

KIMBERLY
THOMAS

Coming
Full Circle



❖ An Oak Harbor Series ❖

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An Oak Harbor Series

Kimberly Thomas

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Prologue

Three years ago...

“**A**nd I need you!”

“And I miss you!”

The two young women locked eyes as they belted out the next line of the song, “And now I wonder!” before bursting into giggles. Their long hair floated around their smiling faces as the blue convertible zoomed down the highway.

“Ready to become a supermodel?”

Nikki turned to look at the redhead beside her. Her lips widened in a smile. “Are you?” she threw back at her best friend.

“Of course, darling,” Samantha drawled in a Southern accent.

Nikki couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up her throat at her terrible impression. “I can't wait to get there,” she spoke with eager anticipation, then turned to stare at the dense forest of trees that lined either side of the road. They flitted by and were almost a blur of green at the speed the car was traveling. As they inched closer to their destination, she could almost picture it now, how the recruiters would go crazy for her as she strutted down the runway and the numerous offers she'd receive to be a part of the illustrious campaigns that would set her on a path to fulfilling her lifelong dream of

being grouped with the likes of Kate Moss and Cindy Breakspeare. She could almost taste it now, and her lips widened into another triumphant grin. Hope lifted her shoulders at the idea of her image being on huge billboards all around the world, as well as on the cover of Vogue.

“Think the parents will forgive you for ditching classes to do this?” Sam asked, pulling her out of her carefree thoughts of what could be if she got cast as a model.

“It’s my life,” she replied matter of factly. “This is my dream, not theirs, and besides, I’m nineteen, Sam. I’m perfectly capable of making my own choices.”

Sam didn’t respond. Nikki turned to her friend and noticed her hands tightly gripping the steering wheel as her brows compressed over her eyes and a frown flattened her lips. What’s wrong?” she asked with concern.

Sam released a heavy sigh that brought her shoulders down and deflated her chest. She briefly turned to Nikki. Fear and doubt swirled in her green eyes before she turned her attention back to the road. “Mom and Dad said if I go to this casting, they’re cutting me off for good.”

“Oh no! Sam, that’s awful,” Nikki replied, her hand flying to her chest.

“It’s fine. We’re going to get this gig, and then I won’t have to be under their thumb anymore. Everything will work out.” She turned to Nikki, and her lips lifted in an encouraging smile, but her friend could see the tightness at the corners as she struggled to keep it in place.

“It will work, Sam,” Nikki affirmed, reaching over to touch her arm. “Think about it. This time tomorrow, our lives are going to be changed forever.”

Sam lifted her hand from the steering and rested it on Nikki’s appreciatively.

For the next few hours, the two laughed and sang to the music blasting from the stereo. They took turns driving and only made one stop to get food and gas as they tried to get to the casting call. It was a twenty-hour drive from

Whidbey to Los Angeles.

By the time they reached Redwoods State Park, the sun had disappeared, and the sky was a canvas of blue, pink, and orange hues. The tall trees formed a canopy above the road as their branches spread out and reached across the space toward each other.

“This is really nice,” Nikki said, looking beyond the band of trees to the forest of equal and magnificent stature. Ferns and other shrubs populated the lower grounds. It looked like a scene out of a movie she’d watched before.

“Yeah. It is,” Sam agreed.

Just then, Nikki’s phone rang. She reached her hand back and picked up her bag from the backseat. Her heart slammed against her chest at the name on the screen. It rang twice more, but she didn’t move to answer it, paralyzed by fear.

Sam turned to look at her.

“It’s my dad,” she answered the unasked question. She contemplated not picking up the call as she wasn’t ready to hear his voice full of anger and disappointment just yet. At least not until she had made it to her destination and auditioned. Talking to him now would just mess with her head and all the preparations she’d made.

“Answer him,” Sam coaxed.

Nikki turned to her best friend, her brows furrowed with confusion.

“Do it,” Sam pressed.

Nikki finally hit the answer button before slowly raising the phone to her ear. “Hello?” she answered in a soft, timid voice.

“Hi, sweetie. Where are you? Your mom said you hadn’t been home since yesterday,” her father spoke, his voice full of worry.

“That’s because I was at Samantha’s house,” she explained, avoiding giving him a straight answer.

“Okay. I wasn’t aware of this.”

“I told Mom. She must have forgotten,” she jumped up to say, gripping

the phone at her ear as anxiety filled her up.

“Oh. She must have forgotten to tell me. So, are you coming home this evening?”

“Um...no,” she answered slowly. “Actually, I’m on my way somewhere now.”

“Okay. Where?”

“Um...” she stalled.

“Where are you, Nikki?” her father asked seriously.

She drew in a deep breath before releasing it. “I’m in California, Dad,” she finally confessed.

“California?” he asked, confused. “How did you ge— why are you in California?”

Nikki curled her fingers into her palm, allowing her nails to dig into her flesh. “I’m going to a model casting in Los Angeles,” she released. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her shoulders drew up her chin as she waited for her father to go off on her. At the prolonged silence, her eyes blinked open, and she took the phone from her ear to make sure the call was still connected before replacing it once more. “Hello...Dad? Are you still there?”

“I am,” her father replied, his voice low and somber.

Nikki sighed. “Look, Dad, I know you’re angry that I’m doing this, but this is my dream. I’ve always wanted to be a model, and this is an opportunity for me to make it big,” she reasoned.

“I’m not angry with you for following your dreams, Nicole.”

She tensed at his use of her first name, as he usually only did that whenever a reprimand was coming.

“But I am disappointed. I’m disappointed you lied to your mother and me and are now halfway across the country without our knowledge. Anything could have happened to you, and we wouldn’t know because you deceived us.”

Her shoulders fell, and her heart sank as she hung her head with shame.

Her dad was right. She should have said something, even if he and her mother wouldn't have supported her. She should have told them.

"You're an adult now and should be able to make your own choices. I can't stop you from doing what you think is best for your life, but just remember that in the end, you're the one who will have to live with the consequences."

Nikki opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"I'll see you when you get back...Goodbye, Nicole."

"Bye, Dad," she managed to answer in a hoarse whisper.

"What did he say?" Sam asked when she removed the phone from her ear.

Nikki groaned dejectedly. He said he was disappointed in me for lying to him and Mom," she answered, turning her head to look through the window. She could only make out the dark silhouettes of the trees and bushes because the night had spread its darkness throughout the woodland. The darkness approached the car and enveloped the cabin in a pall of shadow, contributing to the ominous feeling swirling around in the pit of her stomach.

It was Sam's turn to reach over and place a comforting hand on hers. Nikki turned to look at her best friend.

"They'll forgive you," she assured her. "They always do."

Nikki smiled appreciatively. "Thanks."

Sam returned the smile.

Nikki noticed movement from the corner of her eyes and quickly swiveled her head to see what was ahead. "Sam, look out!" she panicked.

Sam turned her head just then and frantically spun the steering wheel in an attempt to swerve away from the moose standing in the middle of the road.

Nikki heard the tires screech as the car swerved to the side, and her heart slammed against her chest as the car spun out of control and headed toward the trees. Nikki looked across at her friend, whose eyes widened in fear as

they stared back at her before they both looked through the windshield. Nikki opened her mouth to scream, but no sound left her lips, and the moment the car hit the tree, it felt like it had pushed back her breath and was crushing her trachea. Her body jerked forward before her seatbelt pulled her back, and the airbag deployed, slamming into her chest, further cutting off her air supply. For the second time in those split seconds, she wanted to scream, but nothing left her lips. She slowly turned to the left to see if her friend was okay, but Sam wasn't in the driver's seat. In fact, she wasn't in the car. Nikki began to panic even more.

“S-Sa-Sam?” she called in a short wheezing voice. “Sam?” she managed to call louder, but still, there was no response. She tried to lift her hand to unbuckle the seatbelt, but it felt like they were being held down by heavy weights. “Sam!” she called again. “Answer me, please,” she cried. She finally managed to get out of her seatbelt. However, when she tried to slide out from under the airbag, a sharp pain shot up her leg. “OW!” she screamed and fell back against the seat. The tears rolled down her face as she ran out of options for what to do.

“Hello? Are you all right?” came a female's voice.

Nikki turned to see a woman standing by the window, her face showing concern. “My...my friend,” she breathed out. The woman looked from her to the empty driver's seat.

“Sherry!” a man called out.

“What is it, Bill?” she asked. But the man didn't answer.

Sherry looked from Nikki to whoever she had been conversing with. “I'll be back. I just need to check on something. I've already called for help, and the paramedics are on their way.”

“Please...find my friend,” she begged once more.

“I will, honey, I promise.” Sherry left her just then.

The woman didn't return after a good ten minutes had passed. Nikki made another attempt to get out of the car. She needed to find Samantha— to make

sure she was okay. The pain in her leg and chest was unbearable, but she pushed past it and slowly eased herself out of the car. She leaned against the metal. Using it as a crutch, she hopped on her good leg toward where she could just make out the woman who'd been with her earlier and a man standing beside her. They were huddled together and speaking in hushed tones.

“She wasn't wearing a seatbelt. The airbag just wasn't enough.”

The man seemed to have heard her approaching and turned around. The woman followed suit. Their eyes widened.

“You shouldn't be out here. You're injured. You need to stay put until the paramedics get here.” Sherry advised, coming toward her.

But Nikki ignored her, trying to see behind the two. Her heart beat rapidly against her chest.

“Is...Is that...” she swallowed, unable to finish her question.

The woman looked at the man, who nodded in agreement with whatever unspoken request she had made. Slowly the two stepped away from what they had been shielding her from.

Bile rose up her throat, and her heart squeezed tightly against her chest, fighting to break through her ribcage. The light from the car's headlights shone on Sam's body that lay on the wet forest floor. Her left leg was twisted at an awkward angle as well as her right arm, while blood oozed from her head, eyes, and nose.

“Sam,” Nikki released a guttural cry as she collapsed on the wet forest floor, shattered by the sight of her best friend.

Chapter One

“**S**am! Wake Up. Wake Up! Please. Don’t leave me here alone...
Sam!”

Nikki jolted awake. Her body trembled all over, even though she was drenched in sweat. She took in two long gulps of air, filling her lungs. She had felt deprived of oxygen up until that point. She shuffled to the edge of the bed and swung her legs over until her feet rested on the plush carpet by the bed. She leaned forward and rested her head on her thighs.

It had been a recurring theme for the past three years that she would dream about her best friend lying there on the ground in the Redwood Park Forest, her body at various stages of looking mangled as her lifeless eyes stared back at Nikki accusingly. Sometimes she would speak, accusing Nikki of not doing enough to save her, and other times she would just stare at her mockingly, judging her.

Sighing, she got up and went to the bathroom. She stared at her reflection in the mirror above the sink. Her skin was paler than usual, and she had dark circles under her eyes. Her lips were also pallid. She sighed again as she examined herself in the mirror, then bent her head to turn on the faucet and splash cold water on her face.

She stripped off her clothes and stood under the hot shower, letting the water wash over her while she massaged her tense shoulders. It felt like she

had been running a marathon rather than sleeping. She contemplated going back to sleep, but she knew sleep wouldn't come. Instead, she decided to go for a run and to get some fresh air to clear the fog in her head.

Nikki picked out a T-shirt and a pair of leggings from her closet to wear before slipping into her sneakers. It was early morning when she stepped out on the porch. The night sky had faded into a deep blue, and fluffy clouds tinted orange and pink stretched across the horizon. The streets, still lit by the streetlights, were quiet, houses were shuttered, and the only sound reaching her ear was the sound of her feet hitting the pavement as she ran along the sidewalk. By the time she left her community on SW Thornberry Drive and turned onto Swanton Road, the first rays of sunlight peaked over the horizon. The world slowly began to come alive as the birds chirped, and the gentle breeze rustled through the trees scattered along the road. A few cars passed her as she continued her trek, moving farther away from home. She tried to focus on her breathing and the rhythm of her feet, but her mind kept wandering. Images from her dream flashed through her mind. The sound of the car's tires screeching along the wet asphalt before it wrapped itself around the large tree and the sight of Sam being flung from the driver's seat caused her adrenaline to spike, and she pumped her legs and arms faster, trying to outrun her thoughts, but it did not help.

Sam had been her best friend since childhood. She had stood up to a boy that had taken Nikki's ribbon back in kindergarten and had caused him to cry. The teacher had scolded Sam for being mean, but the little girl with the fiery red hair and bright green eyes defending her had enamored her in Nikki's heart forever. They had been inseparable, but now Sam was gone, and Nikki felt lost without her.

Now, she cried herself to sleep almost every night, feeling like a part of her had been ripped away. She missed Sam's infectious laughter, adventurous spirit, and unwavering loyalty. Sam had been her rock, her confidant, her partner in crime. They had been through everything together, from scraped

knees to first crushes to graduating high school and pursuing their dreams of becoming supermodels.

When she got back to the house, Nikki was exhausted. She took another shower and then sat down on the couch. She pulled out her phone and started going through the pictures of her and Sam. They had taken so many pictures together over the years and looking at them brought back so many memories.

A smile lifted her lips as she stared at a photo of her and Sam at Ms. Oak Harbor High. She had been first runner-up, and Sam had been the winner of the pageant. Their bright smiles shone through the photo as they held onto each other. It was then that the two seventeen-year-olds decided to become models after graduating high school. Only following their dreams had led to her losing her best friend.

Her smile sank.

Nikki was lost in thought when her mom walked into the living room. "Hi, sweetie. How are you?"

"Hi, Mom. I'm fine," Nikki turned to say.

"That's great."

Nikki's lips lifted in a facsimile of a smile that struggled to stay in place. She suspected her mother was being nice because her birthday was tomorrow. She had wanted to forget about it because how could she celebrate another year of living without her friend?

A wave of sadness came over her. Sam had always been the one to remember her birthday and had always been the first to wish her Happy Birthday. She would do the same the following day, which was Sam's birthday. They had always celebrated together, but since her death, Nikki found every excuse she could think of to avoid anything that reminded her of it.

"So, what are your plans for tomorrow?" Kirsten asked, cutting into her thoughts.

Nikki stared at her mother with furrowed brows.

“Are you going anywhere? Maybe out with friends?”

Nikki recognized her mother’s hopeful tone. She didn’t have friends to hang out with, and if she was being honest, she barely hung out with anyone from her family. Her cousin Diane was the only person that she was currently close to, and she knew it was a much-discussed topic between her parents.

“No. I don’t have any plans.”

“Why don’t I take you out tomorrow afternoon?” Kirsten asked, sitting down on the couch beside her.

Nikki looked at her mother hesitantly. Her mom was unusually nice to her, which put her on edge that there was something planned. Usually, her mom and dad ignored her unless they were trying to convince her to go to college or get a job.

“Um. I don’t th—”

“I just want to spend some time with you, sweetie,” Kirsten cut in. “We haven’t done anything together in so long. Not since— just give me a chance to do something nice for you,” she said, her eyes pleading.

Nikki opened her mouth to say no, but the look in her mother’s eyes broke her resolve. “Okay.”

“Great!” Kirsten spoke, bringing her hands together in satisfaction. “I have the perfect place for us to go.”

Nikki gave her mother a tight smile.

“It will be lovely, I promise.”

When Kirsten finally left, Nikki felt restless. She didn’t want to be alone, but she didn’t want to be around her parents. She decided to go to Diane’s bistro. It was under renovation, but she knew Diane would be there.

“Mom. I’m heading out,” she informed the woman in the kitchen, preparing breakfast.

“Oh. I was just making breakfast for us. I thought it would be a good idea to eat together as we used to,” Kirsten replied, looking at her daughter with hopeful eyes.

“I’m not hungry, and I really have to go,” Nikki declined.

She noticed her mother’s shoulders drop and her face set with disappointment. A feeling of guilt crept up, but she quickly looked away. She didn’t want to sit and have breakfast with her parents because she knew where it would lead— where it always led— especially with her dad. She tried to avoid situations where they would have an opportunity to grill her about her plans for her future.

“I’ll be back later.”

“Okay. Be safe,” Kirsten replied with a small smile. Nikki gave a nod of acknowledgment and left.

When she got to ‘Java Bistro,’ the place was buzzing with activity. Workers were hammering and drilling, and there was a lot of noise. Diane was there, supervising the work. She looked up when Nikki walked in.

"Hey, Nikki," she said, coming around the counter to hug her cousin. "I wasn't expecting to see you today. How are you?"

“I’m fine. Great, actually,” Nikki responded, her lips lifting into a convincing smile.

Diane’s lips folded in on each other as her green eyes searched her cousin’s face. “Are you sure?” she asked with concern.

“Scout's honor,” Nikki replied with her right palm resting across her heart.

Diane’s face showed concern, but she didn’t press the matter further. "So, what brings you here?" she asked instead.

Nikki shrugged. "I just needed to get out of the house for a bit."

Diane nodded, understanding. "Your birthday is tomorrow. How do you feel about that?" she inquired.

“Like I don’t want to think about it. Better yet, I wish I didn’t have one.” Nikki turned away from her cousin and sighed.

“You can’t say things like that, Nikki,” Diane cautioned.

Nikki didn’t respond. Diane walked up to her and touched her arm.

Slowly she turned to face her.

“Why don’t we go to the kitchen, away from all this noise?” Diane offered. “I’m making muffins and bagels for the morning customers, and there is a steaming cup of hot chocolate with your name on it,” she offered, bumping Nikki’s shoulder with her own.

Nikki simply nodded, and Diane led her to the back of the building.

“The batter is already mixed. I just need to get them into these muffin tins and into the oven,” Diane informed her after placing a bagel with cream cheese and a cup of hot chocolate on the counter where she sat.

“Thank you,” Nikki said gratefully, raising the mug to her lips and savoring the taste of the hot liquid. The creamy richness of the cream cheese slid across her tongue as she sank her teeth into the freshly toasted bagel, evoking a deep and happy sigh of delight. “This is really good,” she complemented.

“I’m glad you like it,” Diane returned as she straightened up and shut the oven door. She sat on the barstool beside Nikki and looked at her. “I heard Samantha’s parents are planning to have a balloon release for her birthday.”

Nikki froze at the mention of her best friend. She released the sandwich, letting it fall to the plate as her appetite disappeared. “I...I,” she gulped back the lump in her throat. “I didn’t know that. But that’s...that’s a great way to honor her memory.” Her voice strained with sadness and sounded foreign to her ear. She kept her head down, staring at her hands clasped in her lap.

Minutes ticked by in a heavy, suffocating silence before Diane finally spoke up. “Have you been to her grave?”

Nikki shook her head, and her lips curved downward. “I haven’t.”

“Nikki,” Diane said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I know it’s hard, but you have to stop blaming yourself for what happened to Sam. None of it was your fault. Sometimes things happen that are out of our control, and we just have to accept that.”

Nikki looked at Diane with tears in her eyes. “I just miss her so much,”

she spoke softly. "And it's..." her eyes shut tightly as she gulped back a sob. "It's hard to let go of the guilt. I'm here and she's not."

"I understand," Diane replied, her voice laced with empathy as she reached out to give Nikki's arm a comforting squeeze. "But Sam wouldn't want you to keep living in the past like this," she continued, her gaze unwavering. "I'm pretty sure that if she were here, she would tell you that you have your whole life ahead of you, Nikki. You deserve to be happy and to do that, you must let her go, face the reality of what happened, forgive yourself, and start moving forward. It won't be easy, but I'll be here for you every step of the way."

Nikki wiped her teary eyes with the back of her hand and gave her cousin a grateful smile as she spoke the words, "Thank you."

"Anytime, sweetie. Now, when was the last time you visited the therapist?"

Nikki's lips pursed into a slight pout, and her eyes rolled heavenward. "Not this again."

Chapter Two

"I just don't understand why everyone is always pushing me to do things I don't want to do," she said, her voice tight in annoyance. "Why can't people just let me be?"

"And when you say pushing you to do things you don't want to do, does that also including coming to therapy?"

Nikki lowered her gaze and gave her therapist a sheepish look. Her cheeks flushed with a faint rosy hue as he rightly pointed out that she truly did not want to be there.

Over the course of the last three years, Nikki had sought out the help of no less than five different therapists, but none of them had managed to establish a lasting connection with her. Although she had been visiting Dr. Grimes intermittently for only a couple of months, she felt more at ease in his presence than with her previous therapists. However, Nikki still found it challenging to divulge her deepest emotions to him, struggling to overcome the barriers that had prevented her from opening up in the past.

"So, your birthday is tomorrow. How are you feeling about that?" he asked, his voice soft and reassuring.

Nikki let out a deep sigh and shifted uncomfortably on the plush sofa. "Honestly, I don't know how to feel," she admitted, her eyes downcast.

Dr. Grimes nodded understandingly. "Birthdays can bring up a lot of

emotions for people. Do you want to talk about why you're feeling this way?"

Nikki hesitated for a moment before finally speaking. "I don't know...it's just that every year, I'm reminded of what I lost, and I also feel like I'm getting older, and I haven't accomplished anything meaningful in my life. It's like another year wasted."

Dr. Grimes listened attentively; his eyes locked on Nikki's. "Go on," he encouraged.

"You know, I told my cousin today that I wished I didn't have a birthday," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Dr. Grimes' eyes widened slightly, but he didn't miss a beat. "That's a tough thing to say," he acknowledged. "But it's okay to feel that way. It's normal to feel overwhelmed or sad on your birthday. Just remember that you're not alone. You spoke about your family before and how much it feels like they are suffocating you when they try to be kind and understanding, but it shows that they still care about you and want to be there for you. It might not be easy to accept that because you're at the stage of doubt and guilt. My advice to you is that you ignore the voice in your head telling you that you're not worth their love and time and start accepting it. This can serve as a reminder of what you still have...Can you do that?"

Nikki nodded slowly, taking in her therapist's words. As she leaned back into the sofa, she couldn't help but feel a sense of relief wash over her. Maybe, just maybe, she could get through this birthday after all, but then she sighed. "I don't know if I can," she finally expressed.

Her therapist nodded slowly, his eyes compassionate. "That's okay," he assured her. "But we need to find out. So, I'm going to give you some homework."

Nikki raised an eyebrow. Homework? Wasn't she already doing enough by coming to therapy every week?

"I want you to start journaling," he continued. "Every day, write down your moods, your thoughts, your feelings. Try to figure out what's going on

inside of you."

Nikki scoffed inwardly. Journaling? Wasn't that something for high-school kids with pink diaries and glitter pens? But as she left the therapist's office and headed home, she found herself thinking about his words.

That evening, Nikki sat at her desk and pulled out a notebook. She hesitated for a moment, then began to write. At first, her words were stilted and awkward, like she was trying too hard. But eventually, something shifted. She began writing about her frustrations, fears, and anger. She wrote about the things she didn't want to do and the things she was afraid to do. And as she wrote, she felt a sense of release, like a weight was lifting off her shoulders.

Before she knew it, Nikki had transitioned to sitting on her bed and had written for hours. She had filled page after page with her thoughts and feelings, and as she closed the notebook and crawled into bed, she felt a sense of peace.

As the night passed, she lay still in her bed, her mind empty of dreams or thoughts. The only sound that could be heard was the soft hum of the wind outside, cutting into an otherwise silent night. It was the most peaceful she had slept in a while. And yet, when morning came, she was jolted awake by a sudden knocking on her door. Disoriented and groggy, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes, trying to shake off the remnants of her slumber. As she tried to shake her disorientation, her mind flashed to her conversation with Diane and her therapist, and she was reminded of the day.

At that moment, she felt a sense of unease and apprehension. Her heart raced as she called out, "Come in."

The door creaked open before opening fully, and her parents walked into her room. Her mother carried a tray in her hand. The sweet scent of fresh pancakes wafted through the air, and a single candle flickered on top of the stack.

"Happy Birthday, sweetheart," her mother said in a gentle tone, her voice

warm with affection as she walked toward the bed with a smile on her lips.

Nikki's first reaction was to frown, her face contorting into a look of confusion and mild annoyance. "Why are you guys doing this?" she asked, her tone a mix of bewilderment and resignation. "It's just another regular day. You don't have to do any of this. I'm pretty okay with this just being another day."

Her father, Brian, who had been standing by the door, let out a sigh. "Nikki, your mother made an effort to do this for you," he said, his voice tinged with disappointment. "Can't you, for once, just be grateful?"

Nikki looked over at her mother, who had a crestfallen expression on her face and felt a pang of guilt. She realized that her reaction had been overly dismissive and ungrateful.

"I'm sorry," she spoke softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "And thanks for the kind gesture." She tried to smile, but it was a feeble attempt, and she knew that her parents could see through it.

"I'll just leave this here for you to enjoy. I made it extra special with syrup you like," Kirsten spoke, placing the tray on the bedside table.

"Thanks, Mom," she tried again to conjure a grateful smile, but she wanted them to just go.

"You're welcome, sweetie," Kirsten smiled before leaning over to plant a kiss on her temple. "Remember, we have a lunch date this afternoon."

