nodded. “I liked the pink leg the best.”

“I thought you might. Your mom told me pink’s your favorite color.”

Grace touched the pale pink blanket covering her leg. “I like it because it’s a princess color. I was going to wear the leg the hospital gave me, but it hurt too much. Will the leg you make hurt?”

Aidan shook his head. “It’ll be a perfect fit.” He thought of the picture Esme had sent Jackie and added, “Just like Cinderella’s glass slipper.”

Grace’s face lit up with an excited smile. “That’ll be awesome!”

Aidan pulled himself to his feet and smiled at Josh and Sandy. “How’s everything going?”

Sandy’s smile was just as excited as her daughter’s. “We’ve had our first meeting with Rebecca. She’s such a wonderful person. Next week, we fly to Manhattan to do the initial set of measurements and tests for Grace’s new leg. We can’t wait to get there.”

“You’ll be amazed at how quickly everything happens after the team has the details they need.”

After they’d finished speaking, Josh and Sandy shook his hand, and Grace high-fived him. Seeing their excitement made Aidan proud of what BioTech was doing. And even prouder of the motivation his brother had given him to make a difference in other people’s lives.

An arm settled around his waist, and he smiled at Jackie. “The auction’s amazing.”

“And so are you,” she whispered. “I spoke to Josh and Sandy yesterday. They said The Christmas Wish Program paid

for Grace's new leg, but we don't have enough money to do that. Did you pay for it?"

Aidan looked over Jackie's shoulder to make sure no one could hear them. "It was the least I could do. Otherwise, they would've been waiting for months. And that's only if the trust sponsored Grace."

Jackie sighed. "That was really kind and generous." And with the lightest of touches, she kissed his cheek. "You have a big heart, Aidan Remington."

As he gazed into her shining eyes, Aidan realized his heart had become even bigger since he'd met her. He'd fallen completely in love with Jackie—and he didn't know what to do about it.

CHAPTER 20



Jackie glanced at the stack of folders sitting on her desk, then back at her watch. Aidan was driving to Kalispell this morning, then catching a flight to New York. Before he left Sapphire Bay, he was coming to see her. But the minutes until he arrived had dragged by so much that she'd almost driven to The Lakeside Inn to see him. After a moment of indecision, her common sense had kicked in and told her not to be so impulsive.

At some point, she had to get used to not seeing him, and that time was now.

So, she'd stayed at home, buried her breaking heart in invoices and receipts from her store, and ignored the ticking clock on the far wall.

She still didn't know if she'd made the right decision when she'd told Aidan she wouldn't move. But she had her store, friends she adored, and a community that cared about her. For someone who'd never felt as though she belonged anywhere, they were precious gifts she couldn't ignore.

With a deep sigh, she walked into the kitchen and headed to the pantry where her emergency rations were kept. If there was ever a time she needed an instant sugar rush, this was it—and her stash of caramel fudge from Sweet Treats would hit the spot nicely.

With a satisfied smile, she stood on tiptoes and reached into the back of the highest shelf. There, sandwiched between

boxes of cereal and granola bars, was a small container full of deliciousness.

When the doorbell rang, her heart skipped a beat and she almost lost her balance. Leaving the fudge on the counter, she walked through the living room and into the entryway.

It could only be Aidan. No one else would visit her at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning, especially if they'd gone to the gala the night before.

Jackie opened the door and stared at the man she'd spent all night thinking about. The wind ruffled his hair and his blue eyes seemed to connect with her soul. She felt a pang in her chest, but tried to hide it with a smile.

"Hi, Aidan," she said. "Come in."

He stepped inside, and she closed the door behind him. They stood there for a moment, neither of them saying anything.

Jackie felt awkward, and shy, and everything she hadn't felt in years. "Were you able to pack everything into your suitcases?"

"I had to buy an extra one but, luckily, Mabel had some in the general store."

Jackie nodded and took a deep breath. "Would you like a cup of coffee before you drive to Kalispell?"

Slowly, Aidan shook his head. "I had coffee with my breakfast. I can't stay long. The weather's too unpredictable."

"Have you checked to make sure the roads are open?" Jackie bit her bottom lip. The state of the roads was the last thing she wanted to talk to Aidan about, but her brain and heart were refusing to cooperate.

"I have an app that alerts me to any road closures." Aidan stepped forward and held her warm, shaky hands in his. "I'll miss you."

Jackie didn't know how three little words could make her cry, but they did. "I'll miss you, too. I don't want you to leave."

With a gentle tug, Aidan pulled her into his arms. “You aren’t the only one who feels that way. It’ll get better.”