Nikki simply nodded.

"Happy Birthday, sweetheart," her father said when her mother joined him by the door where he had been standing.

"Thanks, Dad," Nikki replied with a small lift of her lips.

The moment they left the room, the door closed, her face fell, and tears welled up in her eyes. She got out of bed and walked to her bathroom. After showering, she slipped on baggy sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt before curling up in bed. The pancakes went untouched as her tears continued to flow freely down her cheeks, her heart feeling like it had been shattered into a

million pieces as she thought about Sam.

Her phone pinged and she reached the bedside table to retrieve it. It was a message from Diane wishing her a happy birthday. Another text came in just then and she opened it up to see it was from her brother Mitch. Sighing, she switched off the phone and returned it to the bedside table. She didn't want to see another birthday message for the rest of the day, and she simply wanted to get through her lunch with her mother and return to the same position in her bed.

Her tummy grumbled as she got up to start preparing for her lunch date with her mother.

After carefully considering her wardrobe options, she settled on a knee-length red turtleneck dress with long sleeves that clung effortlessly to her model-size figure. The dress stopped just above her knees, offering a stylish yet modest look. To complete her outfit, she paired it with a pair of black ankle booties that accentuated her long legs. As a finishing touch, she pulled her blond tresses into a high ponytail, adding a touch of sophistication to her look.

She made her way out of the room to see her mother already dressed and waiting for her. "You look beautiful, sweetie," she complimented.

"Thanks," Nikki said with a small smile.

The two walked out of the house and Nikki got into the passenger seat of her mother's SUV. Her mother got into the driver's seat and started the engine, pulling out of the driveway and onto the road. Minutes later, they were driving down the highway before turning onto SE Pioneer Way. The car smoothly rode over the pavement as they made their way toward the Seaside Hideaway.

As they arrived, Kirsten expertly parked the car in front of the restaurant before the two women got out. The sun was now shining directly overhead. They walked up to the entrance of the restaurant and the smell of saltwater and seafood filled their nostrils. As they stepped inside, the cool air

conditioning welcomed them.

“Welcome to Seaside— Oh, hi Kirsten, Nikki, how are you?” their waiter, who was also one of the owners and a family friend, asked with a bright smile.

“Hi, Don. I’m okay. Thanks,” Kirsten replied with a bright smile.

The man nodded his acknowledgment before turning to Nikki, who simply gave him a small smile.

“I heard it was your birthday, young lady. I hope you enjoy the special we have for you today.”

“Thank you.”

Don walked them to their table and walked away to get their order. They started with a simple soup and crotons before the main dish came. It was lobster tails smothered with a buttery garlic sauce. Nikki had only taken a few sips of the soup, but at the sight and aroma coming from the dish before her, her tummy rumbled in response to the savory scent tickling her nostrils.

As she took a bite of the succulent lobster, her eyes fluttered shut and she let out a deep, satisfied sigh. The sweet, delicate flavor of the meat melted in her mouth, and the texture though firm, was tender. The buttery, garlicky flavor of the accompanying sauce added a layer of richness and depth to the dish.

Nikki paused for a moment. “This is really good,” she praised.

“It is,” her mother smiled, delighted. “I’m glad you like it. That means I made a good choice.”

Nikki’s lips turned up as she gave her mother a soft appreciative look. “Thanks for this. I really needed it.”

Kirsten reached across the table and placed her hand on her daughter’s as she smiled affectionately back at her.

After that, the two sat in comfortable silence, enjoying their meal and making light conversation. By the time they were ready to leave, Nikki felt a little lighter. It was like the relationship she once had with her mother, where

they could talk about every and anything, was slowly making a comeback. She was scared, but she was also hopeful, and she needed to journal it.

Her mother convinced her to stop and get ice cream and they sat on the boardwalk enjoying the creamy deliciousness as they stared out at the water and the many vessels of varying sizes that littered the water. When it was time to head back home, Nikki was almost sad that the day was ending.

The moment they turned onto their road, Nikki could sense that something was wrong by the way her mother kept fidgeting with the car controls and glancing at her every few seconds from the corner of her eye. The hairs at the back of her neck stood at attention the moment they stepped onto the porch. Something was definitely up and whatever it was, she wasn't going to like it.

“Can you take this to the living room? I just remembered that I spilled some chips on the couch, and I need to get to it quickly, but I need to head to the bathroom for a quick second. I'll be there shortly.

Nikki took the small hand-held vacuum from her mother and headed down the hallway toward the living room.

Shouts of “Surprise!” hit her the moment she walked through the door. Her heart slammed against her chest violently and her eyes widened as her mouth formed an ‘O’ as she stared at the happy faces of her family, looking back at her expectantly. Slowly her face morphed into anger. She turned just in time to see her mother standing by the door with a look of apprehension in her eyes.

“I told you that I didn't want a party. I didn't even want to go to this stupid lunch today. Why can't you guys just respect my wishes?”

Everyone's expression went from dumbfounded, shocked to hurt, but Nikki did not care. The rage bubbling within her did not give her time to do that. Without another word, she rushed out of the house and walked down the path until she descended the sidewalk. Hot tears streamed down her face as she walked aimlessly for more than an hour. Finally, she collapsed on a

bench and she placed her face in her hands as she sobbed uncontrollably, the only thought on her mind being that Sam wasn't here to celebrate with her.

Chapter Three

“**M**hmm.”

Cora savored each bite of the squid-ink pasta with unbridled enthusiasm. As the flavors of the dish danced on her taste buds, she couldn't help but let out another deep, guttural moan of satisfaction. "Mhmm," she groaned, her eyes closing in pure bliss.

With the pasta still steaming on her plate, she paused to take a deep breath, savoring the dish's aroma. The fragrant scent of garlic and herbs, mixed with the oceanic aroma of squid, created a symphony of flavors that filled her senses.

"This is some good pasta," she expressed, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I agree," Jamie chuckled as he paused, eating to watch her from across the table.

Her bright eyes danced with delight and affection as she stared back at him. She reached for her glass of wine, took a sip to cleanse her palate, and dove back into the dish. As she twirled a forkful of pasta around, she marveled at the intricate patterns of black and white that swirled together in perfect harmony.

Cora closed her eyes again, lost in the moment as she enjoyed the richness of the sauce and the perfect al dente texture of the pasta. The flavors

were so intense and complex that it was as if she could taste the passion and dedication that went into creating this masterpiece.

With a sigh of contentment, Cora took another bite, fully immersing herself in the joy of the moment. She knew that she would remember this meal for a long time to come, and she was grateful for the opportunity to experience such a culinary delight.

"I'm having such a great time tonight," Cora said, smiling at Jamie. "Thank you for taking me out," she affectionately smiled at Jamie.

"Of course," Jamie replied, reaching across the table to take her hand. "I love spending time with you."

Cora's heart swelled with an intense and overwhelming affection that radiated deep within her. It filled her entire being that triggered her cheeks to feel flush. The warmth was comforting, filling her with a sense of contentment and joy.

She couldn't express how incredibly blessed and lucky she was to have found Jamie. He was a person who had all the qualities she had ever wanted in a partner. He was kind and compassionate, always thinking of others before himself. His sense of humor never failed to make her laugh, even on her worst days. She felt a deep connection with him that made her heart flutter with excitement and anticipation every time they were together.

As she looked into his eyes shining with affection, Cora felt a sense of peace and security that she had never experienced before. She knew that no matter what challenges they faced in life, they would always be there for each other. It was a feeling of unconditional love she had always dreamed of, and now it was a reality.

He had gone above and beyond to ensure that their anniversary was nothing short of spectacular. Two years ago, they had become an official couple, and to commemorate this momentous occasion, he had made reservations at the highly sought-after Lot 28 restaurant, nestled on the serene and picturesque Camano Island. The restaurant, boasting a coveted three

Michelin stars, was known for its exquisite culinary creations that tantalized the taste buds and left a lasting impression.

As they sat at their table, their plates almost empty and their wine glasses half-full, they were surrounded by a beautifully romantic atmosphere. The soft music and dim lighting created the perfect ambiance for the occasion. However, what truly made the evening special for her was the effortless conversation and genuine laughter they shared. It was a testament to the deep connection and love they had built over the past two years.

She was grateful for the effort he had put into making the evening unforgettable. From the moment they had arrived, he had ensured that every detail was perfect, from the exquisite cuisine to the impeccable service. The evening was a celebration of their love, a testament to their commitment to each other, and a reminder of the beautiful journey they had embarked on as a couple. She knew that this anniversary would be etched in her memory forever, and she was grateful for the love and joy that filled her heart.

However, she could also tell that something was bothering him as he would get a far away look when he thought she wasn't looking.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, gently touching his hand.

Jamie blinked in surprise before his eyes settled on her and a smile lifted his lips. “I’m at a fine restaurant, eating the finest food and right across from me is my beautiful fiancé. What could possibly be wrong?” he teased.

Cora blushed at the compliment, but she also knew it was geared at distracting her from getting an answer.

“Jamie...you don’t have to keep anything from me...you don’t have to be strong all the time. I want you to trust that I am able to handle whatever it is that you’re going through. We are a team, remember?” She ran the pads of her fingers back and forth across the back of his hand soothingly.

Jamie gave her a grateful smile. “What did I do to get this lucky?”

Cora blushed. “You deserve all the love in the world,” she responded.

Jamie flipped his hand over and clasped hers before giving it a gentle

squeeze.

"I was thinking about Lily," he said, referring to his twenty-two-year-old daughter. "I know she's been distant lately, and I just want her to feel more connected to us. I was thinking that maybe you could spend more time with her, get to know her better."

Cora's heart went out to Lily, who had always been polite but reserved around her. She knew the girl had been through some rough patches, especially with losing her mother as a teenager. Now she had to deal with her father moving on to remarry and dealing with her upcoming wedding to her fiancé Bill Mason.

"I would love that," Cora said, squeezing Jamie's hand. "I know it's not easy for her right now, but maybe we can plan something fun together, just the three of us."

Jamie smiled gratefully, his eyes shining with pride and love for Cora. "Thank you. I think that would mean a lot to her."

Their conversation turned to Lily's impending wedding, and Jamie's expression grew serious.

"There's something I've been meaning to talk to you about," he said hesitantly. "I don't know if Lily has told you anything, but I have a feeling that there's something she's not telling me about her relationship with Bill. I just want to make sure she's happy and safe."

Cora felt a pang of worry, but she knew that Jamie was a good father who always had his daughter's best interests at heart.

"I understand your concern," she said gently. "But maybe it's something Lily needs to come to you with on her own. She might just need time to figure things out."

Jamie nodded, but his brow was still furrowed with worry. "I know. I just want to make sure she knows that she can always talk to me, no matter what. I'll always be there for her."

Cora reached across the table again to take his hand, her heart swelling

with affection for him. "I know you will. And I'll be there to support her, whatever she needs."

They smiled at each other, the warmth and love between them palpable. Cora knew their relationship was built on trust, respect, and a deep understanding of each other's needs. And with Jamie by her side, she felt like anything was possible.

Cora's mind wandered back to a difficult time in her life—the aftermath of her divorce from her ex-husband, who had cheated on her.

"Jamie, I remember how hard it was for me to give my daughters the space they needed to process their feelings after the divorce," Cora said, her voice softening as she spoke. "It was tough to watch them struggle, but I knew it was important for them to work through it in their own time."

Jamie nodded thoughtfully, listening intently as Cora continued. "But you know what? It was worth it. Now they're both happy and thriving, and I'm so proud of the young women they've become."

Cora could see the concern etched on Jamie's face as he spoke. "Just be patient with her, Jamie," she said gently, placing a comforting hand on his arm. "It's not easy, but sometimes all we can do is wait for our kids to open up to us."

As the evening progressed and the dinner began to wind down, Cora and Jamie decided to indulge in dessert. They savored their sweet treats before leaving the restaurant. Jamie suggested they take a leisurely stroll around the quaint yet charming town.

The picturesque surroundings left a lasting impression on them, with old-fashioned buildings and cobbled streets adding to the charm of the place. As they walked, Cora fell at Jamie's side comfortably, taking in the soft melodies that wafted toward them from a concert happening somewhere in the town. Suddenly, Jamie stopped by a flower vendor and picked up a stem of fragrant roses. He handed it to her. She was delighted by the sweet aroma emanating from the soft velvet petals. She couldn't resist pressing her nose against them,

relishing the sweet, heady scent.

After that, Jamie drove her home.

"I had the most amazing time tonight," Cora smiled up at Jamie as her arms circled his upper torso and locked behind his back. Thank you."

Jamie's face lit up with a smile as he hugged her back. "I had a lovely time, too," he replied, his lips curling up into a grin.

Cora's heart skipped a beat as he leaned in to plant a soft kiss on her lips. When their lips finally parted, she rested her head against his chest, feeling the steady thumping of his heart beneath her ear.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," she sighed dreamily, her fingers tracing lazy circles on Jamie's back.

Jamie chuckled softly. "We only have forever," he whispered affectionately, his fingers gently brushing back a few strands of her hair and sending shivers down her spine. Cora felt like she was floating on cloud nine, completely lost in the moment with the man she loved.

"I love you," she professed.

"I love you too," Jamie immediately responded. "I'll see you tomorrow." He pecked her lips once more before they separated, and she waved goodbye as she watched him pull away from the driveway.

She turned and made her way up the steps and onto the porch before entering the house. She shrugged off her coat and placed it in the coat room.

"Hi, Mom."

Cora turned to see her daughter at the bottom of the stairs with a smile on her lips. "Hi, sweetie," Cora returned. "Where's Becca?"

"I just managed to put her down without her getting up and screaming because I'm leaving her," Jules replied.

Cora nodded her understanding.

"How was your date with Jamie?"

"It was great," Cora cheesed. "We went to Lot 28."

"That's great," Jules replied.

Cora smiled gratefully, but as her thoughts ran to Lily, a frown marred and creased the space between her brows.

“Mom, are you okay?”

Cora smiled and nodded. She then pulled her daughter toward her. Her heart swelled with love as she wrapped her arms around her daughter. "Jules, I'm so glad you're here," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "I love you so much."

“I love you too, Mom,” Jules replied, hugging her back.

Chapter Four

Nikki walked down the hallway, her slippers barely making a sound against the hardwood floor. She was trying to avoid her parents, with whom she had hardly exchanged a word since her explosive outburst two days ago. The memory of her anger still stung her, and she felt guilty for unleashing it on them and the rest of her family when they had gone above and beyond to make her feel special on her big day.

Despite their thoughtful efforts, Nikki had felt suffocated by the overwhelming attention, and the weight of her best friend's absence on the eve of her birthday had only compounded her discomfort.

"We can't keep doing this, Kirsten. It's tearing our family apart," Brian's voice boomed through the living room, causing Nikki to freeze in her tracks.

Her mother's voice, usually calm and collected, shook with emotion. "I know, Brian. But what else can we do? Let's just...let's give it some more thought."

Nikki felt a knot in her stomach, knowing their conversation was about her. She wanted to storm into the living room and demand to know what was going on, but the fear of what she might hear kept her rooted to the spot.

She made up her mind then to continue on her mission. Nikki slipped out the back door and into the garden. The air was cool and crisp, and the stars twinkled above her. For a moment, she felt a sense of peace wash over her.

But then the guilt set in.

For the next few days, Nikki avoided her parents as much as possible. She spent most of her time in her room journaling, lost in thought.

Her anxiety and depression, which had been creeping up on her, now felt like a weight on her chest that she couldn't shake off.

As she walked into the kitchen, she noticed her parents with their heads close together, whispering to each other. Their mouths clamped shut as soon as they saw her, and Nikki could feel the tension in the air.

"Don't stop on my account," Nikki said, trying to make light of the situation. "What were you guys talking about?"

Her father's expression was stern as he looked at her. "Nikki, we need to talk to you about something."

Nikki's heart sank. She knew what was coming. Her parents had been hinting at it for a while now, but she had been hoping they wouldn't bring it up.

"I'm putting my foot down," her father said. "It's time for you to find a job and start preparing to move out."

Nikki felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. She had been living with her parents ever since she had finished college, unable to cope with the pressure and her mental health issues. Her parents had been supportive, but she could see the strain it was putting on their finances.

"I know we've been supporting you, but we can't keep doing it forever," her father continued. "You need to start taking responsibility for your life. You've been moping around the house for too long now. It's time to stop living in the past and move on with your life."

Nikki felt tears welling up in her eyes. She knew her father was right, but the thought of finding a job and moving out seemed like an insurmountable task. Her anxiety was already at an all-time high, and the thought of facing the world outside seemed overwhelming.

"You want me to move out? Fine, I'll move out. Maybe then I won't have

to worry about your constant nagging, and you won't have a problematic daughter to deal with."

"That's not why we're doing this, Nikki," her mother refuted. "We're doing it because we love you—"

"You love me?" Nikki asked. "You sure have a funny way of showing it," she snorted.

"Nikki, try to understand," Kirsten continued to say.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," she replied, shaking her head, her eyes filled with hurt and betrayal. Abruptly, she turned and began walking out of the kitchen.

Kirsten started to go after her, but Brian held her shoulder and shook his head, "No," stopping her.

She stormed out of the house, her heart pounding with anger and frustration. She couldn't believe her parents were kicking her out and telling her to get a job. She had just graduated from college and was still trying to figure things out. She didn't want to move out yet; she wasn't ready. She didn't know what she wanted to do with her life, and the thought of having to support herself was overwhelming.

As she walked down the street, she couldn't help but feel lost and alone. She needed someone to talk to, someone who would understand her.

Nikki turned and headed back to the house, her mind racing with anger and sadness. She got into her car and drove off, the radio blasting loud music to drown out her thoughts. As she made her way toward Pioneer Way, she couldn't shake the feeling of betrayal from her family.

When she arrived at the 'Java Bistro,' she saw Diane in deep conversation with the construction workers. The sight of her cousin brought a wave of emotions, and Nikki struggled to hold back tears as she approached Diane. Her cousin noticing her approach, said something to the workers before walking toward her.

"Nikki, what's wrong?" Diane asked, noticing the tears in her eyes.

"I'm being kicked out," Nikki responded with anguish. "My parents are

throwing me out like I'm some kind of burden.”

Diane's expression softened, and she gave her cousin a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry, Nikki. That's terrible."

Nikki let out a bitter laugh. "It's like what I went through doesn't matter. It's been hard for me to get back on my feet, and they just don't get it, Diane."

Diane listened patiently as her cousin poured out her heart, nodding in understanding. "I know it's hard, Nikki. But you're strong, and you'll get through this," she encouraged.

Nikki wiped away her tears, feeling a little better. "Thanks, Diane. It's just that they don't want to deal with me because they can't understand what I'm going through. I bet you they wouldn't have done this to Mitch. Their golden son," she added with a sneer. "Little Mr. Perfect."

Diane placed a hand on Nikki's shoulder. "Don't worry about Mitch. This is about you, and you're going to be okay."

Nikki sighed. "It just sucks that they can treat me like this," she vented.

"Nikki," Diane spoke her name hesitantly.

Nikki looked at her, waiting for what she was going to say next.

"Your parents are just worried about you. They want you to be independent and successful. They're trying to help you," Diane said, trying to calm her down.

But Nikki didn't want to hear it. She felt like her parents were abandoning her, and she resented their interference.

"That's easy for you to say. You always got everything you wanted."

"That's not true, Nikki, and you know it," Diane refuted. "Are you forgetting that Mom wouldn't give me the money to expand my bistro and that she didn't support me having a business in the first place?"

Regret filled her for what she said. She wanted to apologize for what she said, but pride stopped her, and instead, she bowed her head.

"Why don't you stay with me at Bev's?" Diane offered. "There's plenty

of rooms there, and I'm pretty sure she wouldn't mind."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Nikki declined.

"Why not," Diane returned.

Nikki sighed. "It just isn't."

As she left the bistro, Nikki felt worse than when she had come. She felt like she had nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

As she made her way into downtown Oak Harbor, the small coastal town was alive with activity. The streets were lined with quaint shops, cafes, and restaurants, each with its own kind of charm and character. The sound of car horns, chatter, and laughter filled the air as locals and tourists alike bustled around, going about their day.

As she drove through the heart of downtown, she had to navigate through a maze of cars, pedestrians, and bicycles, all vying for their space on the road.

Nikki turned into the mall. Whenever she was angry, frustrated, or excited, it was usually her cue to go shopping. Shopping always calmed her. As she approached the entrance, she felt a sense of anticipation. She drove around the parking lot, searching for a spot, but it seemed as though every space was taken. After several minutes of circling, she finally spotted an open spot near the entrance. She quickly maneuvered her car into the space and turned off the engine.

With a sigh of relief, Nikki opened the car door and stepped out onto the pavement. She stretched her legs and took a deep breath of fresh air. As she made her way toward the mall, she noticed the sleek, modern architecture of the building, which stood out in stark contrast to the older, more traditional buildings in other parts of town.

She was eager to explore the various shops and boutiques that awaited her inside. She couldn't help but feel a little giddy at the prospect of discovering new fashion trends and trying on the latest styles. As she crossed the threshold into the mall, she was greeted by the buzz of activity, with shoppers

bustling about and music playing in the background.

With a smile on her face, Nikki made her way through the crowds, taking in the sights and sounds of the mall. She felt a sense of freedom and liberation as she wandered through the aisles, enjoying the thrill of browsing through the latest fashions and accessories.

Nikki stopped short when she noticed the sign in the window of a women's fashion store advertising the vacancy for a sales representative. Her heart was racing with anticipation as she entered the fashion store. This was a chance for her to get a job like her parents wanted, and it didn't hurt that it was a job linked to something she liked— fashion.

The store was a feast for the senses, with racks of clothes in every color and style and the scent of fresh fabric and perfume wafting through the air. A petite woman with a bright smile on her lips walked over to her.

"Hi there. Welcome to the House of Chic. I'm Kelly. How can I assist you today?" she asked, her voice filled with warmth.

"Hi, Kelly," Nikki greeted back. "I'm Nikki. I'm actually here to apply for the position being advertised."

Kelly's smile broadened. "That's fantastic! We're always on the lookout for talented sales representatives. Do you have a resume with you?"

Nikki gave her a sheepish look. "Um, no."

"Okay. Not a problem. What can you tell me about yourself and why you think you would be a good fit for this job?" Kelly asked.

Nikki drew in a deep breath before releasing it. "I know it might not be enough for me to get this job, but what I can say is that I love fashion. It has been my dream to become a model or a designer. I have an eye for what makes an outfit great, and this is what I would be able to help the customers with."

She waited with bated breath as Kelly bowed her head in thought. The woman finally looked up at her with an unreadable expression.

"Well, Nikki, I can't say I am thrilled with the fact that you don't seem to

have much experience, and this seemed to be a spontaneous gesture from you to apply for this job, but..." Nikki cringed inwardly as she prepared for the woman to tell her no.

"I think you'd be a great fit for our team, and we do need someone immediately," Kelly continued."

Nikki's heart leaped with joy. "That's...that's. Wow! Thank you so much!"

Chapter Five

"What do you think about this color?" Cora lifted her hand, showing off the light pink nail polish on her recently manicured fingers.

Cora had spent hours carefully selecting her outfit for the day, wanting to make a good impression on Lily. She had settled on a casual but chic look, pairing her favorite high-waisted jeans with a flowy blouse and a pair of stylish flats. As she sat across from Lily, she couldn't help but feel a sense of unease.

But when Cora lifted her hand to show off her light pink nail polish, she was met with a genuine smile from Lily. It was a small but significant gesture that put Cora at ease.

"Thanks, I wasn't sure if it was too girly," Cora admitted, feeling a little embarrassed for worrying about something so trivial.

Lily shook her head. "No, I think it suits you. It's soft and pretty."

Cora felt herself relax further, grateful for the unexpected compliment. She returned the favor by admiring Lily's matte burgundy nails, which looked effortlessly chic against her olive skin.

"I love that color on you. It's bold and edgy," Cora said, hoping to make Lily feel comfortable enough to open up to her.

Lily's smile widened, and for a moment, Cora saw a glimmer of the girl she had first met when she and Jamie had started dating. The girl who had

been open and eager to get to know her.

Cora knew that building a relationship with Lily wasn't going to be easy, but at that moment, she felt hopeful that they could find some common ground. Maybe it was something as simple as a shared love for nail polish colors, but it was a start.

So, when Jamie suggested they spend time together and get to know each other better, she jumped at the opportunity.

As they sat side-by-side, getting their nails done, Cora tried to keep the conversation light and easy.

"So, Lily, what were your favorite subjects in high school?" she asked.

"English and Art, definitely," Lily instantly responded. "I always enjoyed expressing myself through writing and drawing."

"Oh, that's interesting. You're a science teacher now. Why didn't you pursue art?"

Lily drew in a deep breath and released it before replying. "Well, I loved art, but it wasn't practical. I wanted a career that would be stable and secure."

Cora nodded. "I see. That makes sense. It's good to have a practical plan, but don't let go of your passions completely. You never know where they might lead you," she encouraged.

Lily nodded, but Cora could tell that there was something else on her mind.

"So, what do you do in your free time? Any hobbies?"

"Well, I also enjoy hiking and going to the gym," Lily responded.

"That sounds like fun. Do you have any close friends that you hang out with?"

"Yeah, I have a few good friends. We like to go out to eat, see movies, and try new things together."

"That's great. Maybe with time, you and my girls could hang out, get to know each other, and become close," Cora said, hopeful.

Lily's lips turned up in a smile, but Cora could see the apprehension in

their dark depths.

After a long pause, Cora couldn't help but ask. "Lily, is there anything else that you want to talk about? You seem a bit quiet."

"No. I'm fine," Lily replied, her eyes fixed on the small Asian woman applying another coat of polish to her nails.

Cora took a deep breath and tried a different approach. "Lily, I know things have been a little awkward between us lately, but I want you to know I'm here for you. If there's anything you want to talk about, anything at all, I'm ready to listen."

Lily looked up from her nails, surprised by Cora's sudden seriousness. "I don't know, Cora," she said hesitantly. "It's just...it's weird, you know? You're nice, and I think you're good for my father, but...You're not my real mom, and I miss her so much."

Cora's heart twisted in her chest at the pained expression on the young woman's face. It reminded her of what she had lost, how much she missed her mother, and what she wouldn't give to have Becky back. She shook her head to dispel the thought and the longing that crept up.

"I know I'm not your mother, Lily," Cora said gently. "But I still care about you and want us to have a good relationship. I'm not trying to replace your mom. I just want to be here for you."

Lily chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, then sighed. "It's not that I don't like you, Cora," she said. "It's just...I don't know how to act around you. You're not like my mom; you're different."

Cora nodded with understanding. "I get that, Lily. But you don't have to act a certain way around me. You can be yourself, and we can figure out our relationship together. It might take some time, but I'm willing to put in the effort if you are."

Lily smiled tentatively. "Okay," she said. "I'll try."

Cora put a hand on Lily's shoulder. "That's all I can ask for," she smiled encouragingly. "Just remember, I'm here for you whenever you need me. I

want to be a part of your life and make you feel loved and supported."

Lily looked up at Cora, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "Thanks, Cora. I appreciate it."

From there, the conversation flowed more easily between them. They talked about Lily's favorite TV shows, her love for her students, and even the wedding planning that Cora was knee-deep in. Cora was surprised when Lily asked if she could help with the planning, but she was thrilled at the opportunity to bond with her future stepdaughter.

As they sat in the salon chairs, getting their hair done by the stylists, Cora decided it was the perfect time to ask Lily some questions about her fiancé, Bill. She had been curious about him for a while and wanted to get a better understanding of their relationship, especially since Jamie had also mentioned his concerns about their relationship.

"So, Lily, tell me about Bill," Cora began, trying to sound casual.

Lily hesitated for a moment, then gave a vague answer. "He's great. We're really happy together."

Cora prodded a little further. "What do you love about him?"

Lily shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Um, I don't know. He's just been really nice and supportive. When my mom died, he was there for me at my lowest."

Cora sensed that Lily wasn't being entirely forthcoming with her but didn't want to push too hard. She decided to offer some advice instead.

"Well, Lily, when I was your age, I wish someone had told me to really think about what I wanted in a partner." Her mind flashed to her ex-husband, Joel. While she wouldn't have taken back the years she spent with him because it gave her the two best gifts in her life—her daughters—if she had been guided to think about her choices, maybe her life would have turned out differently, and the regret she felt for the wasted years she spent trying to make her marriage work would have been less.

"It's important to make sure you're on the same page about important

things, like finances and children."

Lily bristled at the suggestion. "Thanks, Cora, but I think I can handle my own relationship. And I don't need you to lecture me like a child."

Cora's eyes widened, and her lips parted as Lily's reaction took her aback. She had only been trying to help, but it seemed that her stepdaughter didn't appreciate her advice.

"I'm sorry, Lily. I didn't mean to offend you. I just want to be there for you and support you in any way I can."

Lily sighed and looked away. "I know, but at this point, it just feels like you're trying to take over and be my mom, and I don't need that right now, to be honest."

Cora felt a pang of hurt at Lily's words but tried not to show it. "I understand, Lily. I'm sorry about that. I'll try to be more mindful of that in the future. And if you ever need advice or support, you know I'm here for you."

Lily nodded, but Cora could tell that the moment had passed. The easy rapport they had been building was suddenly tense and awkward.

As they left the salon and walked to the car, Cora couldn't help feeling disappointed. She had hoped that this outing would bring her and Lily closer together, but instead, it seemed to have driven a wedge between them—again.

The tension between them was palpable, and it only seemed to intensify as they made their way to the upscale Caesarea Gourmet Hideaway for dinner. Lily's body language spoke volumes, betraying her discomfort and reluctance to be there. The atmosphere was suffocatingly awkward as they sat at the table, with stilted conversations and forced politeness.

Cora was at a loss, unable to understand why Lily had grown so cold toward her so quickly. She wracked her brain, trying to remember if she had said something wrong during their earlier conversation, but nothing stood out as a potential trigger. It wasn't until much later in the meal that the penny finally dropped, and Cora realized with a sinking feeling that her mention of

Bill had been the catalyst for Lily's abrupt change in demeanor.

Regret flooded Cora's heart, wishing she could turn back time and erase her ill-timed advice. But it was too late, and the damage had been done. The rest of the meal was consumed in strained silence, marked by occasional glances and furtive movements as each woman struggled to come to terms with the underlying tensions that had been exposed.

As Cora navigated the quiet streets, the hum of the car's engine was the only sound that filled the air. Her thoughts, however, were loud and overwhelming. She couldn't help but replay the evening events in her head and wish she hadn't made such a big mistake.

The silence between them only added to Cora's unease. She stole a glance at Lily, who was staring out the window with a blank expression. Cora longed to say something, anything to break the tension, but the words caught in her throat.

A knot formed in Cora's stomach as they pulled up to Lily's apartment. She turned to Lily, who met her gaze for the first time since they left the restaurant. Cora could see the apprehension in her stepdaughter's eyes, and it broke her heart.

At that moment, Cora realized that building a relationship with Lily was not going to be easy. It would take patience, understanding, and a lot of effort. Maybe it was better to take a step back and let Lily come to her on her terms. After all, the last thing Cora wanted was to push her further away.

With a heavy heart, Cora turned off the engine and finally spoke. "Goodnight, Lily. I want you to know that I enjoyed spending time with you today. I hope we can do it again soon."

Lily nodded silently and exited the car, leaving Cora alone with her thoughts again.

But no matter what happened, Cora knew she would always be there for Lily, even if it wasn't how she had hoped.

Her phone rang just then. Her heart skipped a beat at the caller ID.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Jamie’s voice echoed through the car’s speaker.

“Hi, honey.” Her lips instinctively curved into a smile as her chest filled with butterflies. Just the sound of his voice put her mind at ease, but the question that followed shattered that peace.

“How did it go with Lily?”

Her face fell. “Well...”

Chapter Six

““**W**hat do you think about this one?”

Nikki looked at the woman holding a cream-colored, mock neck ribbed, long sleeve bodycon pullover, mini sweater dress. She couldn't help but notice how it seemed to accentuate the woman's brick-shaped figure. She smiled politely, trying not to let her thoughts show on her face.

“Um, I don't know,” she spoke reflectively, trying to find the right words. She circled the woman, looking her up and down as if assessing her measurements. "The color is lovely, but I'm not sure it's the right style for your..."

The woman looked crestfallen, and Nikki quickly added, "But why don't you try it on? It might look different on."

The woman nodded, and Nikki directed her toward the changing rooms at the back of the store. As she disappeared behind the curtain, Nikki sighed. She knew the dress would be a miss, but she didn't want to add to the woman's insecurities. She had seen how quickly she had looked unsure and fearful of what Nikki was saying. However, Nikki felt she had a duty to help her find the best outfit, so she turned to the rack of clothes, preparing to go through them until she found something suitable.

Nikki's eyes flickered to the side and caught her co-worker, Sheila,

snickering. Her lips tightened as she turned to face the woman, her expression conveying a mix of annoyance and confusion.

"What's so funny?" she asked, her tone laced with a hint of irritation.

Sheila's lips twisted into a sly smile, her eyes glinting with malice. "Good luck finding something that actually looks good on that log," she sneered, her voice dripping with vindictiveness.

Nikki's nostrils flared as she fought to maintain her composure. She glared at Sheila, the urge to snap back and put her in her place almost overwhelming. But Nikki knew better than to engage in workplace drama, especially with someone like Sheila.

She turned her head away with a subtle roll of her eyes, dismissing the other woman's taunt with silent disdain. She had only been working at the boutique for a week, but already it was clear that Sheila resented her. Nikki had quickly gained a reputation with the customers for her fashion sense and work ethic, which seemed to irk Sheila to no end. It didn't help that their boss, Kelly, kept praising her capabilities.

She finally found a dress that she thought would look good on the woman who still hadn't come from the changing room after more than fifteen minutes had passed.

"Are you okay in there?" Nikki called out in concern.

The curtain was rolled back slightly, and the woman poked her head through the opening.

"What's wrong?" Nikki asked, getting closer.

"I look awful," the woman replied, her lips curving downward.

Nikki could see that the woman was in distress. Her eyes were red and puffy, and her hair was disheveled. She looked like she had been crying the whole time she had been in the room.

"Let me see," Nikki coaxed gently.

The woman moved the curtain further back until her full body came into view, but she did not come out of the small room fitted with floor-length

mirrors on all the exposed walls.

As Nikki approached her, the woman retreated slightly as if ashamed of her appearance. But Nikki persisted, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, it's okay," she said softly. "Everyone has those days where they don't feel their best."

The woman looked at Nikki with a mixture of sadness and gratitude. "It's just that I have this big event tonight, and I wanted to look my best," she confided.

Nikki nodded sympathetically. "I understand. But trust me when I say you're beautiful no matter what."

The woman gave a weak smile, but it was clear that she wasn't convinced. Nikki knew she had to do something to boost the woman's confidence.

"I brought something that I think will look good on-scratch that will look magnificent on you," she smiled encouragingly.

The woman's brown eyes showed skepticism, but she asked, "Do you really think so?"

"I know so," Nikki grinned with confidence.

"Okay," she said, a hint of excitement in her voice.

Nikki beamed. She headed for the rack and brought back the dress she'd picked out.

It was an olive-green, tulip-shape wrap dress that would fall just below her knees. "The good thing about this dress is you can style it with almost any color, strappy sandals or pumps and accessories," she suggested.

The woman slowly held out her hand for the dress and Nikki gave it to her before stepping back.

She sauntered to the shoe section, chose a pair of three-inch block heels nude sandals, and returned to her spot before the changing room.

"How are we doing in there?" she asked.

"I'm almost done," the woman called out, her voice sounding more upbeat than it had earlier.

“Great,” Nikki expressed. “When you’re done, I want you to try these as well,” she suggested, slipping the sandals under the curtain. “They’ll give you some extra height and accentuate your legs.”

“Okay,” the woman agreed. A few minutes later, she called out, “Okay... I’m ready.”

A broad smile lit Nikki’s face as she looked at how well the dress hugged her in all the right places giving her a flattering, curvy appearance.

“How do you feel?”

“I feel...amazing and look amazing,” the woman gushed. “I love it,” she twirled. “Thank you so much for picking this out for me,” she turned to Nikki.

“You’re welcome,” Nikki smiled. “Now, let’s ring this order up for you.”

“Yes. Most definitely. I’m taking the shoes too and anything else you suggest,” the woman expressed.

Nikki chuckled. “Let’s get this order out of the way first.”

For most of the day, Nikki had back-to-back customers who seemed to hang on to her every word and took her suggestions without question.

Nikki was in the midst of a chaotic scene as she tried to calm down a customer on the brink of a meltdown. The woman was frantically searching for the perfect outfit for an upcoming event, but nothing seemed to satisfy her. Nikki could feel the tension building up in the room, and she was determined to find a solution.

Just as she was about to give up hope, a young man strolled into the store. He caught Nikki's attention, and for a moment, she was struck by his handsomeness. However, she quickly pushed those thoughts aside and refocused on the task at hand.

She took a deep breath and approached the customer, determined to help her find the perfect outfit. After much deliberation, they finally settled on an outfit that Nikki was sure would meet the woman's needs. The customer was initially hesitant, but Nikki's persuasive skills came into play. She convinced

the woman to try on the outfit, and as soon as she did, her face lit up with joy.

Nikki watched as the woman twirled around in front of the mirror, admiring herself from every angle. It was a moment of pure happiness, and Nikki couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. She had worked hard to find the perfect outfit, and it had paid off.

The woman was so delighted that she bought the entire outfit on the spot, and as she walked out of the store, Nikki couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. It was moments like these that made her love her job, and she knew that she had made a positive impact on the woman's life.

She looked up to see the young man standing by a rack of elegant gowns. She looked to her left and saw that Sheila was busy helping a customer. She looked back at the man. He looked lost, almost as if he didn't belong in the shop. She approached him with a smile.

"Hi, I'm Nikki. Do you need any help?"

"Yes, actually," he said, turning to her.

Nikki's breath caught in her throat as she stared into his warm hazel eyes, flecked with gold and green and seemed to be drawing her into their warmth. She had to admit that he was handsome with his brown, tousled hair that fell in soft waves around his face. He had a strong jawline and high cheekbones. There was a smatter of freckles across the bridge of his straight nose.

"Are you all right?"

She hadn't realized that she had been staring without responding until he asked her the question. She blinked back her nervousness and swallowed before responding.

"I'm sorry. I got a little distracted. What were you saying?"

The gentleman smirked, his eyes bright with the knowledge of his effect on her. The indent in his left jaw almost had her swooning. She chided herself for being so distracted by a handsome guy like she didn't see many of those regularly. She tried to school her face into polite disinterest.

"I'm looking for a gift for someone special."

She took in the subtle curve of his jawline and the way his eyes flickered with a hint of nervousness. "*He must be shopping for a gift for his girlfriend,*" she thought to herself.

"Are you looking for something specific?"

"I don't really know," he replied, running his fingers through his curls. "Have any suggestions?"

She led him over to the display of jewelry at the front and began showing him some pieces that might be suitable. "We have some lovely necklaces and bracelets here that I'm sure your girlfriend would adore," she said.

"It's not for my girlfriend," he said, his eyes softening. "It's for my mother. It's her birthday next week, and I want to get her something special."

Nikki's heart swelled with warmth at the thought of him wanting to make his mother feel loved and cherished.

"Let's see what we have for her," she said, leading him over to a display of elegant scarves and shawls.

As they browsed through the options together, Nikki couldn't help but notice the way his eyes lit up as he talked about his mother. "She's always been the rock of our family," he said, his voice tinged with affection. "I just want to show her how much she means to me."

"I think I have just the thing," she said, holding up a soft, cashmere shawl in a warm shade of burgundy. "It's perfect for keeping her cozy during the colder months, and the color will look stunning on her."

His face broke into a wide grin as he took the shawl from Nikki's hands. "This is it," he said, his voice full of gratitude. "Thank you so much for your help."

Nikki smiled back, feeling a sense of satisfaction at having helped bring a little bit of joy into someone's life. "It was my pleasure, sir. I hope your mother loves it."

"Oh, she will," the man said, his eyes twinkling. "She'll love anything that comes from her son's heart."

Nikki couldn't help the smile that lifted her lips.

As he was leaving, the gentleman turned to Nikki and thanked her for her help. "I really appreciate it," he said with a warm smile. "My name is Johnathan, by the way. What's yours?"

"Nikki," she replied, returning his smile.

There was a moment of silence before Johnathan spoke up again. "Listen, Nikki, I know this might be forward, but I was wondering if I could have your number. I'd love to take you out sometime."

Nikki felt a pang of disappointment. Johnathan seemed like a nice guy, but she just wasn't interested in dating at the moment. "Thank you so much for the offer, Johnathan, but I have to decline," she said gently. "I'm not really looking for a relationship right now, and I don't want to lead you on."

Johnathan nodded understandingly. "I completely understand," he said. "It was nice meeting you, Nikki. Maybe I'll see you around."

"Likewise, Johnathan," Nikki replied with a smile. "Take care."

Chapter Seven

"So, what do you think?" Cora turned to her sisters, who flanked her on either side as they surveyed the rainbow arrangement of flowers in the flower shop. The scent from the different blooms was heady, making the sisters feel as though they were standing in a garden.

Andrea tilted her head, considering the options. "I think you should go with something classic. Maybe white roses and lilies?"

Jo nodded in agreement. "Yeah, something elegant and timeless."

Cora sighed, running the pads of her fingers over the petals of a nearby rose. "I guess so. But it all feels so boring. I want something that really pops."

Andrea chuckled. "Well, what about those bright yellow daisies over there? They would certainly pop."

Jo shook her head. "I don't know about that. Maybe some pink peonies?" she suggested.

Cora considered their suggestions. Her eyes darted back and forth, scanning the various displays of exotic flora surrounding her. Suddenly, her gaze locked onto a stunning specimen— a cluster of galaxy orchids. The vibrant petals shimmered with hues of purple and blue, creating a mesmerizing effect that seemed to dance like fire and ice. Cora's heart leaped with excitement as she envisioned the stunning arrangement she could create with these unique flowers. "What about those galaxy orchids?" she

exclaimed, her voice filled with wonder. "They're so unique and breathtakingly beautiful!"

Andrea and Jo exchanged a glance, then turned back to Cora. "Hmm, those could definitely work," Andrea said.

Jo nodded. "Yeah, they are truly mesmerizing."

Cora grinned, feeling a wave of excitement. "Yes, let's go with those. They're perfect."

Andrea chuckled. "Well, it is your wedding. You can have whatever you want."

Cora smiled weakly, but her mind was elsewhere. She couldn't shake the feeling of helplessness she felt when it came to Lily.

"I don't know what to do about Lily," she voiced her concerns.

Andrea and Jo exchanged a look.

"Didn't you guys spend a whole day getting to know each other and bonding?" Andrea asked gently.

Cora sighed again, her eyes drifting back to the flowers. "Yeah. We did."

"Then...what's wrong?" Jo chimed in.

"The day started off great. We established that I wasn't trying to replace her mother but that I still would want to be there for her. Everything was going so well."

She paused for a moment, savoring the memory, before continuing. "We talked about her interests, her friends, and her dreams. And I made sure to let her know that I wasn't trying to replace her mother but was there for her if she ever needed anything."

Her smile faltered as she recalled the moment when things took a turn. "But then I asked about her fiancé, and her whole demeanor changed. She became quiet and distant, and I could tell something was bothering her."

Cora let out a heavy sigh, and Andrea patted her shoulder to comfort her. "I tried to offer her some relationship advice, you know, just trying to be helpful. But she just shut down."

Cora shook her head, frustration evident in her voice. "I just wish I could have done more to help her. I want to be there for her, but it's hard when she won't let me in."

Jo placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's tough, Cora. But you have to remember that she's been through a lot too. Her mother died and now her dad, the only living parent and relative she has left, is getting remarried and she'll now have to share his love. It's a big adjustment for her."

Andrea nodded. "Jo's right. You have to take it slow with her. Let her come to you when she's ready."

Cora nodded, feeling a sense of relief wash over her. "Okay. I'll try."

Andrea smiled at her. "Just remember, you're not alone in this. We're here for you, too, every step of the way."

Cora smiled back at her sisters, feeling grateful for their support.

The florist emerged from the back of the shop, her gentle presence filling the room. Her arms were full of pots and her smile was warm as she approached Cora.

"Have you decided on what you'd like to have at your wedding?" she asked.

Cora's face lit up. "I have," she said, her voice filled with excitement. "I'm going with the galaxy orchids over there," she pointed toward the vibrant purple blooms.

The florist's eyes followed her gesture and she nodded approvingly. "That's a wonderful choice," she said, her voice filled with approval. "Galaxy orchids make a bold statement."

Cora beamed with pride. "Yes, that's what I was going for," she confirmed, her voice full of determination.

The florist's smile widened. "I have just the thing to enhance the arrangement," she said, her eyes twinkling. "White lilies—they'll add a touch of elegance and grace."

Cora hesitated, unsure whether to stick with her bold vision or take the

florist's advice. "I don't know," she said, her voice uncertain.

The florist leaned in, her eyes full of understanding. "I know you want to make a statement," she said, her voice gentle. "But sometimes, a touch of grace makes a statement truly unforgettable."

Cora's face softened as she considered the florist's words. "You know what?" she said, a smile spreading across her face. "Let's do it. Let's add the white lilies."

The florist beamed with delight. "Excellent choice," she said, her voice ringing with approval. "Your wedding is going to be unforgettable."

Cora beamed with satisfaction. "What about an arbor?"

"Ah, the arbor," the woman smiled, her eyes sparkling excitedly. "I have just the thing to make it truly magical." She beckoned them to follow her as she weaved through the vibrant rows of flowers.

Cora and her sisters trailed behind, their gazes fixated on the woman's every move. As they reached the back of the room, the woman turned to face them with a wide grin.

"Behold, thy altar!" she exclaimed, gesturing toward a bundle of spindly branches against the wall.

Cora's eyes widened with wonder as she approached the branches, admiring their delicate and intricate design. "How beautiful," she breathed, imagining the branches forming a stunning archway over the wedding altar.

The woman nodded in agreement, her eyes twinkling with enthusiasm. "Yes, it will be perfect. And with the flowers you've chosen, it will be a sight to behold."

"What do you guys think?" she asked, turning to Andrea and Jo.

"It's lovely," they both agreed.

Cora turned to the florist. "I'll take them."

"Wonderful," the woman said, bringing her palms together in satisfaction.

Cora left the shop feeling joyous.

As the trio strolled down the bustling sidewalk, Andrea nudged Cora with her shoulder and slyly jutted her chin in Jo's direction. Their younger sister had donned an uncharacteristically distant expression, lost in thought with a furrowed brow.

"Hey, Jo, what's going on in there?" Andrea teased, tapping her temple with a finger.

Jo's gaze snapped up to meet her sister's probing stare. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice tinged with apprehension.

Cora chimed in, her tone gentle but insistent. "You've been awfully quiet, Jo. Something's clearly bothering you."

Jo let out a deep sigh, her shoulders sagging. "It's Daniel," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Andrea's eyes widened, and she reached out to gently clasp Jo's arm. "What's going on? Did something happen?" she asked, concern etched on her features.

Jo shook her head slowly, her eyes fixed on the pavement. "No, nothing like that. I just don't know if we're right for each other. I've been thinking about breaking up with him," she confessed, her voice heavy with uncertainty.

Cora and Andrea exchanged a surprised glance. They always thought that Jo and Daniel were the perfect couple. "What happened?" Cora asked.

Jo's shoulders slumped as she let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know. It's just that...I don't feel like we have that much in common anymore," she said, her voice laced with sadness. "We work together at the restaurant and that's pretty much all we talk about. It's like we're stuck in this routine, and I didn't notice it before, but now it's bothering me."

Andrea nodded sympathetically. "I can understand that. You need to have more than just work in common with someone."

Jo nodded before she continued, "I met his daughter last week."

"How did that go?" Andrea asked with a raised brow as she stared at her

sister curiously.

Jo gave a melancholy smile as she recounted her recent encounter with Daniel's daughter. "She didn't seem to like me very much. I thought it was just nerves at first, but the way she looked at me with those icy blue eyes...I swear, I felt like I was being scrutinized under a microscope." She released a heavy sigh.

"It's not her fault, but it made me realize that maybe this isn't the right relationship for me."

Cora put a comforting hand on Jo's shoulder. "You have to do what's best for you, Jo. We'll support you no matter what."

Andrea added, "But remember, this is the happiest we've seen you since your husband and son died. You deserve to be happy, and if Daniel makes you happy, then maybe you should give it some more thought."

Jo's eyes misted as she thought about her late husband and son. "I know, but I don't want to cause any more pain or problems for anyone. Especially not his daughter."

Cora gave Jo's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You can't control how others feel or react, Jo. All you can do is be true to yourself and what makes you happy."

Andrea nodded in agreement. "Exactly. And if Daniel makes you happy, then maybe it's worth sticking it out for a bit longer."

Jo's lips twitched upwards in a small smile. "Maybe you're right. I'll think about it some more."

The three sisters shared a warm hug, a silent reminder that no matter what, they had each other's backs.

Jo looked up at her sisters, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Thank you both. I appreciate your support and your honesty."

"Let's go get something to eat," Cora suggested when they separated.

They chose to head down to the Marina to enjoy some seafood.

As Cora and her sister strolled along the beach boardwalk of the marina,

she felt a sense of peace wash over her. The salty sea air filled her lungs with every breath, and the sound of waves crashing against the wooden stilts and rushing toward the shore filled her ears with a soothing melody.