The only way it would get better was if Jackie left Sapphire Bay—and she wouldn’t do that.

“Take care of yourself in Manhattan,” she told him. “And let me know when you land. There’s a storm covering most of the east coast and a lot of flights are canceled or diverted.”

Aidan’s arms tightened around her. “I’ll call as soon as I land. Don’t do anything crazy while I’m away.”

Jackie wiped the tears off her face. “I won’t have time to be crazy.”

Aidan kissed the side of her head. “I should go. If you need me for anything, call me. It doesn’t matter what time of the day or night it is.”

The knot in Jackie’s chest tightened. All she could do was nod.

Aidan’s eyes glistened with tears. “We can make this work. I know we can.”

She didn’t know whether he was saying that because he believed it or because he was trying to convince himself it was true.

As they turned around to the front door, Jackie couldn’t think of a single thing to say that would make this goodbye easier.

Aidan’s hand trembled as he brushed a lock of hair off her face. “If anything stops working in the store, call Pastor John. He said he’d keep an eye on you and make sure you’re okay.”

A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Shelley says he breaks more things than he fixes, but I appreciate his offer.”

With a gentleness that broke her heart all over again, Aidan kissed her for the last time. And, by the time he left, Jackie knew her life wouldn’t be the same again.



THE MORNING LIGHT shone into the kitchen, creating a cheerful and inviting atmosphere as Jackie made chocolate-covered marshmallow Santas for the Christmas Carol Competition. The scent of melting chocolate and toasted coconut filled the room, making her small house feel cozy and inviting.

She should've listened to Andrea and purchased store bought marshmallows. But with absolutely no idea of what she was getting herself into, she'd hunted for the perfect molds before whisking a triple mixture of marshmallow crème together.

It was sticky, messy work, and she wasn't sure anyone would appreciate the trouble she'd gone to.

After a quick knock, the front door opened and Daniella rushed into the kitchen. "There you are. I thought you might've been working from your store."

"Not this morning. I promised Mabel I'd make something for the carol competition. I should have stuck with cookies instead of the marshmallow Santas."

Daniella smiled at the treats already sitting on a baking sheet. "They might be tricky to make, but they look gorgeous."

"That's what I thought when I saw the recipe. Next time, I'll read the reviews before I buy anything."

Daniella sat opposite Jackie on a kitchen stool. "I learned that lesson the hard way, too. I had so many awesome ideas for The Fairy Forest, that I forgot about the basics. And that's kind of why I'm here. You'll never believe how much money we made at the Christmas gala."

Jackie had been wondering if there was a final figure yet. "I won't guess because it'll be wrong," Jackie said as she dipped another marshmallow into the bowl of melted chocolate. "I still can't believe what some people paid for the auction pieces."

“Neither can I. Natalie was thrilled her painting sold for so much. So...without further ado.” Daniella drum-rolled her hands against the counter. “The gala we organized raised forty-two thousand dollars!”

Jackie’s mouth dropped open. “Wow, that’s incredible!”

“I know. David called me with the good news. BioTech’s finance team received the last of the payments an hour ago. You should get a text from the finance team soon.”

As they continued to chat, Jackie sprinkled coconut onto the marshmallow Santas in front of her.

When Jackie filled another tray with chocolate-covered Santas, Daniella moved them to the kitchen table. “I have a favor to ask.”

Jackie’s eyebrows rose. “You can have one, but no more. Mabel’s expecting half the town to be at the competition.”

“It’s not the Christmas treats I’d like, but thanks for the offer. In five months, my landlord’s selling the house I’m renting. I’ve got a few months to find another place to live, but I’m struggling to find anything.”

“Have you checked with Pastor John?” Jackie asked. “He has a list of houses that are available to rent.”

“I talked to him, but most of them are snapped up within hours of being advertised.”

Jackie thought about the other options Daniella could consider. “Have you thought about buying a house?”

“I wish I could, but I can’t afford it right now.” Her voice was strained with worry.

“Listen, if the worst comes to the worst, you can always move in with me until you find something. My house is small, but I have a spare bedroom.”

“Really? That would be amazing!” Daniella hugged Jackie tightly. “Thank you so much.”

“You’d do the same thing for me,” Jackie replied with a smile. “Now come help me coat these marshmallow Santas in

coconut.”

As they continued to work together, the conversation turned to Aidan. “It’s only been five days since he left, but I miss him so much,” Jackie admitted.

“It’ll be okay. He’ll come back,” Daniella reassured her as she sprinkled coconut over a batch of freshly dipped marshmallow Santas.