The small cafes and restaurants that lined the periphery of the walk were bustling with activity. The intoxicating smells of freshly cooked seafood and grilled meats wafted through the air, making her mouth water and her stomach rumble. Cora couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy toward the lucky diners inside, savoring their delectable meals.

She gazed at the boats docked on the other side, their sails billowing like giant wings. The deep blue-green water shimmered in the sunlight like a million diamonds.

As they continued their leisurely stroll, people of all ages passed them. Some carried ice cream cones, while others walked their furry four-legged friends. Children laughed and played, running back and forth along the wooden planks with unbridled joy.

Cora's eyes wandered to the few cafes and restaurants she could see clearly into. The sound of clinking glasses and the cheerful chatter of people enjoying their meals was inviting to her.

"I need to pick a spot so that we can order. The smell of that seafood is driving me wild!"

Chapter Eight

"I'm really worried about the business, guys. These new Inns popping up are really taking a toll on us. We've always had a steady stream of guests, but now it seems no one wants to stay with us anymore."

Cora sat at the kitchen table with her sisters and her friend, the manager of Willberry Inn. The morning sun cast a warm glow across their faces as they went through the latest bookings at the inn. She had noticed for over a month now that reservations had been significantly slashed compared to last year.

"Yeah, it's been tough. "It's not just us, though," Andrea reasoned.

"Everyone's been affected by the new competition. It's just the way things are now. But we have to stay positive and find ways to stand out," Andrea expressed.

"I agree," Jo added, then offered her suggestions. "Maybe we can add some new amenities or activities for our guests."

"What about expanding our marketing efforts? We could partner with local businesses and offer package deals," Andrea quipped.

Cora tapped the pen against her chin thoughtfully. "I like the ideas, but I was thinking something more short-term for the time being. We don't want to go all out and spend a bunch of money and still not turn a profit," she cautioned.

"We could maybe offer a discount for guests who refer their friends to stay with us," Marg suggested.

"That's a great idea! Word-of-mouth is so important for our business," Andrea agreed, nodding thoughtfully.

"What are you thinking, Marg," Cora asked, noting that her head was bowed, and her brows knitted together in concentration.

Marg looked up to catch Cora staring back at her expectantly.

"I was thinking that the inn could host a sip and paint session, and apart from the guests, we could open it to the public. That is sure to get tongues wagging."

"That is a brilliant idea," Cora praised, earning a broad smile from Marg.

Andrea nodded in agreement. "People love those things."

Cora's face lit up. "We could offer these activities on weekends or holidays. It could be a way to bring in new guests and keep our regulars interested."

Jo smiled. "I think that's a fantastic idea. And we could also promote our beautiful gardens and maybe do a few excursions by water. People love to be surrounded by nature."

Cora felt a weight lifted off her shoulders. Her sisters and Marg were the A-Team. Together, they always found solutions to the problems they faced.

As the women put the finishing touches on the business aspect of the inn, the sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway. Cora's heart skipped a beat when she saw Jamie's tall figure appear at the doorway. Her face flushed with warmth and a smile crept onto her lips as the butterflies in her stomach began to flutter.

"Hi, ladies," Jamie greeted them with a charming smile. The other women returned his greeting, but Jamie's dark gaze was fixed on Cora. She felt her heart rate spike as he approached her.

"Hi, my love," Jamie spoke softly, his deep, low voice sending shivers down her spine. The attention he was giving her caused her to blush even

more deeply.

"Hi," Cora greeted him, feeling shy under his gaze. Jamie couldn't help but grin, knowing the effect he had on her.

"Do you mind if I borrow my fiancé for a bit?" Jamie asked the others, his eyes never leaving Cora's.

"Not at all," Andrea chuckled. "She's all yours."

Jamie smiled and walked up to Cora. He took her hand and pulled her out of her chair, causing her to look up at him with wide, bashful eyes. He leaned in and brushed her lips with his, causing the other women to "aww" like a group of schoolgirls. Cora's heart swelled with love and happiness.

"Let's go for a special lunch down by the gazebo at the back of the inn," Jamie suggested, still holding her hand. Cora nodded, feeling a rush of excitement at the thought of spending more time alone with him.

They made their way to the gazebo, surrounded by blooming flowers and the soft sound of birds chirping. Jamie had arranged for a private lunch just for the two of them. As they sat down, Cora couldn't help but feel grateful for the man she was going to marry. They talked, laughed, and enjoyed each other's company, basking in the warm sun and the love they shared.

* * *

Cora and her sisters had been looking forward to this girls' night out all week. It had been a busy time for them as they worked on their plans for the inn. She was also still stressing about her wedding plans as she wasn't entirely on schedule, but the most significant challenge she had was that Lily hadn't attempted to reach out and her calls to the young woman all went to voicemail. A night of fun at The Anchor was a welcomed distraction.

As they stepped into the trendy club on Bayshore Drive, the air was thick with the scent of expensive perfume and cologne. Their eyes scanned the dimly lit room, taking in the sleek décor and the fashionable crowd that had

gathered there. The walls were adorned with abstract art, and the lighting was low but cast a warm glow over everything.

The music was tasteful and unobtrusive, a perfect backdrop for the scene. It seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once, filling the room with its soothing rhythm. Already, some people were on the dance floor, their bodies swaying and gyrating to the beat.

The waitresses, dressed in elegant black dresses, glided around the room like ballerinas, delivering drinks to the patrons with effortless grace. They moved with such fluidity that it was almost as if they were dancing themselves.

As they made their way through the crowd, Cora couldn't help but notice the eclectic mix of people that had gathered there. There were couples on romantic dates, groups of friends out for a night on the town, and even a few big shots mingling amongst the crowd.

They spotted their company in a corner booth, laughing and chatting over glasses of wine. Tess, Kerry, and Rhonda were dressed to the nines, each one looking more glamorous than the last. Sharon, Kirsten, Marg, and Shelby were equally stunning, with bold makeup and stylish outfits.

Cora, Andrea, and Jo made their way over to the booth, hearts pounding with excitement. "Hey, girls!" Cora exclaimed, hugging each of them in turn. "You all look amazing!"

Tess grinned. "So do you! I love that dress."

Cora blushed. "Thanks! I wasn't sure if it was too much."

Kirsten waved a hand. "Nonsense. You look fabulous."

They settled into the booth, ordering more drinks and appetizers. The conversation flowed easily, with everyone catching up on each other's lives and sharing stories from the past. Laughter filled the air and the sound of clinking glasses and music added to the festive atmosphere.

"So, Tess, how's it going with Dr. McDreamy?" Tessa's sister Kerry asked with a glimmer of mischief in her eyes.

Tess sighed in frustration. "Can you stop calling him that?" she asked. "And he's fine," she added dismissively.

"That's all we get?" Kerry asked, with a look of mock shock as she looked around the group for support.

"How do you guys manage to work such long hours? When do you get time to go on dates?" Kirsten asked.

Tess sighed. "We're trying to make it work. Justin's a great guy and very patient," she expressed.

"Oh, oh, is that a but I hear coming?" Kerry asked, alarmed.

Tess sighed again. "I like him...a lot...but this is all so new for me. I've only ever been in a relationship with Don and now that he's dead and with me trying something new, I just feel like a fish out of water, honestly." Her blue eyes reflected her vulnerable feelings.

"Tess," Cora spoke, placing her hand atop her cousins to get her attention. Tess turned to look at her.

"It takes time to get used to it, but don't push him away. I did the same with Jamie and believe me, it only hurt me in the end. I decided to let go of the past, embrace my new future, and look at what it has brought me. A man that loves me unconditionally and wants me to be his wife. Don't shut yourself away from this," she said encouragingly.

Tess smiled appreciatively. "Thanks, Cora. I think I needed to hear that."

"Yeah, what Cora said..." Kerry applauded, and the others burst into laughter at her antics.

"So, Kerry, since you're so invested in my relationship, why don't I return the favor?" Tess asked, smirking. "How's it going with Ethan?"

Kerry chuckled. "Touché."

Tess grinned.

"Ethan has been so wonderful I can't complain. He makes me feel so special that I sometimes wonder why I couldn't have met him earlier?" The others nodded in understanding.

"And how is it going with Amy?"

"What can I say? She is the perfect daughter," Kerry gushed, her voice filled with pride and admiration. "She's not just smart, caring, and thoughtful, but also ambitious and driven. I'm constantly amazed by her ability to balance her academics and everything else with such ease."

Kerry took a deep breath, a smile spreading across her face. "I know I missed out on so much of her life, but I'm grateful for every moment I get to spend with her now. Watching her grow and mature into the amazing person she is today is truly a blessing."

"And it's not just that," she continued, her enthusiasm growing. "It's the way she, Sophia and Emma have just bonded right off the bat. Seeing the three of them together, laughing and enjoying each other's company, fills my heart with so much joy."

Kerry paused, a wistful expression crossing her face. "I may have missed out on Amy's childhood, but I'm determined to make up for it now. I want to be there for her, to support and guide her as long as she lets me."

"I agree. Amy is a wonderful addition to the family and we're all happy you found her, Kerry." Cora smiled, happy for her cousin, but there was also a pang of sadness when she thought about how hard it was connecting with her stepdaughter. As she looked at Jo, she could see the hurt and pain etched into her features, and she couldn't help but wonder if Jo was thinking about Daniel's daughter or her son Nicholas.

As the night wore on, the group migrated to the dance floor, moving to the beat of the music with abandon.

Finally, as the night drew to a close, they all hugged each other tightly, promising to do it again soon. "This was the best night ever," Rhonda said, wiping away tears of joy.

Cora nodded. "Agreed. You should hang out more with us. It's guaranteed to be like this always."

"Oh, I will definitely be coming on more of these outings. Believe me.

Besides, there isn't much to do at home these days. The kids are grown, and Brian spends half the day at the business. Watching HGTV gets tiresome after a while, so I am very much there whenever you're having the next one," she smiled. "I love you all so much." They shared a group hug at that point.

And with that, they parted ways, their hearts full and their minds buzzing with happy memories of a perfect girls' night out.

As the night came to a close, the group hugged goodbye and promised to do it again soon. Cora walked to her car with a smile on her face, feeling grateful for the love and support of her family and friends. She knew that no matter what challenges came her way, she had a strong network of people who would be there for her.

She took the driver's seat while Andrea and Jo slid into the backseat. Marg rode shotgun with her.

Chapter Nine

"I can't believe I let you talk me into doing this."

Nikki stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror, her eyes flickering with nervous energy. Her fingers fidgeted with the strap of the dress, the fabric soft and silky against her skin. She took a deep breath and tried to quell the chaotic bubbling in her stomach.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into doing this," she repeated, her voice trembling slightly.

Diane appeared behind her, her hands resting gently on Nikki's shoulders. She looked at her cousin's reflection in the mirror and smiled reassuringly. "You look amazing," she said. "Absolutely stunning. You're going to knock this out of the park. Right, Cassidy?"

Cassidy, their cousin, was busy rummaging through the makeup kits on the vanity by the far wall of the dressing room. She looked up at Nikki and grinned. "Yeah, cuz, you're going to knock them dead," she said, her words absentminded as she returned to searching through the makeup.

Nikki's heart skipped a beat at Diane's words. She turned to face her cousin and smiled gratefully. "Thank you," she said. "I hope you're right."

The sound of something falling to the floor shattered, like a glass vase hitting a concrete floor. They turned to see Cassidy bending to gather the items that had scattered when the makeup kit hit the floor.

“Can you not?” Diane chided, her voice tinged with irritation. “Nikki’s already late, and she needs to get into the lineup if she’s to have a shot of making it through. We don’t need them kicking us out because you misplaced something.”

Nikki rolled her eyes, her sarcasm dripping like honey from her lips. “Geez, when you put it like that, Diane, it sure makes me feel like a one-in-a-million shoo-in to get this.”

Diane let out an exasperated sigh, her hand slapping her forehead in frustration. “That’s not what I meant, Nikki,” she reasoned. “Gregg only let us in because he and Erin are friends, but it would be all for nothing if you didn’t get to walk on that runway and show them just how perfect you are and deserve to be a model.”

The room fell silent as the gravity of her words sank in. Nikki could feel the pressure building inside her, the weight of expectations crushing her like a boulder. She took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves.

“I know, Diane,” Nikki said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I just wish I could shake this feeling of doubt. What if I’m not good enough? What if they don’t want me because of—”

“Listen to me,” Diane interrupted. She put a reassuring hand on Nikki’s shoulder. “You are more than good enough, Nikki. You are amazing. You have the looks, the talent, and the drive to make it in this industry. You just need to believe in yourself and show them what you’ve got.”

Nikki opened her mouth to talk when a knock sounded on the door before Gregg, one of the photographers for Saint International, poked his head in. He looked over at Nikki. “The models are lining up to go on. If you’re serious about this, you need to get out there right away,” he warned.

“Thanks, Gregg. We’re headed out now,” Diane spoke up for Nikki, who had suddenly found it hard to form a coherent thought.

As Nikki stood frozen in place, Diane noticed the panic etched on her face and quickly took charge. She spun Nikki around to face her, locking

eyes with her and speaking with conviction. "Listen to me," she said firmly, "you've got this." Diane could feel the tension in Nikki's body, so she leaned in closer and continued, "When you're on that runway, just remember, you were born to do this."

Nikki's fear began to subside as Diane's words sank in. She took a deep breath and nodded, feeling a newfound sense of confidence. As Diane led her toward the door, Nikki couldn't help but feel grateful for her cousin's unwavering support.

As they stepped into the area where the other model hopefuls were already lined up, Nikki felt a surge of nerves. But she looked to Diane, who gave her a reassuring smile and nodded toward the runway. "You've got this," she repeated once more before walking away to join Cassidy at the side.

Nikki's heart pounded in her chest as she stood at the back of the line, waiting for her turn to strut down the runway. She watched the other girls before her sashay down the long, glittering path, their bodies fluid and graceful, their poses confident and fierce. Her palms were slick with sweat, and she could feel her knees trembling with nerves.

But she refused to let her anxiety get the best of her. This is why she came to Seattle to this casting call—to be discovered. She couldn't let the opportunity pass. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, centering herself and focusing on the rhythm of her heartbeat. "You've got this," she whispered, her voice low and determined.

Nikki's anticipation grew as the line inched forward and the other girls stepped up to showcase their capabilities. She could feel the room's energy buzzing around her, a palpable hum of excitement and competition. But she refused to let it overwhelm her.

When she finally reached the front of the line, Nikki turned to look at her cousins, who both gave her a thumbs-up of encouragement. She drew another breath and faced forward, stepping onto the long runway. A high-pitched ringing filled her ears, but she pushed it to the back of her mind, focusing

instead on the task.

As she began to move down the runway, Nikki's body seemed to take on a life of its own. She rolled her shoulders back, feeling the tension in her muscles release as she extended her legs in a deliberate gait that made it look like she was floating. With each step, she blocked out everything and everyone around her, her eyes fixed on a distant point in the distance.

The runway seemed to stretch out before her, endless and shining. She moved with confidence and poise, her body a study in controlled power and grace. And as she reached the end of the runway and turned to make her way back, she knew that she had given the audition everything she had.

As Nikki stepped off the runway, her heart was pounding in her chest. She had given it her all, but now she needed to hear it from her cousins. Cassidy was the first to reach her, practically tackling her with a hug. "Oh my gosh, Nikki, you were amazing!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining with pride. Nikki was taken aback by the show of affection, considering their rocky relationship in the past.

"Thanks, Cassidy," Nikki replied, grateful for the encouragement. She gave her cousin a quick pat on the back before turning to Diane, who was standing a few feet away with her hands covering her mouth. Nikki could see the anticipation in her eyes, and her heart skipped a beat.

"Diane, how was it?" Nikki asked, her voice shaking slightly.

Diane slowly lowered her hands, her eyes widening like saucers. "That was...that was epic," she whispered in awe.

Nikki's face broke into a relieved smile, and she let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. "Seriously?" she asked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

"Seriously," Diane confirmed, nodding emphatically.

Nikki let out a whoop of excitement, feeling a rush of adrenaline course through her veins. "Yes!" she exclaimed, pumping her fist in the air. "I can't believe it!"

Cassidy and Diane joined in her celebration, and the three hugged in a tight circle. Nikki felt a sense of camaraderie and support that she hadn't felt in a long time— she liked it.

"That was a fair attempt," said a woman who approached them, her presence unexpected. She was dressed in a vibrant floral kimono that draped over her frame, making her stand out in the muted surroundings. Her oversized glasses magnified her eyes, giving her an intense gaze that seemed to penetrate Nikki's very soul. The woman's scrutinizing gaze traveled up and down Nikki's figure as if she were sizing her up. The way she assessed Nikki made her feel uneasy as if she were being judged by a strict authority figure.

"We'll see if you have what it takes to make it in this world. That is if you actually make it past this round."

The woman's words felt like a splash of cold water had been dumped on her, and at that moment, Nikki just wanted to pack up her things and leave.

"Don't listen to her. You're going to make it and you're going to be a superstar," Diane broke into her negative thoughts. Nikki gave her a weak smile.

"Nicole Hamilton?"

At the sound of her name, she looked past her cousin to see a gentleman with a paper in hand calling the names of models. She nervously walked up to the others and stood before him. When he was finished, he looked up at them, his expression one of boredom.

"Congratulations. You've all been chosen to move forward. Please head to the changing rooms and get on a swimsuit."

"Swimsuit?" Nikki blurted. "I didn't know we had to model swimsuits," she panicked.

The man looked at her with annoyance. "Either you do it, or you can go," he said before walking off.

Nikki's heart sank. She hadn't modeled a swimsuit since the accident, and the thought of doing so in front of a panel of judges made her feel sick to her

stomach.

Diane and Cassidy could see the fear in Nikki's eyes, and they knew she was about to back out. But Diane stepped forward and whispered in her ear.

"You can do this," she said. "You're beautiful and confident, and you deserve to be here. Don't let anyone's opinion stop you from pursuing your dreams."

With Diane's encouragement ringing in her ears, Nikki took a deep breath and stepped into the dressing room. She slipped on the swimsuit. She drew in another deep breath, trying to calm her nerves.

She looked in the mirror and cringed. The scar running from her sternum to the top of her navel was jarring. She placed her hands over her torso after noticing the other girls glancing in her direction, some of them whispering to each other.

"You can do this...you've got this far; there is no backing out now," she reminded herself.

When it was her time to head on stage, Nikki blocked out everything and reveled in her confidence from her first walk. She struck a few poses, feeling the fabric of the swimsuit against her skin, and she could see the judges' expressions changing. It boosted her confidence.

The judges all praised her effortlessness, but then her gaze zeroed in on the woman from earlier sitting at the table. Her name tag said that she was the brand manager. Nikki's anxiety skyrocketed.

The woman's sharp gaze zeroed in on Nikki's torso. "What is that?" she asked, her voice dripping with disdain. "It's hideous. There's no way you could ever walk in a fashion show with that thing."

Nikki felt like she had been punched in the gut. She had always been self-conscious about her scar, but hearing someone else ridicule it so openly made her feel exposed and vulnerable. "It's from a car accident," she stammered, feeling her cheeks flush with embarrassment.

The woman scoffed. "Well, it's not exactly a selling point, is it?" she said,

her lip curling in disgust. "You might as well forget about modeling, sweetheart. No one wants to see that on the runway."

Nikki felt the blood drain from her face as the woman's words sunk in. All of her insecurities came flooding back, and she felt like crawling into a hole. "I... I didn't know it was such a big deal," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

The woman rolled her eyes. "Of course, it's a big deal," she snapped. "You think anyone's going to want to book a model with a scar like that? You're lucky if you can get work as a hand model, let alone a runway model."

Nikki felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. She clenched her fists, willing herself to stay strong in the face of this woman's cruelty.

"There is no way you're going to be a part of this campaign, honey," she said before turning on her heel and striding away.

Nikki watched her go, feeling a mix of anger and sadness churning in her stomach.

"Nikki, I am so sorry. I—"

Nikki stormed off, not letting Diane finish. Nikki slammed the car door shut, seething with anger and humiliation. Diane trailed behind, calling out to her, but Nikki refused to listen. "Save it, Diane," she spat. "You shouldn't have pushed me into this. I should have known better than to trust you." Cassidy tried to intervene, but Nikki was already on a roll. "And you, Cassidy, don't even get me started. You're jealous because I'm doing something with my life instead of sitting on my couch all day."

Diane's attempts at reasoning with her fell on deaf ears. Nikki was beyond consolation. She felt like a fool for even trying to make it as a model with her scar, and the brand manager's cruel words had only reinforced her insecurities. "I don't need your pity," Nikki snapped, wiping her tears. "I don't need anyone. I'll figure things out on my own."

The car ride home was fraught with tension, each lost in their thoughts. Nikki fumed silently in the backseat, her mind racing with all the things she

wished she had said to the brand manager. She couldn't shake the feeling that she had been set up to fail and that her cousins had been complicit.

When they finally pulled into the driveway, Nikki wasted no time storming off to her room. She slammed the door shut, drowning out Diane's apologies and Cassidy's attempts at reconciliation. She collapsed onto her bed, feeling utterly defeated.

As she lay there, tears streaming down her face, Nikki couldn't help but think about all the hard work she had put into her modeling dreams. She had practiced her poses for hours on end, gone to countless auditions, and even invested in expensive skin treatments to minimize the appearance of her scar. But it had all been for nothing. The brand manager's words echoed in her head, taunting her with their cruelty.

"I'll never be good enough," Nikki whispered to herself. "No matter how hard I try."

Chapter Ten

"You think anyone's going to want to book a model with a scar like that?"

Nikki stood by the counter; her eyes glazed over with anger and frustration. She replayed the judge's cruel words repeatedly in her head, feeling the sting of humiliation all over again.

"You're lucky if you can get work as a hand model, let alone a runway model."

The sound of a customer's voice broke through her thoughts. "Excuse me."

"What?" Nikki snapped in annoyance, barely hiding her irritation.

At the shocked look on the woman's face, Nikki realized she had just messed up. She forced herself to take a deep breath and tried to school her expression to appear polite. "I'm so sorry. What were you saying?" she asked, her voice strained.

"Um," the woman started hesitantly. "I was thinking about getting this in fuchsia. Do you have any?" she held up the dress in question.

"No," Nikki replied dismissively, her frustration still simmering beneath the surface. "Even if we had it in that color, I doubt it would suit you."

The woman's face registered hurt, and Nikki knew she had gone too far. Guilt gnawed at her, but her pride prevented her from apologizing. "Okay. I'll

see if there's anything else I could get," the woman said timidly, then walked off.

Nikki watched her go, feeling a sense of regret wash over her. She knew she had been unfair to the customer and wondered if it was all because of her insecurities.

"What was that?" Kelly, her boss, walked up to her with a serious look on her face.

"What was what?" Nikki asked, with a raised brow, feigning ignorance.

"You were rude to that customer a while ago," Kelly pointed out, her voice sharp and disapproving.

"I wasn't trying to be mean. I was just telling her the truth. Fuchsia is not her color," Nikki reasoned, her arms folding over her chest defensively.

Kelly's eyes narrowed as she looked at Nikki for a long moment, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I don't know what happened to you on your trip to Seattle, but you've been different ever since you got back. I don't like it, Nikki, and the customers are definitely being affected by your attitude."

Nikki hung her head in trepidation, feeling her cheeks flush with embarrassment. She knew her boss was right but didn't know how to fix it. "I'm sorry, Kelly. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

"Sorry, doesn't cut it, Nikki. You need to start treating our customers with the respect they deserve," Kelly scolded, her arms crossing over her chest.

Nikki knew she had messed up but couldn't help but feel defensive, "I do respect our customers. I just don't think it's my fault if they have bad taste."

Kelly raised an eyebrow, her eyes flashing angrily, "That's not your place to decide, Nikki. You're here to help them find what they're looking for, not judge their choices. Now, take the rest of the day off. Maybe a change of scenery will help."

"I'm fine," Nikki started to say, but Kelly cut her off.

"I insist," Kelly spoke more forcefully, her tone brooking no argument. "We'll talk about this tomorrow when you've had time to think."

Nikki nodded and turned to leave. She noticed Sheila snickering in the corner of the store, and she scoffed as she walked off.

“Nikki,” Kelly called after her.

Nikki turned to face her.

“I like you. You’re the best sales rep I’ve had, but if that little attitude of yours continues, then this partnership has to end. Am I clear?”

“Yeah, I understand.” With that, Nikki gathered her things and left the boutique.

When she made it to the parking lot, Nikki slid into the driver’s seat and just sat there, feeling the frustration and anger she felt becoming too much to bear. She banged on the steering wheel and screamed, letting out all the pent-up emotions she had suppressed for so long. Hot tears ran down her cheeks, splashing her champagne-colored chiffon top.

As she sat there, feeling broken and lost, Nikki whispered to herself, "Sam. Why did you leave me?" She rested her forehead on the steering wheel, feeling the weight of her grief pressing down on her. When she had calmed down enough, she drove out of the parking lot and made her way toward the Marina.

Nikki strolled along the boardwalk, her eyes fixed on the endless horizon where the sea and sky blended in a mesmerizing shade of blue. She needed something to distract her from how she was feeling. As she mulled over her actions earlier at the boutique, she became frustrated and angry with herself for the way she had treated the customers and the way she had spoken to Kelly. If she decided to fire her, she wouldn’t blame the woman because she had been insubordinate and disrespectful. It was a familiar pattern for her, lashing out when she felt overwhelmed and out of control.

The sun beat down on her skin, warming her as she walked along the wooden planks, the scent of salt and sea filling her nostrils. She missed Samantha so much it hurt, her friend's absence a constant reminder of the fragility of life. She wished they had decided to wait until they had finished

college to model. Maybe then they wouldn't have been in that car on that road three years ago. It was a weight that she carried with her every day, a burden that she couldn't shake off, that she was the cause of Sam's death.

She stopped at a small shop and ordered a club sandwich and a root beer before sitting on a bench overlooking the ocean. The food was tasteless, but she forced herself to eat, hoping that the act of nourishing herself would somehow make her feel better.

As she ate, she watched the people around her, their laughter and chatter making her feel even more alone. She felt unseen, as if she were a ghost haunting the boardwalk, invisible to everyone else.

She was about to get up to leave when she heard a familiar voice. "Hi."

She looked up to see Jonathan, the guy who had come in a few weeks ago to buy something nice for his mother smiling down at her. His eyes were bright with recognition, but Nikki felt defensive, her body shoulders stiffening and a frown on her face. She was not in the mood for any type of company.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, getting up from her seat. "I'm not really in the mood to chat."

Jonathan looked at her with concern, his eyes searching hers. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes. I am," Nikki replied, plastering a smile on her face. "I gotta go," she said in a dismissive tone.

Jonathan nodded. "Okay. Take care of yourself." He stepped back, and Nikki quickly rose to her feet before rushing away from him.

"Achoo!" she sneezed for the fourth time as she made her way toward her car. Her eyes were watery, and her throat felt dry and scratchy. Instead of heading home, she made her way to the pharmacy to pick up some allergy medication.

Nikki walked into the pharmacy. Her nose was now itching, and she was sure it was red. Walking down the first aisle, she scanned the shelves for the

allergy drops she needed. The bright fluorescent lights overhead and the hum of the air conditioning unit filled her ears.

As she turned the corner into the next aisle, she saw a display of various allergy medications and quickly made her way over to them. She picked up a few brands and read the labeling before choosing the one she needed.

“Achoo,” she sneezed loudly. The boxes fell from her hands with a clatter. She quickly bent and tried taking them up.

“Let me help with that.”

She stiffened at the voice, and Nikki was livid when he bent and started picking up the boxes.

“Are you all right?” he asked when they straightened up.

“Why are you here, Johnathan?” she bypassed his question to ask, her voice tight with irritation.

Jonathan’s green eyes widened, and his brows lifted heavenward. “I’m here to pick up medication,” he answered.

“Am I supposed to believe that?” Nikki folded her arms across her chest and stared pointedly at him.

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked, his face a mix of confusion and hurt.

“I told you back at the boutique that I wasn’t interested and back at the Marina, and now you’re here,” she spoke, her eyes narrowing. “What are you up to? Is this a game to you?”

His lips parted as if to say something, but then they clamped shut as a myriad of emotions crossed his face. “I’m not stalking you, Nikki,” he said seriously.

“I don’t think I believe you, Johnathan,” she returned.

A hurt expression settled on his face. “I don’t need to explain myself to you, but as I said, I am here to pick up medication.” He fished an envelope from his pocket before pulling out a rectangular piece of paper and holding it to her face.

“It’s for my mother.”

Remorse filled Nikki as she stared at the prescription.

“My mom has arthritis, and I had promised to get her refill; this just happened to be the closest pharmacy on my way back,” he expressed in a tight voice.

Nikki’s eyes lifted to his. They were a storm of anger and disappointment as they stared back at her.

“Not everything is about you, and if you take the time to listen and understand before jumping to conclusions, you’ll realize the world doesn’t revolve around you.”

“Johnathan, I’m so—”

He held up his hand, stopping her apology. “It’s okay. You didn’t know, and perhaps I was a little too friendly, and you misinterpreted it as me pursuing you. But I’ll make sure it never happens again.”

It felt like he had just thrown a bucket of ice water on her. She wanted to tell him that it wasn’t him, that she was just having a bad day, and that she ended up taking it out on him, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Goodbye, Nikki.”

Nikki watched him walk off and felt a sense of regret wash over her. She had let her emotions get the best of her, and she knew she needed to be more careful in the future. As she made her way to the counter to pay for her allergy drops, she found her eyes wandering the pharmacy, trying to get a glimpse of Johnathan.

Chapter Eleven

Cora took a deep breath of the smoky air, savoring the scent of charcoal and grilled meat wafting from the barbecue. She looked around at the group gathered in the backyard, laughing, and chatting as they enjoyed the warm Labour Day afternoon. It was a typical Hamilton family gathering.

Uncle Luke stood at the grill as he tended the burgers and hot dogs sizzling over the charcoal fire. Jamie was hovered nearby, tongs in hand. He looked up and caught Cora's eye, a mischievous glint in his own.

He said something to Luke before walking over to her. "You know, future Mrs. Hillier," he said, winking at her. "I think we should start planning our honeymoon."

Cora felt her cheeks flush and swatted playfully at Jamie's arm. "Stop it, you," she said, laughing. "We have plenty of time for that."

But in truth, she was thrilled to hear Jamie call her by that title. With their wedding less than two months away, Cora couldn't wait to marry Jamie and start their life together as husband and wife.

"All right, you two love birds, knock it off. There are burgers and drinks to be served to our starving family before a riot breaks out. Can't have you canoodling when there's so much to do," Andrea walked up to them with a mischievous smirk, her boyfriend Donny in tow. He wore a broad grin that lit

up his bright blue eyes.

“Looks like we weren’t the only ones canoodling around here,” Cora threw back at her sister with a grin.

Andrea grinned. “What can I say? I am a big fan of canoodling.” She turned and pecked Donny’s lips, and they all burst out in laughter.

“Mom, Becca’s griping again,” Jules walked up to them with Baby Becca fussing in her arms.

“Give her to me.” Cora held her hands out to Jules, who readily deposited the baby in her arms. “Hi, my sweet darling,” she cooed. “Mommy says you’re not feeling well, but not to worry, we’ll get that fixed right away, won’t we?”

Becca’s green eyes stared at Cora for a moment as if she was in awe before her little face scrunched up in discomfort and her lips parted to release a wail.

Cora pressed her against her bosom and began to rock her back and forth as she rubbed her back comfortingly. “There, there, darling. Everything will be okay.”

“Maybe she’d teething,” Andrea suggested.

“At six months?” Jules asked with a raised brow.

“That isn’t so far-fetched. We’ve seen babies starting to teeth at even four months and bursting teeth,” Tess, who had just stopped by the group, advised.

“I didn’t know that,” Jules said.

“You learn as you go,” Tess replied. “Where’s Jo?” she continued to ask, looking around the crowd of family and friends. “Kerry wants her to help with decorating some cakes.”

“She left to go by the restaurant to meal prep,” Andrea informed her.

“All right. Has anyone seen Diane?”

“Your daughter is by the water with the rest of the children,” Cora spoke up.

“Don’t let them hear you say that, or they’ll be surly mad to remind you that they are young adults.”

“I’m gonna get back to the grill before your uncle grills me,” Jamie informed Cora, placing a kiss on the corner of her mouth.

“I’ll come with you,” Donny jumped up, moving away from Andrea. The two men walked over to the grill where Uncle Luke, Charles, Brian, and Ben stood chatting and laughing, beers in hand, as they watched the now patriarch do his magic.

“Have you spoken to Erin?” Cora turned to ask her daughter.

“Yeah, she called this morning. She’s having a blast in Paris with Bryan.”

Cora smiled, happy her daughter finally accepted that she deserved happiness like anyone else. Becca made a fussy sound just then.

“Get some ice chips from the refrigerator. I have an idea,” she told her daughter.

Jules nodded and grabbed some ice. When she came back with a cup, Cora removed a small piece of ice and crushed it in her mouth before putting a small piece in the baby’s mouth. A short moment later, Becca had stopped fussing and was out.

“Wow, Mom. Thanks,” Jules said.

“Anything for my little bean,” Cora replied, nuzzling Becca’s tummy.

“Let me go put her down. Hopefully, she’ll be up by the time Noah calls.”

Cora nodded and smiled. “How is he?” she asked.

“He’s okay. He says he just misses us,” Jules replied before releasing a heavy breath. “I miss him so much,” she confessed. “I know, sweetie,” Cora said, rubbing her daughter’s arm comfortingly. “But in no time, he’ll be home, and you can start building your life together,” she encouraged.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Anytime, sweetie.” Cora placed a kiss against her daughter’s cheek and watched her walk up the stairs and into the house.

“Aunt Stacy, Aunt Maria, are you okay? Do you need me to get anything

for you?" Cora asked as she stepped under the pergola that covered the patio, protecting the two older women of the family from the heat.

"I'm fine dear," Aunt Stacy smiled up at her.

She turned to Aunt Maria, who seemed lost in her thoughts and knew not what to say. Her heart went out to the woman who was slowly losing her memory and would possibly slip into dementia. She could imagine just how devastated Uncle Luke and the children were.

"I'm fine," Aunt Maria finally answered.

"Okay. I'll leave you two for now," Cora said, placing her hand atop Aunt Maria's, feeling how feeble she was. Her mind flashed to Becky and a wave of sadness hit her. She quickly retreated.

As she was lost in her thoughts, she saw Lily and her fiancé Bill approaching. Cora had met Bill a few times before but still didn't know him well. And Lily, well, Cora was still trying to be patient and allow the young woman to come to her.

"Hey, Lily!" Jamie called out, setting down his tongs and walking over to give his daughter a hug. "Glad you could make it."

Lily hugged her father back, but Cora could see the tension in the young woman's body. She wondered what was going on between Lily and Bill. They seemed distant and disconnected, and Cora couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for Lily. Jamie turned and gripped Bill's hand in a firm handshake.

"Hi, Cora," Lily said, giving her a polite smile. "You remember Bill."

Cora greeted Bill with a smile and a handshake, but the conversation between the four of them was awkward and stilted. Cora tried to make small talk but couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. She wondered if Lily and Bill were having relationship troubles.

As the afternoon wore on, Cora watched Lily and Bill from a distance. They seemed to be avoiding each other, and Cora could see the sadness in Lily's eyes. She wanted to reach out to her, to offer her support and comfort,

but she didn't know how.

Cora tried her best to stay away from Jamie as she noticed each time they were close, it seemed to affect Lily negatively.

She thought she had been doing a good job of not making it noticeable, but it seemed like he had noticed anyway.

"I'm sorry," Cora said, feeling guilty. "I just didn't want to upset Lily."

Jamie sighed. "Cora, you don't have to do that. Lily needs to learn to share me with someone else. I'll talk to her if you want me to."

Cora shook her head. "No, it's okay. I think I need to talk to her myself."

As the sun began to set and the barbecue started to wind down, Cora found herself lost in thought. Cora couldn't stop thinking about the troubled couple. She knew she and Lily would never be best friends, but Cora couldn't help but feel a connection. She felt herself caring for the young woman as she cared for her own two daughters. They were both women in love, trying to navigate the complexities of life and relationships.

Cora approached Lily. "Lily, I wanted to talk to you about something," Cora said, taking a deep breath.

Lily looked up at her, her eyes curious. "What is it?"

"Can we go for a walk?" she asked.

Lily's dark eyes showed her hesitancy and Cora waited for her to refuse but to her surprise, she said, "Okay."

The two women walked along the path that led to the rose garden.

"I know that spending time with your father is important to you, and if I have been taking away any of that time, I want you to know that I'm sorry if that's been making you upset," Cora said, feeling guilty.

Lily looked away, her hands fidgeting with her dress. "It's not that, Cora. It's just that... I don't know. I guess I've been feeling a little jealous."

"Jealous?" Cora repeated, surprised.

Lily nodded. "Yeah. I mean, you and my dad seem so happy together, and I'm having problems with my own relationship. It's not fair, I guess."

Cora felt a pang of sympathy for Lily. She hadn't realized that the little girl was struggling with her own problems.

"Lily, I'm sorry if I've been making you feel that way," Cora said, reaching out to touch her arm. "But you don't have to be jealous of me. Your dad loves you, and he always will. And I'm here for you, too, if you ever need someone to talk to."

Lily sat nervously on the bench overlooking rows of popular and unique roses, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. Cora could see the worry etched on her face and knew that whatever she was about to say was important. Cora took a deep breath and waited for Lily to speak.

"Cora, I need to tell you something," Lily said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Bill doesn't want children."

Cora's heart sank. Jamie had told her how much Lily wanted a family of her own someday, and the thought of Bill not wanting the same thing was devastating.

"Oh, Lily," Cora said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry. Have you talked to him about it?"

Lily nodded. "We decided to take a break to reassess our relationship. But I haven't told my dad yet. I don't want to upset him."

Cora understood Lily's dilemma. Jamie was thrilled about their upcoming wedding and the thought of Lily being unhappy was the last thing he wanted. But Cora also knew that keeping this secret from Jamie was a mistake. "Lily, I want to thank you for trusting me enough to share this news with me. I promise to keep the information to myself. But you need to tell your dad. He deserves to know."

Lily nodded, tears welling up in her eyes. "I know. I just don't know how to tell him."

Cora put her arm around Lily, pulling her into a hug. "I'll be here for you every step of the way. We'll figure it out together."

As Lily left, Cora couldn't shake the feeling that she was betraying

Jamie's trust by keeping this secret. She knew he would want to know, but she also didn't want to hurt Lily or cause any unnecessary drama. It was a difficult situation, and Cora wasn't sure what the right thing to do was.

Chapter Twelve

“This is definitely your style, and the color looks good against your skin.”
“Really? Thanks.”

Nikki smiled at the woman and watched her head to the changing room to take off the dress that she was definitely purchasing because of the advice.

Her eyes looked at the clock on the wall. She had been there for five hours already, and her shift was far from over. This was not what she wanted to be doing with her life, but her passion for fashion had led her to take this job.

She smiled at the customers as they walked in, her smile fake but her advice genuine. She knew what looked good on them and she was good at convincing them to buy what she suggested.

“You’re back to your old self Nikki. I’m pleased,” her boss commented after the customer left. “You have a real talent.”

Nikki smiled appreciatively at her boss's words, but inside, she felt like she was dying. But life had taken her on a different path, and she found herself stuck in a job that paid the bills but didn't fulfill her dreams.

As the day wore on, Nikki's smile grew more and more forced. She helped customer after customer, suggesting outfits and accessories and answering questions about sizes and colors. But with each passing moment,

she felt more and more disconnected from herself.

At the end of her shift, Nikki walked out of the boutique, her head down and her spirits low. She knew she was good at her job, but it wasn't what she wanted to be doing. She felt like she was wasting her talent and her passion. Maybe her dad was right. Maybe it was time to go back to college.

As she walked down the street, lost in her thoughts, a woman approached her. "Excuse me, are you Nikki?" she asked.

Nikki looked up, surprised. "Yes, that's me," she said.

The woman smiled. "I just wanted to say thank you for all your help the other day. I bought the dress you suggested, and I got so many compliments at my event. I never would have picked it out on my own, but you knew exactly what would look good on me. You have a real gift."

Nikki smiled genuinely this time. "Thank you," she said. "That means a lot to me."

As the woman walked away, Nikki felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe she was making a difference, even if it was in a small way. Maybe she could use her job at the boutique as a steppingstone to something greater. Maybe not modeling because she didn't think she could go through the same ridicule she had faced back in Seattle for her scars, but maybe she could become a consultant, or maybe she could run her own fashion line, creating her own designs and showcasing them on the runway.

With renewed energy, Nikki headed home, determined to keep pursuing her dream. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but she also knew that she had the talent and the passion to make it happen. And maybe, just maybe, her time at the boutique wasn't a waste after all.

The next day at the boutique was a busy one for Nikki. The bustling store was filled with the sounds of customers chatting and shelves being restocked. Nikki was in the middle of assisting a customer when she saw him—Johnathan. Her heart skipped a beat as she felt a twinge of guilt. The memory of their last encounter at the pharmacy flooded back to her. She had been

short-tempered and dismissive, and she knew she had hurt his feelings.

Despite the chaos around her, Nikki was determined to make things right. She excused herself from the customer and walked over to Johnathan, her heart in her throat.

"Hey, Johnathan," she said. "I just wanted to apologize for the way I acted the other day. I was having a bad day, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry."

Johnathan looked surprised but relieved. "Thanks, Nikki. I appreciate it."

Nikki felt a wave of gratitude wash over her as she saw Johnathan's eyes soften. She smiled warmly at him.

"Do you need help finding another gift for your mother?" she asked.

"Um, sort of," he replied, scratching the back of his neck.

"Okay, give me just five minutes. I'm finishing up with a customer. After that, I'll come help you."

"Okay," he replied.

Nikki walked away to finish up with the customer and in less than five minutes, she was back at his side.

"Okay. Let's find that perfect gift for your mom," she said, leading the way to the back of the store.

As they browsed through the shelves, Nikki couldn't help but feel grateful for the chance to make things right. She knew that sometimes a simple apology could go a long way, and she was glad she had taken that step. The two chatted amicably as they perused the store, and Nikki felt a newfound sense of warmth and kindness between them.

As they walked around the boutique, Nikki tried to figure out what Johnathan was looking for. But then he stopped her.

"Actually, Nikki, I didn't come here for my mother," he said. "I came here to see you."

Nikki's heart sank. She had already told him she wasn't interested, but he didn't seem to take the hint.

"Johnathan, I'm sorry, but I'm not interested," she said, trying to let him down gently.

Johnathan looked crestfallen. "I understand, Nikki. It's just that we got off on the wrong foot the other day and, but you still left an impression on me. I just had to try."

"I appreciate that, but at this juncture in my life, I'm not trying to get into a relationship. I have a lot of issues that I think I need to sort out before thinking about something like that," she told him.

Jonathan nodded. "Fair enough," he replied thoughtfully. "I would offer to be friends, but I'm sensing you're not looking for that either."

Nikki shook her head.

He smiled understandingly, but she could see the sadness in his eyes at her rejection, and she felt terrible about it.

"Okay, Nikki. I guess I'll see you around then."

"Goodbye, Johnathan."

Nikki sighed as she walked away from him. She watched him leave the boutique, and there was a sense of loss that she couldn't understand. She didn't know why she felt that way, but she tried to shake it off.

Just then, Diane walked in.

"Hey, Nikki, what's up?" she asked, noticing the look on Nikki's face.

Nikki shrugged. "Oh, nothing. Just a customer."

Diane looked from the door to Nikki with a questioning look. "Is that the guy you were telling me about?"

Nikki nodded. "Yeah, that's him."

"Why do the both of you look like your cat just died?" she asked, looking from her to the door once more.

She didn't respond.

Diane put her arm around Nikki. "Come on, let's go grab some lunch. You could use a break. It is your lunchtime, isn't it."

"Yeah, it is," she confirmed.

“Then, let’s go.”

Nikki smiled gratefully and followed Diane out of the boutique. As they walked down the street, Nikki couldn't help but feel a sense of sadness. She didn't know why she felt that way, but she knew she needed to figure it out.

Nikki leaned back in her chair, studying Diane's face. She could see the worry etched into her cousin's features, and she felt a pang of empathy. Nikki had always known that Diane meant well, but sometimes that meant she overstepped her boundaries.

"I just didn't feel comfortable with the whole thing," Nikki admitted, her voice low. "I know you were trying to help me, but I felt like I was being put on display."

Diane nodded, her eyes flickering with understanding. "I get it. I should have listened to you when you said no. I won't make that mistake again."

Nikki gave a small smile, relieved to hear Diane's words. She had been worried that this conversation would turn into a fight, but it seemed like they were both on the same page. "Thanks, Diane. It means a lot to me."

They sat in silence for a few moments, the tension between them slowly dissipating. Nikki felt a sense of closure like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She knew that she could trust Diane to respect her boundaries in the future.

"Hey, I was thinking," Diane said suddenly, breaking the quiet. "What if we did a photoshoot together? Just for fun, no pressure or anything."

Nikki's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really? You want to do a shoot with me?"

Diane grinned, her eyes sparkling. "Yeah, why not? We could make it a girls' day out. Get our hair and makeup done and wear cute outfits. It would be fun!"

Nikki felt a warmth spread through her chest. She had always loved spending time with Diane, and the idea of doing something creative together felt exciting. "I'd like that," she said, her smile growing wider. "Let's do it."

As they made plans for their photoshoot, Nikki couldn't help but feel grateful for Diane's willingness to listen and make amends.

"I also wanted to say that I missed you at the barbecue," she said, changing the subject. "Why didn't you come?" she asked, her eyes fixed intently on her cousin.

Nikki hesitated for a moment before responding. "I just didn't feel like being there," she said, her voice soft and unsteady as her eyes traced the pattern of the tablecloth. "I knew that no one really wanted me there, especially my cousins. I'm such a mood killer."

Diane shook her head, her expression one of concern. "That's not true, Nikki. You're an important part of our group, and we always want you around. You shouldn't think that way."

Nikki looked at her cousin, searching for any hint of insincerity. But all she saw was genuine kindness and concern. "Thanks, Diane."

Diane smiled at her, then hesitated for a moment before speaking again. "And, Nikki... I think you should give Jonathan a chance. I know you said you were mean to him in the past, but I think you like him. And I think you deserve to be happy."

Nikki's expression darkened. "It's too late for that, Diane," she said. "I've rejected him too many times. He wouldn't want anything to do with me now."

Diane put a hand on Nikki's shoulder, trying to reassure her. "You never know until you try, Nikki. And I really think that he cares about you. You should at least give him a chance."

Nikki chewed her bottom lip, considering her cousin's words. She knew that Diane was right— she did like Jonathan, and she had been pushing him away because she was scared. But maybe it was time to take a chance and see where things could go.

"Okay," she said finally, looking up at Diane. "I'll think about it."

Chapter Thirteen

Cora smiled at the little cherubic face staring at her through innocent green eyes as she chomped on the teething ring held between her chubby little fingers. “Are you going to be an angel for Grandma today?”

“Bah-bah-bah!”

Cora chuckled at the little girl’s seemingly instant response to her question.

“Of course, you’ll be an angel,” she cooed, then placed a soft kiss against the baby’s temple. “You’re our miracle sent to us just at the right time.” Her thoughts went to her mother, who died the same day that Becca was born. It would always be a bitter-sweet day for the family, but she was thankful to cherish all the memories and embrace the new ones.

Becca’s mouth widened in a toothless grin. The cuteness caused Cora to lower her head to nuzzle the side of her face, earning her squeals of joy.

“Come now, sweetie. Let’s get your blanket and toys down before Jamie gets here.

Baby Becca continued with her babbling as Cora placed her down on the play mat and spread her toys out.

“Bah-bah-bah.”

“She’s becoming a real little chatter.”

“Isn’t she?” Cora chuckled, looking from her granddaughter to Jamie, smiling down at her from the gazebo front entrance. After arranging the plush toys on the play mat, she ran her fingers through Becca’s soft brown curls before placing a kiss on her cheek and rising to her feet.

Jamie pulled her into his arms before planting a kiss on her. “Hi,” he breathed against her lips.

“Hi,” she returned, her mouth curved in a smile and her chest filled with warmth as he stared lovingly back at her.

“I hope you don’t mind that she’s with us for our date,” she said, making a sweeping gesture toward Becca. “Jules was up with her all of last night because she was colic, and she’s teething. I thought I’d take her off her hands for a bit so that she could get some rest.”

“Not at all. I love having her around. It makes me happy to be able to be even closer to you by bonding with her,” Jamie reassured her with a smile.

Cora’s lips widened further as her eyes twinkled with love and admiration for the man she would be spending the rest of her life with within just a couple of weeks. “What did I do to deserve someone as amazing as you are?”

“Simple, you existed,” he replied without hesitation. Cora’s cheeks flamed.

“I love you, Mr. Hillier,” she sighed affectionately.

“I love you,” he smiled. Her face lifted in time to meet his descending lips. The kiss left her giddy, and it held much promise of things to come.

“Babababa.”

At the sound of Becca’s babbling, the two separated and looked down at the baby, who had a toy in her grasp, as she looked up at them with a watery smile. Cora and Jamie chuckled at how adorable she was. Jamie sat down on the plush outdoor couch and pulled Cora down beside him. Cora rested her head on his shoulder, reveling in the comfort and safety she felt from the act. They sat in comfortable silence, watching the six-month-old as she lay on her tummy and reached out for one of the small teddy bears with her chubby little

hand. Her fingers curled around the toy and brought it closer to her face to examine it with curiosity. She looked from it to them with a big toothless grin as if to share her joy and excitement with them.