“I’m not so sure. He seems happy in Manhattan. The first thing he did was visit Starbucks.”

Daniella smiled. “That sounds like something he’d do.”

Jackie had thought the same thing. “Sometimes it feels like there’s a hole in my heart that’ll never mend.”

“Let me tell you a story,” Daniella said. “Hopefully, it’ll distract you from what’s happening with Aidan. Before I arrived here, I used to move around a lot with my previous job. Over time, I lost contact with my family and friends. Before my brother passed away, he made me promise to find somewhere to live and stay there for at least three years. At the time, I thought he was crazy. But, after spending my first few months in Sapphire Bay, I understood why. This town is special. Between the people, the scenery, and the business opportunities, there’s so much to do. If my brother could see what I’ve achieved, he’d say he told me so. And do you know what happened to the hole my brother left in my heart?”

Jackie shook her head.

“It filled up with all the good things I’ve found here. Aidan’s special to you. Nothing will ever change that. If he’s too busy trying to save the world, let him. It might be his way of filling a hole in his heart, too.”

Jackie sighed. “I never thought about it like that. Apart from living in different cities, what was your life like before you moved here?”

“I worked in an advertising agency. I handled multinational and international accounts. There weren’t many days when I was at home.”

Jackie opened another bag of coconut. “If you’re worried about not having enough money to buy a house, have you considered working part-time in the advertising industry? You might be able to do most of the work from Sapphire Bay.”

Daniella shook her head. “The Fairy Forest keeps me far too busy.”

Just then, Daniella’s cell phone rang, and Mabel’s voice crackled through the speaker. “I’d like to get into The Fairy Forest early today, Daniella. It’s important we get the treats for the audience inside before the other teams arrive.”

“All right, Mabel. I’ll be there soon,” Daniella promised, ending the call. Grinning at Jackie, she said, “It looks like the fun’s just beginning! Are you ready to take all these Santas into town?”

Jackie looked around the messy kitchen. “I guess so. I’ll tidy everything when I get home.” She handed Daniella a stack of containers and gestured toward the table. “The Santas on the baking sheets need to go into these containers. The rest just need the lids snapped into place.”

After carefully placing all the containers into three bags, Jackie and Daniella bundled up their winter coats, ready to face the excitement of the Christmas Carol Competition.

When the tables were full of the Christmas treats, Jackie was going to take a photo and send it to Aidan. They might not have a Starbucks in Sapphire Bay, but they *did* have a community that knew how to bake delicious treats.

CHAPTER 21



Jackie found a seat beside Paris as the Sapphire Bay Community Choir marched into the performance space inside The Fairy Forest.

“They’re so cute,” Paris whispered.

Jackie grinned. With their brown antler ears, bright red T-shirts, and happy smiles, they looked adorable. Even Mr. Jessop looked the part with his freshly shaven face and proud expression. “I hope it goes as well as Mabel expects.”

“It won’t matter. It’s the experience that counts.”

Jackie opened the program to see how many choirs were performing. The list was longer than she’d imagined. They’d come from far and wide to pit their caroling against the best in the region. The number of gold stars beside previous winning choirs was impressive, and a little worrying for the choir from the smallest town.

She moved her legs as someone side-stepped along the row to sit beside her.

“Is this seat taken?”

The program fell out of her hands. With eyes that were suddenly full of tears, she looked up at Aidan. “What are you doing here?”

He smiled and her heart raced out of control.

“I saw the photos Mabel posted on Facebook of everyone decorating The Fairy Forest for the competition. It looked too good to miss, so I flew home this morning.”

Jackie frowned. Did Aidan say *home*? Before she could ask him what he meant, Pastor John introduced the choir. A spontaneous round of applause greeted the local favorites. Before everyone stopped clapping, Mabel took her place at the front of the choir, lifted the baton, and glanced at her husband, the designated music maestro of the evening.

With heads held high, the first notes of “Silent Night” filled The Fairy Forest with the most magical sound.

Jackie looked at Aidan to make sure she hadn’t dreamed he was sitting beside her.

He picked up her hand and smiled. “It’s okay. You’re not seeing a ghost.”

“Why are you here?” she whispered.

A man behind Jackie cleared his throat and pointed to the choir. A blush warmed her face and she sank a little lower in her seat.

“It’s okay,” Aidan whispered in her ear. “He’s just jealous you aren’t his girlfriend.”

Jackie didn’t think it was possible for her heart to beat any faster. She should’ve had a lot more questions for Aidan, but her brain had stopped working the moment he sat down. She didn’t know how long he was staying, but it didn’t matter. He was here now, and that meant more to her than he could know.