“She is so precious,” Cora smiled. “So innocent.” The smile dissipated, and worry lines creased her forehead as her eyes glazed over.

“What’s wrong?”

Cora blinked a couple of times before turning to see Jamie staring back at her with concern in his dark gaze.

“It’s nothing,” she replied with a slight upturn of her lips.

“Cora, talk to me. I want to help, even if all I am able to offer is a shoulder for you to lean on. I want to be there for you no matter what,” Jamie implored.

She gave him a grateful smile before releasing a heavy breath. “I’m just worried about the sip and paint activity Drea, Jo, Marg, and I planned for our guests at the Inn. What if it doesn’t turn out the way we want it to? What if it’s a flop?” she asked, allowing the vulnerability she was feeling to echo in her words.

Jamie chuckled. “Come on, Cora. You and your sisters are creative and talented, and Marg being an event planner, is an added bonus. I’m sure everything will turn out great.”

“Cora smiled weakly. “I hope so.”

Jamie cupped her cheek as he stared at her. “You’re an amazing woman, Cora. You always succeed at whatever you put your mind to. This is no different,” he said with an encouraging smile. Cora nodded as her lips lifted, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Why don’t I pour you some sparkling wine, hmm?” Jamie’s voice was smooth and melodic, carrying a hint of playful mischief as he reached for the bottle of bubbly. He lifted it out of the ice bucket with a flourish, the droplets of icy water cascading down the bottle’s frosted surface.

As he poured the effervescent liquid into the wine glasses, the delicate

bubbles danced and shimmered in the sunlight that filtered through the gazebo's open arches. The soft fizzing sound of the wine mingled with the gentle rustling of the leaves as the wind brushed through the trees, and those leaves that had fallen to the ground created a soothing symphony that enveloped them in a cocoon of tranquility.

Jamie handed a glass to Cora, the stem cool and smooth to the touch. The wine's aroma was light and fruity, with notes of crisp apples and tangy citrus. As she raised the glass to her lips, the cool liquid tingled on her tongue, the tiny bubbles bursting with a burst of sweet effervescence that left her feeling light and carefree.

The two sat on the soft couch, their bodies sinking into the plush cushions as they sipped their wine and watched Becca shake her toys and make bubbles on the play mat. Cora was glad she had chosen the gazebo. It was the perfect spot to escape from the world, a peaceful oasis where they could forget their worries and simply enjoy each other's company.

Cora rested her head on Jamie's shoulder, relishing in the warmth it brought her being so close to him. She wished they could stay like this forever, the problems that plagued her a distant memory. But that wasn't possible, and as much as she loved being in this moment with him, she had to get back to reality soon. A soft sigh escaped her lips.

"I can tell that something else is bothering you." He bumped her shoulder. Cora's mind flashed to Lily and the conversation they'd had back at the barbecue. Lily still hadn't told Jamie about her and Bill— she knew because if she had, Jamie would have told her. It made Cora uncomfortable having to keep this from him.

"It's Jules," Cora said, her voice heavy with concern. "She's been going out of her mind with worry for Noah. She's always been a strong girl, but ever since his deployment, she's been on edge. And it feels like it's getting worse."

Jamie nodded as he stared attentively at her.

"She doesn't sleep as much, and she's always spacing out," Cora continued. "And whenever her phone rings, I can see the anxiety on her face. I'm worried for her, Jamie. I don't know what to do."

Jamie placed his glass down and leaned forward, placing a hand on Cora's arm.

"I can only imagine how tough it must be for both Jules and Noah," Jamie said softly. "But Jules needs our support now more than ever. She needs to know that we're here for her, that we'll listen to her and help her through this."

Cora nodded, tears welling up in her eyes. "I just want my little girl to be okay," she whispered.

"We'll make sure she will be," Jamie said with a reassuring smile. "Together."

Cora leaned into Jamie's embrace and let out a deep breath. "I know you're right. It's just hard to see her so upset."

Jamie squeezed Cora's shoulder gently. "I understand. But remember, you can't control everything. You're doing what you can to support Jules, and that's all you can do."

Cora nodded, feeling grateful for John's words of encouragement and comfort. "Thanks, Jamie. You always know what to say to make me feel better."

Jamie pecked her lips and smiled. "That's what I'm here for...we make a great team."

She smiled before averting her eyes to take up her wine glass. Her mind raced with thoughts of Lily, and a fresh wave of guilt washed over her.

Becca's cries pierced the peaceful silence that had settled over the gazebo. Cora's brows wrinkled with concern. She stood from the couch and crouched down before her granddaughter. Scooping her up, she gently cradled her against her chest.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" she asked, her voice soft and soothing.

Becca's cries started to subside, and she looked up at Cora with tear-streaked cheeks. She reached up with one of her chubby hands and placed it against Cora's cheek as a smile lifted her lips.

"Someone was missing the attention," Jamie chuckled, coming to stand beside Cora. Becca's hazel eyes turned to him, and her smile grew. Cora chuckled, too, at how quickly the little girl's mood had changed when all eyes were on her. Becca reached both arms toward Jamie, and the two adults couldn't contain their laughter as he took her into his arms.

"Who's the sweetest little princess?" he asked, blowing bubbles against her cheek. This earned him a stream of happy giggles.

"You're so good with her," observed. Her eyes sparkled with affection.

"It's not so hard. I already love her as if she were my own flesh and blood," he replied sincerely. "Plus, someone's gotta keep this little princess entertained," he said, grinning down at Becca. "Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

Becca released another stream of squeaks and giggles which caused the adults to join in. Cora smiled affectionately at the man that had her heart. It always amazed her how easily he fit into her family, as he'd always been there.

"Is there something going on between your sister and Daniel?"

Cora's brows furrowed at the random question. "Why do you ask?" she looked questioningly at him.

"Whatever they're discussing over there, it doesn't seem pleasant," Jamie replied, jutting his chin to something behind her.

Cora turned her gaze to where he was pointing, and sure enough, she could make out Jo and Daniel across the lawn. It looked like they were in the midst of an intense argument if their wild gestures and raised voices were anything to go by. Cora couldn't make out what they were saying, but based on how they were acting, it couldn't be good.

Cora watched as Daniel suddenly turned and headed toward the

restaurant, leaving Jo standing alone on the grass, her arms folded across her chest and her head down. Cora hesitated for a moment.

“Go to her,” Jamie encouraged. “I’ll look after Becca until you get back.”

“Thanks.” She planted a soft kiss on his lips before stepping away from the gazebo.

As she drew closer, Cora could hear the sound of Jo's sobs, and her heart clenched with sympathy. "Jo, what's wrong?" she asked softly, wrapping her arms around her sister in a tight embrace.

Jo buried her face in Cora's shoulder, her body shaking with sobs. "We broke up," she managed to choke out. "It's all over."

Cora held her sister close, feeling the weight of her pain. "I'm so sorry, Jo," she said, her voice filled with compassion. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Jo nodded, pulling away from Cora and wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. “He said...he said I’m selfish and that I didn’t even try to get to know his daughter. But Cora...I tried. Believe me, I did,” Jo whimpered.

“Oh, Jo,” Cora sighed and pulled her sister into a tight hug. Jo sobbed against her shoulder.

Chapter Fourteen

““Nikki, Diane’s here.”

At the sound of the knock and her mother’s voice, Nikki turned to the closed door.

“Um, I’ll be out in five,” she answered.

“Okay, sweetie. I’ll let her know,” Kirsten replied.

At the sound of her mother’s retreating steps, Nikki's gaze met her reflection in the mirror. She couldn't help but admire the dress she had carefully selected for the evening. The rich wine color complemented her skin tone, while the snug fit accentuated her curves. As the dress flowed from her waist, it gracefully flared out, stopping just above her knees. Her outfit was completed by a pair of strappy silver sandals that wrapped around her ankles.

Nikki had put in the effort to style her hair perfectly, straightening it to create a sleek, polished look. Her luscious blond locks cascaded down her back, framing her slender figure and drawing attention to her long, graceful neck. As she turned her head slightly to the side, her neck was further accentuated by the dress's off-shoulder design.

She had applied just the right amount of makeup to highlight her natural beauty. Her blue eyeshadow brought out the color of her eyes while the mascara lengthened her lashes. A hint of blush on her high cheekbones added

a subtle touch of color to her complexion. Her lips were adorned with a light pink gloss, providing a soft, feminine finish to her look.

Despite looking flawless, Nikki's inner confidence wavered. She couldn't help but feel the twinge of self-doubt creeping in. She didn't know what the night would bring, especially as she was going out with her cousins, but Diane had convinced her it was a good idea. She only hoped she didn't turn into a spoiled sport and ruin their fun. With a final glance in the mirror, she straightened her posture and stepped out of her room.

"Hey," she greeted when she got to the living room, drawing the attention of her cousin, who had been in deep conversation with her mother.

"Wow, Nikki. You look really pretty," Diane complimented.

"Thanks. So do you," Nikki returned with a smile as she took in her cousin's blue romper that hugged her body comfortably and stopped just about mid-thigh. She wore black suede ankle boots, and her hair was swept up in a high ponytail, revealing the diamond studs in her ears. She also wore light makeup.

Diane smiled. "Ready to go?"

Nikki nodded.

"Have fun, sweetie."

She turned her attention to her mother, who was staring at her with hope in the depths of her brown eyes.

"Thanks, Mom. I'll try," Nikki replied with a slight upturn of her lips. Kirsten's smile widened.

The two young women shuffled out of the house and walked down the porch steps toward Diane's car.

As they approached the car, Nikki noticed that it was empty. "Where are the others?" she asked, confusion etched on her face.

"They're meeting us at the club," Diane responded, opening the car's front door, and sliding into the driver's seat. Nikki slid into the front passenger seat. Diane started up the car, the engine purring like a contented

cat. The headlights illuminated the darkened path, casting long shadows on the pavement. As they pulled out of the driveway, the cool autumn breeze tousled their hair, and the scent of the crisp ocean that wasn't too far away filled their nostrils.

“So, what’s the plan for tonight?” Nikki asked, turning to face Diane.

Diane grinned. “We’re going to dance until our feet ache, grab a few drinks and flirt with every cute guy in the club.”

Nikki chuckled. “Look at you, getting back out there after that Derek fiasco.”

At the mention of her ex-fiancé, Diane’s cheery demeanor slipped, and her knuckles tightened on the steering wheel.

“Shoot, Diane, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned Derek. Although I’m glad you kicked him to the curb, it’s only been a few months, and you’re sure to still be a little sensitive about it. Looks like I’m already putting my foot in my mouth, and I haven’t even had a drink or been around the others.” She released a dejected breath.

“It’s okay, Nikki,” her cousin assured her. “You just caught me off guard, that’s all. I am over Derek. It’s just...” Diane released a steady breath before briefly looking over at her. Even though the light in the car was limited, Nikki could make out the look of regret on her cousin’s face.

“I’ve been with Derek for so long, I’ve given him so much of my time and energy, and I don’t know if I want to go through something like that again. You mentioning him just now reminded me that I’m free to go out and do anything I want, but I’m not putting myself out there because I don’t want to get hurt again.”

Nikki nodded with understanding. “Derek was a total jerk,” she said, making a face.

“He was,” Diane nodded and chuckled.

The two settled into a comfortable silence as they made their way through Downtown Oak Harbor. The streets were illuminated by streetlights and the

occasional neon sign. The cool, crisp air continued to blow through the open windows. The car zoomed past rows of small shops and businesses, many of which were closed for the night.

As they approached the club, Nikki could hear the muffled thump of the bass and the chatter of people inside. Her heart began to beat wildly as she anticipated the meetup with her cousins on the inside. She was already imagining the stink eye Cassidy would give her after the way she'd insulted her back at the audition.

Feeling a hand on her arm, she turned to Diane, who gave her an understanding look. "Relax. They're happy you came. Don't think too hard about it, okay?"

Nikki released her breath and nodded. "Okay," she agreed with a small upturn of her lips.

The two women alighted from the car and made their way toward the entrance. The building itself was unassuming, with a simple brick facade and a neon sign hanging over the entrance reading, 'Pulse.' Nikki squinted her eyes as they were met with a dimly lit interior.

The chatter was much higher as people of all ages and backgrounds chatted and laughed over drinks. The music was also loud and eclectic, with a mix of classic rock and electronic dance music. The dance floor was packed with people moving to the beat while others sat at the bar or in booths lining the walls.

"Wanna order something before we look for the others?" Diane shouted over the music.

"Yeah. Sure," Nikki responded, nodding.

Diane held her hand, and the two made their way to the bar.

"What can I get you two lovely ladies?" the bartender walked over to them to ask. He had a friendly smile that made Nikki assume he also had an easy-going personality.

"I'll have a Cosmopolitan," Diane replied.

The bartender nodded before turning to Nikki. The smile was still in place, but there was something of mischief in his dark eyes as well. “And for you, beautiful?”

She felt the heat creep up her neck and quickly averted her eyes, feeling suddenly shy. “Um, I’ll have a Moscow Mule.”

“One Cosmopolitan and a Moscow Mule coming right up.” The bartender moved away to make their drinks.

“Is it just me, or was that bartender flirting with you?” Diane sidled up to her.

“I doubt it, and besides, I am not interested,” Nikki said with a nonchalant rise and fall of her shoulders.

“Oh, come on, Nikki, we’re here to have fun. Nothing’s wrong if he’s flirting with you. It’s fine to—”

“Here you go, ladies,” the bartender spoke, placing their drinks before them and effectively cutting off what Diane was about to say.

“Thank you,” Nikki replied with a small smile before lifting the glass to her lips and taking a sip of the drink. As soon as the refreshing, tangy, and slightly spicy flavor hit her tongue, Nikki wanted to let out a sigh of contentment.

“Anytime, beautiful.”

Nikki’s eyes rose to meet the bartenders, that stared back at her with challenge.

“So, you ladies here with anyone?”

She felt her heart rate speed up at the question. “Um, we’re meeting our cousins here. We actually need to go find them now. Thanks for this. It was, um...well made,” she rambled, sliding off the bar stool. “Diane, let’s go.” She took hold of her cousin’s hand and pulled her off the stool.

“I can’t believe you’re running like that,” Diane cackled as Nikki pulled her along as they weaved through the bodies on the dance floor. Nikki ignored her jab. Spotting their cousins sitting over in the far corner of the

space, she made her way over to them.

“Diane, Nikki, you’re here,” Sarah got up to hug them both.

“Hi, Sara,” Nikki smiled shyly at one of her oldest cousins before turning to the others seated at the booth. “Hey, Cassidy, Amy, Rory, Natalie...” She hesitated when her eyes made contact with her sister-in-law. “Hi, Sarah.”

Sarah’s eyes popped open, but they quickly shuttered as she recovered. “Hi, Nikki,” she smiled.

“All right, let’s get this show on the road,” Diane injected, lightly slapping Nikki on the back before sliding into the booth. “I’m so happy we finally made it here.”

"Right? I've been dying to come here," Sara replied, sipping on her drink.

"Let's get some shots!" Cassidy chimed in.

“Easy on the shots, Cassidy; you’ve already had two,” her sister, Sara, cautioned.

“Oh, come on, Sara. Can you stop babying me for five minutes? We’re here to have fun. That’s what I’m doing,” Cassidy pouted. “Who’s with me?”

Loud cheers of agreement sounded around the table.

Nikki laughed, feeling the tension she had been carrying all day start to melt away. As the night went on, the girls started to let loose, and the conversation flowed effortlessly. They talked about everything from work to relationships to their wildest dreams. Nikki even had a pleasant conversation with Sarah.

As the night went on, the girls started to get louder and more animated. They danced together and sang along to the music, not caring who was watching.

"I can't believe we haven't done this in so long," Cassidy shouted over the music.

"I know. We need to make this a regular thing," Diane agreed.

Nikki looked around at her cousins, feeling grateful for this moment. Unlike their usual interactions where her cousins acted like they were

walking on eggshells around her and she would find some way to say something offensive, she was actually having fun and by the looks on their faces, they were cool having her along.

"I love you guys," she blurted.

Eyes filled with surprise turned to her as their mouths hung open.

"I love you more!" Cassidy yelled, throwing her arms around Nikki.

The others laughed at her antics, and soon enough, they were all hugging. The music and laughter surrounded them.

As they walked toward their booth, Nikki caught sight of a familiar figure in the distance. Jonathan. She couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt as she saw him with his head down, listening to whatever the woman beside him was saying. His lips curled up into a smile. She made to turn away, but as if he could sense her watching him, his head came up, and their eyes connected.

She turned to get back to her cousins, but the tap on her shoulder caused her to turn. Jonathan stood before her with a curious expression.

"Hey, Johnathan," Nikki greeted as lightly as she could.

"Hey, Nikki. I thought that was you. How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm good," she smiled. "I'm actually here with my cousins." She looked over her shoulder to her cousins, whose attention was on them.

"Look, I'm sorry for the way I treated you," she spoke apologetically. "It wasn't fair to take out my problems on you and I just want you to know that I'm not always that..."

"Waspy?" Jonathan finished for her.

Nikki chuckled. "I deserve that, and again I am truly sorry for the way I treated you. You can get back to your date now."

Johnathan looked at her, his expression softening. "Actually, she's not my date," he said, pointing to the woman behind him. "She's engaged to my best friend."

Nikki felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. "Oh, I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't know."

"It's fine," Johnathan said, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. "But you know, if you're not busy, maybe we could grab a drink together? If you're through with being a wasp, that is."

Nikki opened her mouth to say something but hesitated.

"It's not a date. I'd just like to be your friend if that's all you want," he rushed to justify.

Nikki's lips broaden in a smile. "Ask me again."

"Um, would you like to grab a drink with me?" he asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

"That's not the question."

His brows furrowed in confusion.

"Ask me the question you asked me the first time we met," she clarified.

"Oh. Can I have your number?"

"Sure. Let me have your number." She held out her hand for his phone and Johnathan placed it in her palm.

Nikki inputted her number into his phone and handed it back to him. "Make sure you call me so that we can set up a time for our date."

Jonathan's lips broadened in a smile. "Sure thing. I'll let you get back to your cousins. It looks like they're getting ready to come over here."

"Okay," Nikki responded. As she turned and made her way to the booth, she couldn't help the wide grin on her lips or the butterflies in her stomach.

"I'd like that," she said, returning his smile.

As they walked away, Nikki couldn't help but think that maybe this night was turning out to be more than just a girl's night out.

Chapter Fifteen

“Hi.”
“Hi.” Nikki couldn’t help the blush that crept into her cheeks as butterflies skidded over each other, making her a nervous wreck. Her hand tightened on the door as she stared up at Johnathan. She willed herself to break the silence that had descended upon them. “I didn’t know what you meant by dress comfortable, so I opted to wear this. I hope that’s okay, or I could go change,” she rambled.

Jonathan reached out and placed a hand on her arm. Nikki’s lips clamped shut as the heat rose up her arm from where their skin connected and made its way up her neck to her already burning red cheeks. “It’s fine,” he spoke with a reassuring smile as he looked her up and down. She had opted to wear a white T-shirt tucked into a pair of skinny jeans and a denim jacket. To finish off the look, she had on a pair of flat sandals and had placed her hair in a ponytail.

“You look beautiful, by the way.”

“Thank you,” she replied with a coy smile. “You look beautiful too. I mean, you look...you look great in this— not that you don’t always look great, I just mean...” She cringed internally at how much she had been rambling. Why couldn’t she stop herself from blabbering like a young teen experiencing her first crush?

“Thanks for the compliment,” Jonathan chuckled. “Shall we?” he held out his arm to her.

“Yes,” Nikki smiled and gingerly placed her hand in the crook of his arm. The butterflies ran amok in her chest at the contact. As she drew closer to him, she could also make out the scent of old spice mixed with his own masculine scent.

“You have a Jeep Wrangler?” Nikki exclaimed, looking from the army green, four-wheel drive to Johnathan, eyes wide with surprise.

“Yeah...is that a problem?” he answered slowly, a look of caution in his emerald eyes.

“Are you kidding me? Of course not,” Nikki replied. “I love Jeeps. It’s my dream car.”

“Oh yeah?” Jonathan responded in surprise.

Nikki nodded vigorously.

“That’s cool. A girl after my own heart,” he teased.

Nikki’s heart skipped a beat, and her lips parted slightly.

“I mean, I like that you’re someone who seems to like adventures. I bought my Jeep because I like going on excursions off the beaten track,” he explained.

“That’s cool,” she responded softly.

Jonathan smiled down at her, which caused her heart to skip another beat. He helped her up into the front seat before taking his seat around the steering wheel. She noted the basket in the backseat with what looked like Italian loaf bread sticking out.

“What exactly are we doing today?” she turned to ask him with a raised brow.

“You’ll see when we get there,” Jonathan replied, smiling over at her. Nikki’s lips raised in a smile as well. Her interest peaked as the sign for Windjammer Park came into view.

When Johnathan brought the car to a stop, he alighted and helped her

from her seat before taking out the basket and a small igloo, along with a backpack. She offered to help him, but he declined.

As they walked through the entrance of Windjammer Park, Nikki took the time to admire the area that was located on the waterfront and offered beautiful views of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains in the distance.

Nikki felt a flutter of excitement as she stepped out of the car and saw the picnic blanket laid out on the lush green grass. Johnathan had really put in an effort to make this date special, she thought to herself. Jonathan brought them to a grassy spot that was in an area away from most of the others, enjoying the day. He took a blanket from his backpack and spread it out before removing the items from the basket.

The sun was shining down upon them, casting a warm glow over the colorful spread of food that Johnathan had brought along. As they sat down to eat, Nikki couldn't help but feel a little nervous. This was only her first date in a couple of years, and she wasn't quite sure what she was doing or where this was going.

"So, tell me something about yourself that not many people know," Johnathan said, breaking the silence as he took a bite of his sandwich.

"Sure, let's start with the hard questions. Why don't you," she chuckled.

He smiled back at her with challenge in his green eyes.

"Let's see...I can cross my legs over my head while lying on my chest," she revealed.

"Really?" he asked in surprise.

Nikki nodded.

"That is amazing. Let me see."

"I can't," Nikki laughed. "At least not until our third date."

His smile split his face. "So, we're already planning a third date, are we?"

"We'll see," she smirked.

"I guess I better make this count more than anything else," he grinned.

Nikki smiled. "Your turn."

“I can recite the first thirty values of pi,” he answered.

“Now that, that is something,” Nikki spoke. Impressed. “Mhmm, this quiche, it’s so good,” she moaned with satisfaction as she placed another forkful of the food into her mouth. “Where did you buy this?”

“I made it, actually,” he replied. “I love cooking.”

“You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?” Nikki spoke in admiration.

“I aim to please,” he smiled.

The two settled into a comfortable silence as they continued to eat and watched the people also out enjoying the say.

“So, tell me, what are your dreams and aspirations?” he asked.

Nikki paused for a moment, unsure of what to say. But then, she took a deep breath and decided to be honest. "Well, my dream was to become a model," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Johnathan looked at her with surprise. "Really? Why didn't you pursue it?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Nikki's heart sank a little at the question. She didn't want to talk about the accident she had been in, the one that had left her with scars or that the one person who truly understood her aspirations was gone, which drained her and put a damper on her desire to continue with it. But she knew she had to tell him something. "Life happened, I guess," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Johnathan could sense that she was uncomfortable. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry," he said, reaching out to hold her hand. "It's okay if you don't want to talk about it."

Nikki felt a wave of relief wash over her at his words. "Thank you," she said, giving his hand a gentle squeeze before turning away from him. "I just...it's a sore topic for me."

"It's okay," Johnathan said, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I understand. And I'm willing to wait for you to trust me enough to open up to me."

"Thank you, Johnathan," she said, smiling. "You're different from other

guys. You're kind and understanding."

Johnathan smiled back at her. "You're like an onion, Nikki," he said, chuckling. "You have many layers that need to be peeled back. But I'm willing to take the time and care to get to know you."

Nikki blushed at his words. "That's sweet of you, Johnathan," she said, feeling a warm fuzzy feeling in her heart.

"I'm a firefighter."

"I did not know that," she said in surprise. Jonathan nodded.

"It's a family tradition, I guess. My grandfather was battalion chief, and so was my father. I have a few uncles who are firefighters back in Seattle," he explained.

"Did you always want to be a firefighter?" she asked.

"Yeah, I did," he confirmed. "It was either a firefighter or joining the army."

"I admire you for following your dreams," Nikki spoke, resting an encouraging hand on his arm.

Jamie smiled at her, the side of his cheek dimpling.

Nikki felt her lips lifting in a smile of her own, and the butterflies continued to roll over each other in her chest.

"Your father must be very proud of you."