AIDAN CLOSED his eyes and let the choir’s soulful rendition of Elvis Presley’s “Blue Christmas” wash over him. He couldn’t imagine not being with Jackie this Christmas, or any other Christmas in the future. He’d known as soon as he landed in New York that being separated from her wasn’t the life he wanted.

Because, against all rhyme or reason, he desperately wanted to be part of her life—regardless of where that was.

Jackie's hand tightened on his. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

He opened his eyes and leaned closer. "I've never been better. Can we talk?"

With a silent nod, she picked up her bag and whispered something to Paris.

Aidan glanced at the scowling man behind them. They hadn't made *that* much noise. Whatever was on his mind must be worse than two people whispering a few words to each other.

Crouching as low as possible, Jackie led the way out of The Fairy Forest.

As soon as they closed the large door behind them, she sent him a confused frown. "Don't take this the wrong way, but why are you here, Aidan?"

"I missed you." His simple explanation brought tears to her eyes. He swallowed hard, trying to remember all the things he needed to say to her. "I've done a lot of thinking. About us. About how I feel about you."

Jackie's eyes searched his face. "And how do you feel?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"I love you. When I went back to my apartment, it felt cold and lonely. All I could think about was spending the evenings with you in front of your fireplace, enjoying our home-cooked meals, and talking about what was happening in our lives."

A single tear rolled down Jackie's cheek, and Aidan wiped it away with his thumb.

"I love you too," she said, her voice breaking. "But what about the job in Miami? Have you accepted the position?"

"I've spoken with the chief executive and turned down their offer. David's happy for me to split my time at BioTech between Manhattan and Sapphire Bay. Once most of my team has moved here, we can decide what'll happen next."

Jackie held his hands. "I'm sorry I didn't try harder to make a long-distance relationship work. I was being stubborn

and unreasonable. While you were gone, I thought about what we could do and realized staying in Manhattan for long weekends mightn't be a bad thing. As long as someone reliable looks after the store, I could use the time to buy more supplies and find retail outlets for hand-knitted garments from Montana.”

Aidan leaned his forehead against Jackie's. “That sounds like a great way to build your business.”

“I hope so. But most of all, it's a good way to spend more time with you. In the meantime, I have another idea you might like.”

With a gentleness that made his breath catch, Jackie pulled him into her arms. Their lips met in a sweet, tender kiss, sealing their commitment to each other. It was a kiss that held all the promises of a future filled with love, laughter, and endless possibilities. Aidan knew there'd still be challenges in their lives, but they were ready to face them together.

CHAPTER 22



*F*ive Months Later...

JACKIE WAS SITTING on her front porch, waiting for Aidan to take her to dinner at The Starlight Café. The last few months had gone by so quickly she couldn't believe it was almost summer.

After Mabel's choir won the Christmas Carol Competition, they'd sung at many community events. Everyone was thrilled, especially when they performed at the Christmas market and at the church on Christmas Day.

Aidan was enjoying working from Manhattan and Sapphire Bay. He jokingly told her he had the best of both worlds—great coffee from Starbucks and his favorite fudge from Sweet Treats. Jackie was just happy that everything was working out. She'd even managed to have one or two long weekends in New York City with him.

She smiled as she looked across her garden. The time between spring and summer was one of her favorites. The mornings were full of sunshine and perfect for walking around the lake or doing a little gardening. Flowers, heavy with buds, were waiting for the right time to bloom. It was a time of growth and expectation, the beginning of the most colorful time of the year.

A black pickup truck stopped in her driveway. Aidan didn't have a budget in mind when he bought his new truck. There wasn't one high-tech gadget the vehicle didn't have.

He'd told her he wanted them to be safe. What he really meant was that he liked the 3D holographic images that appeared on the windshield when he was driving.

"I thought I'd be late," Aidan said with a smile. "The meeting with Levi was amazing. He has some great ideas for transforming my house. He'll draw up some concept plans and price each option to give me an idea of what we can do."

"I can't wait to see them. Your home has so much potential." The property Aidan had bought was on the outskirts of town. Surrounded by ten acres of gorgeous land, the two-story ranch house was still in its original 1950s condition. But, with some tender loving care and a great imagination, it could be amazing.

Aidan held open the passenger door for her. "Have you spoken to Andrea today? I was wondering how she feels about opening her café for dinner."

"I tried calling her, but she must've been busy. Opening the café one night a week is a great idea, especially now that the weather's more settled. It's amazing how many people enjoy going for an evening stroll through town."