The smile on his face slipped, and his expression became pained before he averted his eyes. "I know he would be," he spoke softly.

"What do you mean?" Nikki softly asked.

His green eyes turned to her once more; the pain in their depths caused her chest to tighten. "He died a few days before my graduation from the academy," he answered.

"Oh no! Jonathan, I am so sorry," Nikki expressed, her hands covering her mouth in horror.

"It's fine. It still hurts to talk about it, but I know he would have been proud of me, and that's what keeps me going. Every time I put on that suit, I

know that I am honoring his memory.”

Nikki squeezed his arm comfortingly.

“I admire your strength and your drive to keep doing what you do,” she said when he turned to look at her.

Jonathan smiled appreciatively. “That means a lot to me.”

Nikki felt her cheeks warm at the emotion she saw in his eyes.

“Let’s try this potato salad, and you can tell me how great of a chef I am,” he said, lightening the mood.

“Okay,” she laughed.

Nikki looked at him, feeling a warmth spread through her. She had never met anyone like him before, someone who was so patient and kind. Maybe this was the start of something special, she thought to herself as they finished their picnic and packed up to leave.

“Can I hold your hand?”

Nikki looked up, surprised. “Yes,” she answered shyly.

Johnathan reached down and intertwined their fingers. It felt so right. They strolled through the lush, green grass, holding hands. As they made their way out of the park, Nikki spotted a familiar face. It was Xena, one of her high school friends who had moved away from Oak Harbor years ago.

A wave of panic washed over her, and she hadn’t realized her fingers had tightened around Johnathan’s until he spoke.

“Are you okay?”

“Hmm?” she looked up at him, dazed.

“You seem tense,” he expressed.

“Nikki! Oh my gosh, is that you?” Her heart slammed against her ribcage as she turned to the woman. “I haven’t seen you in forever!” Xena exclaimed, rushing over to throw her arms over her in a hug.

Nikki hugged her back. “Hi, Xena.”

When they separated, Nikki could see the sadness in her eyes. “I haven’t seen you since the accident,” she said softly, her voice trembling.

Nikki's smile faded, and Johnathan could see the distress on her face. He placed a comforting hand on her back, silently offering support.

"What happened to Samantha was a real tragedy. I still can't believe she's gone," Xena sighed, her shoulders deflating.

Nikki's eyes filled with tears. "I can't talk about it," she said, her voice choked with emotion. "I have to go."

"Xena, is it?" Jonathan intervened.

"Um, yeah," Xena replied.

"I'm sure Nikki is happy to see you and to connect, but she's not feeling well, so I need to get her home. Okay?"

"Okay," Xena slowly nodded.

"Come on, let's go," he said, taking Nikki's hand and leading her away from Xena.

"It really was good seeing you, Nikki," Xena called after them.

As they walked away, Nikki's body shook with sobs. Jonathan stopped and turned to her, pulling her into a warm embrace. "It's okay," he whispered. "I'm here for you, no questions, no judgment."

Nikki fell into his arms, grateful for his support. She cried softly, feeling the weight of her pain lifting just a little bit. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Johnathan held her tightly as her body relaxed against his. "Anytime," he said softly. "I'm here for you."

Chapter Sixteen

The day of the sip and paint had arrived, and the lawn behind the Inn was bustling with activity. The air was filled with the scent of fresh paint and the soft hum of chatter as guests mingled with the locals. Cora, Andrea, Jo, and Marg were all there, ready to guide the guests through the painting process.

Cora was busy setting up the easels and canvases. "Welcome, welcome!" she called out to the guests as they arrived. "Please make yourself at home."

Andrea was busy arranging the paintbrushes and palettes. "We've got everything you need right here," she said cheerfully. "Just let us know if you need any help."

Jo was overseeing the refreshments table. "Wine, anyone?" she asked, holding up a bottle. "We've got plenty to go around."

Marg was busy mingling with the guests and making sure everyone was comfortable. "I hope you're all enjoying yourselves," she said warmly. "Let us know if there's anything we can do to make your experience even better."

As the guests settled into their seats, Cora stepped forward to give a brief introduction. "Welcome, everyone, to our guests from the inn and to those who traveled from town to be here; we are grateful you chose to be a part of this experience. Today, we're going to be painting a beautiful seascape," she said, gesturing to the harbor just a few feet away. It was a sight to behold,

especially on a clear day like today. The water sparkled in the sunshine, and a few sailboats bobbed on the gentle waves. The Cascade mountain range stood majestically in the distance, its snow-capped peaks soaring toward the sky.

"But don't worry if you're not an artist— we have Cheryl here. She is an accomplished artist who has volunteered to help you get the best out of your canvas." She gestured to the redhead standing beside her. "We're here to help you every step of the way," she turned back to the audience to say with a reassuring smile. "I'll now hand over to Cheryl, the real professional here."

The guests chuckled. Cora stepped away so that all the attention was on Cheryl, who went into the basics of how the guests should approach getting their painting together.

One of the guests, a woman with auburn hair, let out a contented sigh. "This is just beautiful," she said, gazing out at the harbor. "I feel like I could stay here forever."

Cora, who was circulating among the guests, smiled at the woman's words. "We're glad you like it," she said. "Our little slice of paradise."

Andrea chimed in. "It's the perfect inspiration for our sip and paint session," she said. "Just look at those colors. The blues, the greens, the whites, the mountain range. It's all so vibrant."

Jo, who was now walking around with a tray of appetizers, nodded in agreement. "And the best part is, you get to take a little piece of it home with you," she said, gesturing to the blank canvases and paints. "A little memory of your time here at our inn."

The woman smiled and nodded in agreement.

The guests settled in with their brushes and began to paint, each one trying to capture the beauty of the harbor in their own way. Some were quiet and focused, while others chatted and laughed as they worked. But all of them were united in their love for this tranquil spot, this haven of peace and beauty.

As the afternoon wore on, the lawn became a riot of color as the guests

brought their paintings to life. There were a few mishaps along the way— spilled paint, smudged canvases, and a few frustrated sighs, but the sisters, Marg and Cheryl, were always there with a kind word or a helpful suggestion.

At one point, Cora paused to admire a guest's work. "This is beautiful," she said, admiring the intricate details of the waves and the sky. "You're a natural."

"I don't know about that," the woman replied modestly, but there was a hint of pride in her voice.

As she made her way around, checking on the guests and offering encouragement to those struggling with their paintings, Cora's heart skipped a beat when she spotted Lily. Her soon-to-be stepdaughter was sitting on a long bench before an easel, her face downcast as she painstakingly worked on her canvas.

Cora made her way over to Lily, a knot forming in her stomach.

"Cora, hi!" Lily looked up and forced a smile.

"Lily, dear. How are you doing?" Cora smiled down at her before taking a seat beside her.

"I'm okay," Lily replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You don't sound fine," Cora pointed out, slightly bumping her shoulder in a friendly manner.

"I'm trying to be," Lily confessed with a sad smile.

Cora gave her a look of understanding and reached over to place a comforting hand on her arm. "Have you told Jamie about the breakup?" she asked gently.

Lily shook her head. "I haven't found the right time to tell him. I don't want to upset him."

Cora's hand climbed up to Lily's shoulder, feeling the weight of the situation. "Lily, you know your father loves you, and he just wants you to be happy. He'll understand."

Lily nodded, tears brimming in her eyes. "I know, but it's just hard. I thought Bill was the one."

Cora turned fully and pulled Lily into a hug. "I know, sweetie. But everything happens for a reason. You'll find someone who loves you for who you are and wants the same things as you do."

Lily sniffled and pulled away, giving Cora a watery smile. "Thanks, Cora. You always know just what to say."

Cora smiled back, feeling grateful for the bond she was developing with her soon-to-be stepdaughter. "That's what family is for Lily. We've got your back no matter what."

After exchanging a few more words with Lily and complimenting her about her natural talent, Cora was off again to mingle with the guests.

"Cora!"

Cora turned to see Tessa and Kirsten walking toward her.

"Hi, guys," she smiled as she accepted their hugs.

"I'm sorry we couldn't make it sooner, but there was an emergency at the hospital, and I had to put in a few extra hours," Tess explained.

"I was marking test papers," Kirsten added.

"I hope it's not too late to start on a canvas," Tess spoke with hope.

"Not at all. There are still a few empty stations," Cora assured them.

"Great," Kirsten replied. "It would've been a downer if I'd missed it."

Cora smiled appreciatively at the women. She was happy that despite their busy schedules, her family always tried to find a way to give their support. She spotted Ben and Marg across the lawn. Ben whispered something in her ear, and Marg buried her face in his chest as his arms came around her, and he chuckled. Cora smiled at their display of affection. She was happy for them.

Cora turned to see Jo offering the guests kebabs, her smile never faltering. Despite the recent heartbreak, she appeared to have found a way to have some fun, but she also knew that it was a facade.

As she made her way over to Jo, Cora noticed a glimmer of sadness in her eyes. As she came to stand beside her behind the serving table, she asked, "Are you doing okay?"

Jo's smile faltered for a moment before she quickly regained her composure. "I'm fine, Cora. Just enjoying this. It's going pretty well, don't you think?" she asked in an attempt to change the topic.

Cora knew her sister too well, and it broke her heart to see her struggling. "You don't have to pretend with me, Jo. I know it's been tough since you and Daniel broke up. It's only been a week; it's still fresh."

Jo's shoulders slumped slightly, and she let out a deep sigh. "It has been tough," she admitted. "But being here, doing this...it helps."

Cora gave her sister a gentle squeeze on the shoulder. "I'm glad. And I'm proud of you for hiring that sous chef to put some space between you and Daniel to heal. Taking care of yourself is important."

Jo's smile returned, albeit a little more subdued. "Thanks, Cora. You always know what to say."

"Come here." Cora opened her arms, and Jo walked into the embrace.

As they worked, Jo turned to Cora. "You know, I think we should do this more often. The sip and paint, I mean."

Cora grinned. "I think that's a great idea. And maybe we can come up with some other events too."

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, the guests stepped back to admire their finished paintings. There were cheers and applause as everyone shared their work with each other, and Cora, Andrea, Jo, and Marg beamed with pride.

"That was so much fun," one guest exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "When's the next one?"

Cora chuckled. "We'll have to see," she said, glancing over at her sisters and Marg. "But I have a feeling it won't be too long."

As the guests started to head back to the inn, Cora and her sisters started

packing up the supplies. Lily, Tess, and Kirsten also stayed back to help.

"I was thinking maybe a cooking class. We could teach people how to make some of our signature dishes," Jo suggested as Cora placed the paintbrushes in the basket she was holding.

"I think that's a good idea," Cora agreed.

"Yeah. Way to go, Jo," Andrea agreed. "Maybe we could also place a suggestion box in the lobby area so that the guests can place their suggestions of what they would want to do while they're staying here," she added.

"That is...wow! Why didn't we think about this before?" Cora smiled.

From the corner of her eye, Cora glimpsed Jamie's arrival. She turned to see him walking in Lily's direction. She watched from afar as he said something to Lily and Lily flew into his arms before burying her face in his chest. His arms came up to hug her tightly to him. When Lily raised her head, her face was red and puffy, and Cora couldn't help but feel a pang of concern for her. Jamie caught her eye and nodded in greeting before making his way toward her.

"Hi, everything okay?" Cora asked, trying to read his expression.

Jamie's face was somber as he replied, "I spoke to Bill earlier. He told me that he and Lily broke up."

"I know," she said softly. "Lily told me in back at the barbecue."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Jamie's voice was tinged with hurt and confusion.

Cora took a deep breath before responding, "Lily is my soon-to-be daughter-in-law, and I didn't want to betray her trust. I know how important family is to you, and I didn't want to jeopardize our relationship with her."

Jamie's expression softened slightly, but his frustration was still evident. "But Lily is my daughter. I should have known what was happening to her. I feel like I'm the last to know everything."

Cora sighed, "I understand how you feel, but I'm the one who's been struggling to have a relationship with Lily. I want us to be a family. Family

doesn't betray each other's trust."

Jamie looked at her for a moment before running his hand through his hair as he released a heavy breath. "I need some time to think," he informed her.

"Okay." Cora replied, her brows furrowed with confusion.

Jamie gave a curt nod, turned around and walked away, leaving Cora staring helplessly at his retreating back. Her lips parted in confusion and hurt as she watched him walk across the lawn and disappear around the side of the inn.

"Cora?"

She turned to Lily, who stood a few inches from her with a look of concern.

"Is everything okay with you and Dad?" she asked, taking a tentative step toward her.

"Your father, I believe, is just overwhelmed by the news about you and Bill. He just needed some time to clear his head," Cora bypassed the question to respond. "He'll be okay," she spoke confidently, although, on the inside, she was anything but confident about Jamie's state of mind.

"I'm so sorry if I caused you guys any trouble. I should not have asked you to keep such a big thing from him," Lily spoke anxiously.

"Lily," Cora said, closing the distance and placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You have nothing to be sorry about. You needed someone to talk to, and I am happy you trusted me enough to share your burden. Your father and I will be fine," she smiled.

Lily's lips lifted, and her eyes shone with relief.

Cora fought hard to retain her smile as panic bubbled within her at the possibility that she and Jamie would not be fine.

Chapter Seventeen

"So, Nikki, how have things been going since our last session?"

"Well..."

Nikki sat nervously on the couch in Dr. Grimes' office, fidgeting with her hands as she tried to gather her thoughts.

Dr. Grimes gave her a patient smile.

Nikki took a deep breath before responding. "Well, I've kind of been seeing someone."

"Oh?" Dr. Grimes responded. He gave a slight nod indicating for her to continue.

"His name is Johnathan, and we've been dating for two weeks now."

Dr. Grimes raised an eyebrow. "Okay. How do you feel about this new relationship?"

"Um..." Nikki's brows furrowed as she struggled to put what she was feeling into words.

"Are you excited, nervous, or unsure?" Dr. Grimes assisted.

"Unsure," she spoke sheepishly.

Nikki watched her therapist as he wrote on the notepad in his hand.

"Okay. Tell me about what attracted you to Johnathan," Dr. Grimes looked up to ask.

"Well, I would be lying if I said it wasn't how handsome he is, but..."

Her lips lifted into a tender smile as she recalled how, just yesterday, he'd shown up at the boutique with Chinese after she'd told him that she was having a hectic day and wouldn't be able to go out to lunch. He hadn't even stayed as he needed to get back to the fire station, but his thoughtfulness had touched her.

"He is very sweet, considerate, patient, and a good listener," she relayed.

Dr. Grimes nodded before scribbling on the notepad in his hand once more.

"Apart from feeling unsure about this new relationship and the things that attracted you to him, how do you feel about Johnathan?"

"He makes me happy, you know? But at the same time, I'm scared," Nikki admitted, wringing her hands that were nestled in her lap.

"Why is that?" Dr. Grimes inquired gently.

Nikki released a heavy breath. "It's just that every time I find something or someone that I love, it always gets taken away from me," she explained. She folded her lips, and her gaze became unfocused as her thoughts transported her to three years ago.

Dr. Grimes nodded understandingly. "Are you talking about Samantha?"

Nikki's eyes filled with tears as she nodded. "I miss her so much. I can't even visit her grave anymore because I blame myself for her death. If I hadn't distracted her, she wouldn't have lost control of the vehicle. I wish it were me that died that day. Do you know that I haven't visited her parents since that day?" She heaved after her word vomit, and her shoulders sagged as the tears flowed unabated down her cheeks.

Dr. Grimes leaned forward, his kind eyes fixed on Nikki's face. "It's okay to feel guilty, Nikki. But it's important to remember that it wasn't your fault. Accidents happen, and sometimes they're beyond our control."

Nikki sniffled, wiping a sleeve across her nose. "It feels like it was my fault. I should have known better than to distract her while she was driving," Nikki spoke adamantly.

Dr. Grimes shook his head. "You can't blame yourself for what happened. Samantha was the one behind the wheel, and ultimately, it was her responsibility to keep you both safe and even then, it wasn't your friend's fault. That accident could have happened to anyone. We can't predict what obstacles will appear out of nowhere."

Nikki looked away, her gaze fixed on a spot on the wall. "I know, but it still hurts. And I can't shake the feeling that her parents blame me too."

Dr. Grimes leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled in front of him. "Have you spoken to them about how you feel?"

Nikki shook her head. "No, I can't bring myself to do it. I'm afraid of what they'll say."

Dr. Grimes nodded understandingly. "It's natural to feel that way, but avoiding the situation won't make it go away. Perhaps it's time to face your fears and have an honest conversation with them."

Nikki looked at him with a mix of fear and hope in her eyes. "I-I-I...I can't," she spoke dejectedly.

Dr. Grimes leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Have you been using your journal to write about how you're feeling?"

Nikki nodded. "Yes, I've been writing everything down," wiping her face with the back of her hand.

"That's good to hear. How do you feel before and after journaling? Can you tell me?" Dr. Grimes gave her a patient look.

"Honestly, every time I write down what I'm feeling, it's like a weight is being lifted off my shoulders to be able to voice what I'm feeling at that moment. But it doesn't last," she confessed.

"That's good," the therapist nodded approvingly as he scribbled on the notepad once more.

"How is that a good thing?" Nikki asked, a brow raised in confusion.

Dr. Grimes put down the pen and looked at her. "It means you are aware of what you are feeling and are able to express it. That is an important step in

identifying the triggers for your negative emotions and being able to work on them," he explained. "Nikki, I need you to keep using your journal as a tool to help you work through your emotions," he advised.

Nikki nodded. "Okay. Thank you, Dr. Grimes. Talking about this stuff is hard, but talking to you helps."

"I want to help you, Nikki. That's what I'm here for." Dr. Grimes smiled. "And remember, you can't control everything that happens in your life. But you can control how you respond to it."

Nikki returned the man's smile before gathering her things to leave his office. She decided to visit Diane before heading home.

Nikki stepped inside Diane's Bistro, taking in the smell of fresh paint and sawdust. Even though the Bistro was under construction, Diane had managed to keep it operational. Nikki spotted her cousin behind the counter, dressed in a paint-splattered apron and a bright smile.

"Hey, cuz," Diane greeted her, wiping her hands on a rag.

"You're painting?" Nikki asked the obvious.

Diane chuckled. "I am. With the cost for the expansion and the repairs, I thought it would be a good idea to tackle the painting myself to cut back on cost," she explained.

"How's that working out for you?" Nikki raised a skeptical brow as she stared at the wall behind her cousin, taking in the paint drips, uneven coverage, and roller marks.

Diane gave her a sheepish look. "Not so good. Turns out, taking on a massive paint job as an amateur isn't a smart thing to do."

"You think?" Nikki chuckled. "Why didn't you call the girls? Or ask Jamie?"

"The girls are busy with their own lives. I didn't want to take them to have to use their Saturdays to help me with my mess, and secondly, it wouldn't feel right to ask Jamie to help and not compensate him and his workers for their efforts, so this— I was the next best option," Diane

explained.

“That’s the faultiest reasoning I’ve ever heard,” Nikki shook her head.

Diane waved her off. “What are you doing here anyway?” she asked.

“Geez. Imagine I left therapy and decided, why don't I visit my favorite cousin before I head home, and this is how you greet me? Thought you’d be happy to see me,” Nikki feigned hurt.

“Just your favorite cousin? You should have put most before that,” Diane demanded with a broad, mischievous grin.

"You know what? I'll have a frappe and a cheese croissant, please," Nikki said, ignoring her cousin’s taunting. She took a seat at the small table in the corner.

Diane whipped up the frappe and warmed the croissant before placing them in front of Nikki. "So, how was your therapy session?" she asked, taking a seat across from Nikki.

"It was good," Nikki said, taking a sip of her frappe. "I made a lot of progress."

"That's great to hear," Diane said, smiling. "Did you talk about Johnathan?"

Nikki blushed, feeling a sudden warmth in her cheeks. "Yeah, I did. I told Dr. Grimes about our relationship and how I've been feeling lately."

Diane leaned in, her eyes sparkling with interest. "And how do you feel?"

"I don't know," Nikki admitted. "I'm willing to try to be happy. I have a good feeling about us— Jonathan and me."

“That’s good,” Diane spoke approvingly. “You deserve to be happy.” She reached over and rested her palm on top of the hand Nikki had on the table.

Nikki’s lips turned up in an appreciative smile. Her phone rang just then. She glanced at the caller ID and felt a wave of heat wash over her. "It's Johnathan," she said, answering the call.

"Hi, Nikki" Johnathan's voice filled her ear, a smile evident in his tone.

"Hi," Nikki said, trying to sound nonchalant but failing miserably.

Diane watched as Nikki talked to Johnathan, a knowing smile on her face. Nikki averted her gaze.

“So, I was thinking, since our movie date got interrupted, we could maybe try again tomorrow. There is a drive-in movie theatre up in Coupeville,” he suggested.

“That sounds great,” Nikki replied, the smile on her lips widening.

“Great. I’ll set it up,” he spoke with excitement. “And Nikki?”

“Yes, Jonathan?” she asked, her heart skipping a few beats as she waited for him to finish after his voice had dropped a few octaves.

“I just really wanted to hear your voice.”

“Oh,” she smiled as the butterflies danced in her stomach. “I wanted to hear your voice too,” she returned, her voice also dropping as it came out breathy.

After hanging up, Nikki put her phone back in her pocket and looked at Diane, still blushing.

Diane stared back at her with a knowing grin.

“Sorry about that.”

Diane waved her off. “No need to apologize. It’s cute to see you blush like that. You’re definitely smitten with Mr. Jonathan Lansing.”

Nikki rolled her eyes but couldn’t help but smile. “Can I use your bathroom?”

Diane chuckled. “You don’t need to ask.”

Nikki got up and headed toward the rear of the building. After finishing up, she made her way toward the front but stopped in her tracks when she saw two familiar faces talking to Diane. Her heart slammed violently into her rib cage, and her lungs felt deprived of air. Her hand gripped the door tightly, as her eyes remained trained on them while they stood at the door with their backs to her as they conversed with her cousin. Nikki slowly willed herself to move and gradually backed up and retreated to the kitchen. She took large gulps of air as she tried to calm her rapidly beating heart and tried to think.

“Nikki, what are you doing?” Diane walked into the kitchen to find her splashing water from the sink on her burning face.

“Are they gone?” she asked, turning off the tap.

“No,” Diane responded in a sympathetic voice. “They want to speak to you.”

“No,” Nikki spoke firmly as her head moved vigorously from side to side.

“Nikki, you need to face them. You can’t keep running away from this. It’s been three years. They need closure too.”

Nikki snapped back, “Easy for you to say. You didn’t cause the accident. I did.” Tears streamed down her face as she spoke.

“Nikki, you did not cause the ac—”

“Don’t,” Nikki interrupted. “Don’t say I didn’t. God, why is everyone trying to let me off the hook when I was the one that distracted her? It is my fault.” She began pacing back and forth to control her shaking limbs. “I can’t see them, D, not now,” she turned pleading eyes to her cousin. “I just can’t.”

Diane’s expression was one of helplessness as she watched Nikki’s breakdown. After what seemed like a lifetime, Diane spoke, her voice strained. “I’ll let them know you’re not feeling well.” She turned and exited the kitchen, softly closing the door behind her.

Nikki crumpled on the floor as she buried her face in her hands and wept.

Chapter Eighteen

“Who’s my little princess? You are.”

Squeals of delight filled the air as Cora cooed at her granddaughter, tickling her chubby little feet while Jules bustled about in the kitchen, preparing a bottle for the hungry baby. The scent of warm milk and baby powder filled the air.

"I can't believe how fast you're growing," Cora said, beaming down at baby Becca. "It feels like just yesterday you were just a tiny little thing." she nestled her head in Becca's tummy as the baby continued to squeal.

Jules smiled, handing the bottle over to her mother. "I know, right? It's crazy. But she's such a good baby. Well, apart from when she's teething and keeps me up for the whole night."

The two women chuckled, and Cora felt a slight pressure on her finger from Becca chomping on it with the two small teeth at the bottom of her mouth.

Jules smiled. "I'm lucky."

Cora nodded, settling into a nearby chair and cradling Becca in her arms. "You sure are. And I'm lucky to have you both living here with me. It's nice to have family around."

Jules leaned against the counter, watching as her mother fed Becca. "I'm proud of you, you know. The sip and paint were a huge success. Everyone

had a great time."

Cora smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Thank you, honey. It was a lot of fun. I'm glad we could do something like that for our guests." We're thinking about making it a regular event for the inn."

"You guys should," Jules encouraged. Cora smiled appreciatively.

"How's Noah doing?" Cora asked as she balanced Becca in her arm as she fed her from the bottle. She looked up with concern when her daughter didn't answer immediately.

Jules sighed, her eyes filling with moisture. "He's...he's doing okay, I guess. It's hard, you know? Being away from him for so long. And Becca...she doesn't even really know her own dad yet. Sure, he Facetime's, but it's just not the same as having him here."