As they passed other homes and businesses, Jackie felt even more connected to the small community she now called home. And, since meeting Aidan, she couldn't have been happier. Even the visit her mom had made at Christmas wasn't as difficult as she'd imagined. They'd spent two days together without either of them feeling frustrated.

"Here we are," Aidan said as he pulled into a parking space.

Jackie frowned. "The café should be open by now. I hope nothing's happened to Andrea." She unbuckled her seatbelt and stepped onto the sidewalk. David would've called them if something had happened to his wife. There was only one other explanation for the closed sign on the door. "Did we get the right Friday night? Maybe the café doesn't open until next week?"

Aidan wrapped his arm around her waist and nudged her forward. “This is the right evening. A few lights are on, so maybe Andrea’s opening a little later tonight?”

They stopped in front of the door and Aidan tried the handle. When it opened, Jackie was even more confused. A table in the center of the room was covered with a white lace tablecloth, sparkling cutlery, and a flickering candle in the middle of a beautiful floral arrangement. The lights they’d seen from outside were from some pretty fairy lights strung across the ceiling.

Jackie’s frown deepened when some music started playing softly in the background. “It’s not either of our birthdays. Have I forgotten a special anniversary?”

Aidan shook his head. “Not yet, but one day it could be.”

Jackie had no idea what he meant. “Maybe we should tell Andrea we’re here.”

“We can tell her soon. But, before we do, I’d like to ask you something.”

Jackie’s heart pounded. Aidan couldn’t mean what she thought he did. Getting married was a big deal. Bigger than anything that’d ever happened in her life. Holding her hand, he led her into the center of the room.

“Why are we here?” she whispered.

Aidan cleared his throat and looked nervously at her. “I tried to remember when I started falling in love with you. It was here, in The Starlight Café, when you asked if I wanted to have a drink of hot chocolate with you and Andrea. From that first conversation, I knew there was something special about you, but I didn’t realize how quickly I’d fall in love with you.”

Tears filled Jackie’s eyes. There was such sincerity, kindness, and love shining from Aidan’s face that she couldn’t speak.

He took a deep breath and held her hands. “I’d like to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to wake up beside you every morning, share our dreams, and grow old together. I love you more than I can put into words.”

“Oh, Aidan,” she said softly. “I love you, too. You’re the most incredible man I’ve ever met.”

A tender smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “I’m glad you said that.” Before she knew what he was doing, he took a small blue box out of his pocket and lowered himself to one knee. “Jackie West, would you do me the honor of marrying me?”

Jackie nodded and tried to hold back her tears. “I do. I mean, I will. Yes...yes, I’ll marry you.”

With trembling hands, Aidan slipped a stunning sapphire and diamond engagement ring onto her finger. “I hope you like it. I chose the sapphire because it matches the color of your eyes.”

Jackie sighed. “It’s beautiful.” She pulled Aidan to his feet and hugged him tight. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.”

Jackie jumped as the front door swung open and a stream of people clapped and cheered. “Oh, my goodness. Where has everyone come from?”

Aidan smiled. “Our family and friends have been hiding in Shona’s quilting store, waiting for Andrea to tell them to come into the café.”

Fresh tears stung Jackie’s eyes when she saw her mom and Esme. Paris and Daniella came into the café holding plates of food, and Pastor John and Shelley were making sure everyone had a drink. “This is so lovely.”

The celebration continued with laughter, hugs, and kisses. Everybody was happy for them, and Jackie felt loved and cherished. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with Aidan. He was her rock, her constant, and she knew they could face anything as long as they were together.

THE END

THANK YOU

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The Magic of Summer

Love on Anchor Lane

Book 1

Fans of Netflix's Virgin River series and Sweet Magnolias will love this small-town, feel-good romance!

Daniella Judd moved to Sapphire Bay to keep a promise she'd made to her brother. If anyone told her she'd be happy living in a small Montana town, she'd tell them they were crazy. But, here she is, baking cookies for a church fundraiser, organizing events at The Fairy Forest, and dreaming of a little cottage on Anchor Lane.

Harrison James knows all about love and loss. After the devastating death of his wife, he doesn't think he'll ever be happy again. Working on the cottages on Anchor Lane is giving him time to plan the next phase of his life, to re-evaluate what's really important. And none of his plans involve staying in Sapphire Bay.

When Daniella and Harrison meet, their worlds collide in a whirlwind of emotions. Will Daniella discover that a lifetime of commitment can be the greatest adventure of all? Will Harrison find the courage to let go of his fears and embrace the love that awaits him?

Join Daniella and Harrison in this heartwarming story set against the backdrop of Sapphire Bay, where love, joy, and happiness intertwine in unexpected ways.

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