Cora put a comforting hand on her daughter's shoulder. "I know, honey. I can't even imagine how hard it must be for you. But you're strong. And you have to be strong for Becca too. She needs you."

Jules nodded, wiping away a stray tear that had fallen. "I know. It's just...hard sometimes."

"You're going to be okay," Cora encouraged, bringing her closer for a hug. Becca made a sound as if protesting as she was sandwiched between the women. Cora let Jules go as they chuckled at the baby's sassiness.

"Thanks, Mom," Jules smiled.

"Anytime," Cora returned with a smile of her own.

Just then, the doorbell rang, cutting through their conversation. Cora stood up, carefully handing Becca back to Jules.

"That must be Jamie," she said, heading toward the door. "He called earlier to say he was coming over." She headed to the foyer.

As she approached the door, Cora took a deep breath before reaching down to turn the knob and open it. Jamie stood tall on the porch, his hands in his pockets.

"Hey," he said softly, his voice strained with emotion.

“Hi,” she returned tentatively. Seconds that felt like minutes rolled by as they stood at the door, neither saying anything. “Would you like to come in?” she asked, already stepping aside to give him entry.

“Yes. Thanks,” he replied, stepping into the foyer.

“Jules is in the kitchen with Becca, but we can talk in the living room,” she suggested.

“Okay,” he replied before following her down the hall.

Cora poked her head into the kitchen to see Jules nestling a sleeping Becca. “I’ll be in the living room if you need me,” she informed her.

“Okay. I’m gonna put Becca down for her nap,” Jules replied. “Hi, Jamie,” she greeted upon spotting Jamie standing behind Cora.

“Hi, Jules. How are you?” Jamie warmly greeted.

“I’m okay,” Jules answered.

Cora and Jamie continued to their destination. When they made it to the living room, she turned to him.

“Would you like to have a seat?”

“No. Not yet,” Jamie shook his head. His hand found the back of his neck, and he released a low breath, a sign that Cora had come to recognize as him being nervous.

“I’m sorry for the way I acted yesterday. It wasn’t fair to you or to Lily. I don’t know what came over me,” he sighed. “In that moment of finding out my daughter had been hurting and I hadn’t been there for her, it hit me like a ton of bricks, and for a minute, I felt sad that she didn’t come to me with her problems,” he explained.

Cora nodded slowly, taking in Jamie’s words. “It’s okay,” she replied, her voice gentle. “I understand that you were upset. But I also value the relationship I have with Lily, even if it’s fragile. And I value a person’s privacy and trust. It was never my intention to keep this from you. I even encouraged her to tell you as soon as possible.” She, too, took a breath before continuing. “As a journalist, I know how devastating breaking someone’s

trust can be, especially if it's a loved one."

Jamie's expression softened at Cora's words. "I know that's what you were doing," he said, his voice filled with pride. "And I'm proud to know that my daughter is gaining someone who cares about her so much and is honest and has good integrity."

Cora smiled, the tension between them dissipating. "Thank you," she said softly. "That means a lot to me."

Jamie stepped forward, taking Cora's hand in his own. "I'm sorry for making you feel like you were at fault," he said, his eyes meeting hers. "I promise to do better in the future."

Cora squeezed Jamie's hand, feeling a rush of warmth flood through her. "I know you will," she said, a smile spreading across her face. "As long as we figure these things out together, we'll be okay."

Jamie nodded in agreement. He took her hand and led her to the couch. As they sat, he entwined their hands as they gazed into each other's eyes. Jamie lifted her hand to his lips and placed a tender kiss against her flesh. Heat crept up Cora's chest, and her cheeks warmed over as they tinted red.

"I know I've said this a lot, but I can't wait to call you Mrs. Hillier finally," Jamie smiled.

"You know I can't wait either," Cora returned. "To think that our wedding is just a month away."

"Too long, if you ask me," he huffed with impatience.

Cora giggled. "Patience is a virtue, sir."

"When it comes to you and all things I want to experience with you, patience feels like torture," he spoke seriously.

Cora smiled tenderly as she stared into his eyes, the intensity of his emotions filling her with joy.

Suddenly the tranquility the two shared was shattered when Jules rushed into the room, her face contorted in anguish.

"Mom, Jamie, something terrible has happened," she gasped, her voice

shaking.

Cora's heart sank as she took in her daughter's distress. "Sweetie, what's wrong?" she asked, rising to her feet. Jamie did the same as they faced her daughter.

"It's— It's Noah. His mom called, and they said he's missing."

* * *

Cora's heart pounded in her chest as she video-called Noah's parents. The moment their faces came up on the screen, she could see that their eyes were red and puffy.

"Evelyn, Kenneth, please tell me something," she pleaded, her voice thick with emotion. "Anything."

Kenneth's voice was heavy with sorrow as he spoke. "We're sorry, Cora. We have no other news. The army has been looking for the plane, but they have been unable to locate it. It's possible it went down over the water."

Cora's face turned pale as she processed the information. She felt a lump form in her throat, and she struggled to hold back tears. "Oh my God," she whispered. "Noah."

Evelyn's tears turned into sobs as she spoke. "We don't know anything else, Cora. We just wanted to let you know what we do know."

"My baby," Evelyn sobbed.

Cora could hear the pain in the woman's voice, and she wished she could reach through the phone and hug her. "This is a lot to take in," she spoke solemnly, her eyes seeking out her daughter sitting on the couch with a dazed expression as she listened to the conversation. "I am so sorry that this is happening, and I wish I were there to offer you guys some comfort."

"We appreciate it, Cora. We're not giving up hope that he is alive. We just have to pray that he finds his way back to us," Kenneth replied, his voice taking on a determined edge.

“That’s the spirit,” Cora agreed. “Keep us updated.”

"Thank you," Evelyn said softly. "Please kiss my grandbaby for me."

“I will,” Cora promised before the call disconnected.

Her eyes met Jamie's, and she could see the worry etched on his face as he held Becca against his chest; her head pulled back as she stared at him with wide eyes. Cora walked over to him, and he handed her the baby.

“Why don’t I make you and Jules some tea?” he offered, his eyes filled with compassion.

"Thanks." Cora gave him a grateful smile.

Cora turned toward Jules, who now had her face in her hands. “Jules,” she called softly as she sat beside her daughter while cradling Becca.

Jules turned her head to look at her mother. Cora felt her heart shatter at the despair in her daughter’s puffy, reddened eyes.

“I know it might not be what you want to hear now, but you can’t give up. You can’t shut down. You have to believe that Noah’s going to be okay, and you have to be strong for him and for your daughter.

“I...I don’t...I don’t know how to do that,” Jules responded as she stared ahead, unseeing.

Cora wanted to cry for her daughter. It was obvious that she was falling apart, but if she wasn’t strong for her at this moment, she was sure it would make it a whole lot worse. Becca made a noise alerting Cora that something was wrong. She looked down to see tears forming in her green eyes, so reflective of her father’s, as she began to fuss. It was like the little girl was aware that something was not right.

“There, there,” Cora comforted. She lifted her against her shoulder and used her hand to pat her back as she rocked her gently. “Everything’s going to be all right,” she spoke with assurance to her granddaughter as she looked over at her daughter, who had resumed her earlier position of burying her head in her hands.

“Here’s the tea,” Jamie announced as he entered the living room. He

placed the two cups of steaming liquid on the small coffee table before them. Cora gave him an appreciative smile, and he gave her a soft smile.

“Thank you for this, Jamie. I appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Jamie responded.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” he informed her. Cora nodded.

After a minute, he returned with Erin walking behind him.

“Hi, Mom. Surprise,” Erin smiled brightly.

“Erin,” Cora said in a disbelieving tone. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming? I thought you wouldn’t be here until the middle of October.”

“I thought it would be great to come early so I could help you with the finishing touches for your wedding,” Erin explained.

Cora, who had moved closer to her daughter, brought her in for a hug. “I’m happy you’re here,” she sighed.

When they separated, Erin’s eyes traveled to the couch. “Hey, sis.”

Jules looked up then, the evidence of her crying still on her face.

“Jules, what’s wrong?” Erin asked with concern as she moved toward the couch.

Instead of responding, Jules rose from the couch and launched herself at her sister. Heavy sobs left her mouth and caused her shoulders to shake as she buried her face against her sister’s neck.

Erin turned to look at her mother, panic clouding her blue eyes.

Chapter Nineteen

Nikki's head rested against the car window as the car drove along the highway. She had been quiet ever since Jonathan picked her up, lost in her own thoughts about what had happened at the Bistro the day before.

"Are you sure you're okay? You've been distant since I picked you up this evening," Jonathan asked, glancing over at her.

Nikki's head came up to stare into Jonathan's concerned green eyes. "I'm okay," she said, plastering on a smile. "Please keep your eyes on the road," she instructed a few seconds later.

Jonathan's head faced forward, and there was silence for a minute" before he spoke again. "You don't seem okay. Is it me? Did I do something wrong?"

Nikki shook her head. "No, it's not you. I'm just a little distracted, that's all."

"Distracted? By what?"

Nikki hesitated. "The fragility of life," she finally replied.

Jonathan's head swiveled in her direction for a brief second before snapping forward once more. He reached over and took her hand. "I'm here for you, Nikki. Whatever you need."

Nikki smiled, feeling a warmth spread through her chest from their connected hands. "Thanks, Jonathan. That means a lot."

Jonathan nodded but didn't push further. Half an hour later, they were driving into the town of Coupeville. The sun had already set, and the streets had come alive with the soft glow of streetlights and the occasional flicker of porch lights. The quaint buildings that lined the main street were aligned with delicate bunting and flower boxes, adding to the town's cozy charm.

Jonathan drove toward the center of town before parking in the designated parking lot of the movie theatre. Nikki turned to him with a raised brow. "I thought we were doing a drive-in movie."

"We were," he confirmed. "But, I received a notification that they moved it to the theatre as there was a high possibility of it raining," he further explained.

"Okay," Nikki replied.

As they walked toward the movie theater, Jonathan held Nikki's hand. Nikki felt the same signs of a blush creeping up her skin. She was happy for a while just walking hand-in-hand with him— it felt right. But the feeling didn't last as her thoughts flashed to Sam's parents standing in the Bistro. She felt Jonathan gently squeeze her hand and looked up to see him staring back at her with concern and question in his eyes. Instinctively she leaned into him, grateful for the light that emanated from him, bringing her out of her dark thoughts. If only it were a permanent fix. Jonathan's thumb rubbed circles on the back of her hand.

After getting popcorn, they made their way into the theatre. For the most part, she could focus on the movie, but occasionally, her mind would wander, and at those times, she would feel Jonathan's hand applying pressure as if he could sense her emotions and wanted to remind her that he was there for her.

When they left the theatre, Jonathan stopped and turned her to face him. "I am trying to be patient and not push you until you're ready to talk, but I would be lying if I said I'm not worried about you," he spoke solemnly.

Nikki cringed internally as she realized her mood was affecting their date.

"Tell me what I can do to make it better," Jonathan continued, his voice

full of sincerity.

“I’m sorry if I ruined our date. I just have so—” Her cell rang, interrupting what she was about to say.

“Answer it,” Jonathan encouraged her.

She pulled the phone from her purse and put it to her ear. “Hello?... Yes, this is her,” Nikki answered, furrowing her brows at the unfamiliar voice at the other end of the call. “Really?...Okay. Thank you.” She ended the call with confusion written all over her face.

“Everything okay?”

She looked up to see Jonathan staring at her in concern once more. “I just got a call for a modeling audition in Seattle,” she informed him.

“What? That’s great,” Jonathan replied with excitement, but noting Nikki’s unenthusiastic demeanor, he tapered it to ask, “Why aren’t you jumping for joy?”

“The audition is tomorrow,” she answered.

“And?” Jonathan asked, not understanding the problem.

“It’s too sudden,” Nikki explained, wringing her hands. “Plus, I don’t think it’s a good idea, not after what...” Her mouth clamped together after realizing she had said too much.

“Nikki, I don’t know what happened to make you stop modeling, but this is a chance to get back to doing something that you obviously love,” Jonathan encouraged.

“I don’t know,” Nikki hesitated.

“Tell you what, why don’t I take the day off work tomorrow and drive you there? You don’t have to decide now if you’ll do it. If when we get there, you don’t want to, I’ll take you home,” he offered.

An easy smile came to Nikki’s lips then. “You would do that for me?”

Jonathan gave her a tender smile. “Of course.”

“What about burning buildings and cats stuck in trees?”

Jonathan laughed, the sound coming from deep within his chest and

causing his body to shake. She liked his laugh. To her, it was a beacon of hope, a carefree melody that lifted her spirit, and she couldn't help but smile in response to the infectious delight that spilled from his lips.

"I'm sure the guys can manage for a few hours without me," he expressed when he'd calmed down. "So, what do you say? Do you want me as an escort to Seattle?" he asked, looking hopefully at her.

"Yes. I would like that," Nikki smiled, throwing caution to the wind.

"Great," he replied with a satisfied grin.

* * *

The next morning, she met Jonathan at the door. He had been talking to her mother, but when he saw her, his face broke out in a wide grin.

"Hi," she greeted shyly, noticing her mother's curious eyes darting from her to Jonathan.

"Hi," Jonathan greeted back.

There was a brief pause before Nikki turned to her mother. "Mom, I'll be back later."

"Okay," Kirsten replied. "Be careful."

Nikki gave her a tight smile before heading through the door.

"It was lovely seeing you again, Mrs. Hamilton," she heard Jonathan say as she walked past him.

"Likewise, Jonathan. I do hope you'll be able to join us for dinner one evening."

She didn't hear what his reply to her mother was because she had already stepped off the porch and was making her way toward Jonathan's Jeep.

"I like your mom. She's really nice," Jonathan spoke when they were settled in the car.

"Yeah. She's a real Martha Stewart," Nikki returned, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Jonathan's head swiveled in her direction before returning to the windshield as he backed out of the driveway. Sensing a question coming, she added in a lighter tone, "Mom's great." Jonathan didn't comment but made his way toward the highway.

The minute the car entered the bustling streets of Seattle, Nikki's heart beat rapidly against her ribcage as her throat clogged with fear. She felt Jonathan's hand rest on hers, and she looked over at him.

"You've got this," he spoke convincingly, not taking his eyes off the road.

"Thanks. I needed that," she confessed with a small smile.

Nikki took a deep breath and tried to compose herself as they approached the building where the audition was being held. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest and her palms getting clammy. "I don't know if I can do this," she voiced barely above a whisper.

"Listen to me," Jonathan spoke firmly, getting her attention. Nikki looked up into his determined green eyes. "You've got this," he repeated. He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Just be confident and show them what you can do."

Nikki nodded and smiled before heading entering the audition room. But as soon as she walked in, it felt like her fears were becoming a reality. She could feel eyes on her, and it felt like they could see every flaw in her body, including the scar on her stomach.

She walked up to the table where a group of judges sat. "Hi, I'm Nikki. I was called to come in for an audition," she said, trying to sound confident.

"Can you walk for us?" one of the judges asked.

Nikki nodded and started to walk. It was something that came naturally to her, strutting like she was on the runway.

"Good. You can go around back and get changed," the judge approved when she was done. He passed her a number card which she gratefully accepted. Her heart thumped heavily against her chest when she realized that

the choice of clothing was a bikini. Still, she had come this far. She quickly changed and walked out into the general populous of models.

“What’s up with her scar? Did she get attacked by a wild animal or something?” she heard one of the models ask loud enough for her to hear. The other models snickered, and Nikki’s heart sank.

She tried to keep her composure and walked past them, but more comments followed. "Looks like she should stick to being a car crash test dummy, not a model," another model sneered. Nikki's hands trembled as she shakily reached for the doorknob of the changing room. She quickly changed into her clothes and exited the room with her eyes cast down.

When she stepped back outside, tears had already welled up in her eyes.

"What's wrong, babe?" Jonathan came up to ask in concern.

Nikki shook her head, "It's nothing, just some stupid comments from the other models. Can we go?"

Johnathan furrowed his brow, "What comments? What did they say?"

Nikki looked away, not wanting to relive the humiliation. "It doesn't matter. I'm just tired. I want to go home."

Johnathan wrapped his arms around her, "Hey, I don't care what those models said. You are beautiful. I just wish you would see that."

But Nikki couldn't shake the feeling of defeat. She remembered the last time she had been treated this way, only a month ago at the other audition. It was all too much, and she couldn't bear to talk about it anymore. She pulled away from Johnathan's embrace and walked toward the Jeep without another word. She remained silent on the ride home, her thoughts a jumbled mess. Jonathan didn't press her to talk.

When they made it to her house, Nikki turned to him, her eyes cold and distant. "I can't do this anymore," she said, her voice shaking.

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I mean us,” she replied, her voice rising. “It was fun while it lasted, but it isn't going anywhere. I can't be with you.” She opened the door and

stepped out. Jonathan stepped out and came to stand before her.

“Nikki, why are you doing this?” he asked, stunned.

Nikki's eyes filled with tears again, and she lifted her shirt, revealing the scar running down her stomach. "Because of this," she said, her voice trembling. "It's my fault my best friend is dead. I was careless, and she paid the price."

Jonathan's eyes widened in surprise, and he took a step back. "Nikki, I'm sorry to hear about your friend, but I don't think it was your fault," he said, trying to reason with her.

But Nikki shook her head, her eyes blazing with anger. "Don't you see? I'm ugly, scarred, and cynical. Who would want to be with me?" she said, her voice rising with each word.

Jonathan took a step toward her, his eyes softening. "I do," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I want to be with you, Nikki. I'm not going anywhere."

But Nikki was already shutting him out. She walked away from him and made her way up the porch steps before opening the door and stepping inside, but Jonathan was there before she could close it.

“Nikki, please. Let's talk about this,” he pleaded.

Nikki shook her head. "Goodbye, Jonathan," she said, her voice barely above a whisper before closing the door in his devastated face.

Chapter Twenty

“Hi, Kenneth. How are you?... And Evelyn. Okay. I see.” Cora sighed dejectedly as she listened to Noah’s father explaining that there had been no new information since they had last talked two days before. It had been like that for the past week since his disappearance and it was taking a toll on Jules. Cora was very worried for her daughter, who barely ate, hardly slept, and cried constantly.

“Okay, Kenneth, just keep us posted if there is any new development,” she implored. “Bye.” She released another heavy breath before turning to see her daughter’s eyes filled with dread staring up at her.

"I just can't believe he's gone," she whispered to Cora as the tears started to stream down her face.

Cora walked over to the couch and sat beside her daughter, then put a comforting arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

"I know, Jules and I am sorry that you have to be experiencing this pain so young. I wish there was a way I could take it away, but for now, just lean on me, your sister, and the rest of the family. We’re all here for you," she comforted.

"I just feel so helpless," Jules said. "I wish there was something I could do to find him."

“I know, sweetheart,” Cora replied, placing a kiss against her hair. “For

the time being, all we can do is pray and hope for the best. And no matter what happens, remember that we're always here for you."

Jules' head moved back and forth slowly in response.

"Let me make you a cup of chamomile tea. It's good for your nerves," Cora offered.

"Thanks, Mom," Jules accepted as they separated. Cora gave her an empathetic smile before rising to her feet and heading to the kitchen.

When she made it back to the living room with the cup of tea, Jules was curled up on the couch with what looked like a shirt belonging to Noah against her cheek as she slept. Placing the tea on the coffee table, Cora lifted the throw on the armchair and covered her daughter before placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. When she straightened, she glimpsed movement in the corner of her eye and turned to see Jamie standing in the doorway.

"How is she?" he asked when Cora drew close.

"She's barely coping. I am trying to be there for her, but it feels like I'm not doing enough," she replied, her shoulders deflating.

"That's not true," Jamie refuted, lifting her chin so that she was staring into his eyes. "You are an amazing mother, and you are strong. Jules will be okay, eventually," he encouraged. Cora gave him a grateful smile.

Jamie held out his hand for her to take, and Cora reached down to weave her fingers with his. He pulled her toward the kitchen and pulled back the sliding door that opened to the wraparound porch. After settling on the porch swing that overlooked the bay, he pulled her into his arms, allowing her to settle against his chest. As they sat in comfortable silence, Cora's eyes were drawn to the breathtaking view before her. It felt like she hadn't done so in a long time. The vast expanse of the bay stretched out as far as the eye could see, glimmering under the warm rays of the afternoon sun. The water was a deep shade of blue green, reflecting the clear sky above and the evergreens that lined the property and shoreline.

In the distance, a few boats bobbed gently on the waves, their white sails

billowing in the gentle breeze. Birds soared overhead, their cries mingling with the sound of the water lapping against the rocks below.

As she took in the scene, she felt a sense of peace wash over me. It was as if time had slowed down, and all that mattered at that moment was the beauty before her and the warmth and strength of the body behind her.

“Thank you for this,” she breathed out appreciatively as the back of her head rested against his chest.

“Anytime,” Jamie whispered against her ear, causing a shiver to run spine. “Sometimes all it takes is a brief moment to be at rest and take in your surroundings to regain your balance,” he explained.

Cora squeezed his forearm that was wrapped around her waist in gratitude. She gazed up at him, her eyes reflective of the emotions she was feeling. “I love you,” she breathed out.

“I love you too,” Jamie returned, his voice just as gentle and heartfelt.

“Mom? Are you out here?”

“Out here!” Cora straightened up as her daughter rounded the corner. “Hi, sweetie,” she greeted when Erin rounded the corner with Becca in her arms.

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Jamie,” Erin greeted them both. “I just saw Marg and Ben by the inn with their newborn baby. She’s such a cutie,” she launched into conversation immediately.

“Oh, really?” Cora asked, surprised. “But Marg’s officially on maternity leave. Why is she by the inn?”

Erin shrugged, her expression puzzled. “She said she only came to pick up a few files that she hadn’t gotten around to organizing,” Erin informed her mother.

Cora’s brows furrowed, concern etched on her face. “But she shouldn’t be doing that. She needs the time to bond with her daughter,” Cora sighed.

“You can tell her when she gets here in a little while. She said she wanted to stop by and see how you and Jules were doing,” Erin explained.

“Okay,” Cora nodded.

“How is she?” Erin asked, her voice dropping a few decibels.

“She’s sleeping, but nothing has changed,” Cora explained.

Erin nodded before releasing a heavy sigh. “God, I wish there was something I could do.”

“You are doing something, sweetie. You’ve been by her side, and you’ve helped out with Becca,” Cora pointed out. “You’re a good sister.”

Erin’s lips turned up in a small smile, but her eyes remained pained. Becca reached up to grasp a few strands of her aunt’s hair in her hand and tugged. “Ow! Becca, no. Don’t do that,” she winced, gently pulling her hair out of the baby’s grasp. Becca looked up at her innocently before her lips spread in a smile before she started to babble.

“Seems like someone didn’t want to be left out of the conversation,” Jamie chuckled. The others joined in.

Erin moved to take a seat in one of the cushioned bamboo chairs, sitting Becca up in her lap. “I spoke to Lily today,” she spoke while her eyes remained on the baby.

“Oh,” Cora gave out, subtly glancing up at Jamie before returning her attention to her daughter.

“Yeah. We’re going with Aunt Kerry to finalize the wedding menu with the caterers, plus she’s taking us over to Camano Island to their Fall Festival.”

“That’s lovely, sweetie,” Cora smiled. “It seems like you and Lily are getting along well.”

“Yeah. Lily’s really nice. I like her a lot. We also have a lot in common. She likes the arts, and she’s into fashion design. It feels like we’ve known each other for a long time,” Erin smiled.

“Lily speaks highly of you as well, Erin. I’m happy you two are getting so close. I think it will make the family transition a whole lot easier,” Jamie chimed in.

“Oh. I thought we were already family,” Erin grinned.

Cora's heart swelled with pride at her daughter's reply.

"You're right. We are," Jamie confirmed with a smile of his own.

"Do you think Jules would be up to go to the Festival?" Erin turned to ask her mother.

"I don't know. It would be a good distraction for her, though," Cora replied.

"I'll get it," Erin said, rising to her feet at the sound of the doorbell. Handing Becca to Cora, she headed inside.

"Hi, sweetheart," Cora beamed at her granddaughter, interacting with her as a welcome distraction from the angst she felt thinking about how much her daughter was hurting. Becca gurgled in contentment, free from the turmoil of missing her father because of her innocence. Becca reached her arm up, attempting to catch a lock of Cora's hair, but she pulled back and chuckled.

"Hi, there."

"Marg, Ben, it's so good to see you," Cora rose from the swing to hug them both.

"Meet Joy," Marg said, moving the receiver so that Cora could see the baby's face.

"Oh, she is just precious," Cora gushed as she stared at the tiny face of the sleeping infant. Becca tried to launch herself out of Cora's hand in an attempt to touch the baby. "Oh no, you don't." Cora placed her on her side, away from the baby. She held the squirming toddler firmly.

"Don't worry, Becca, pretty soon you both will be playmates and probably inseparable," Marg smiled at the toddler.

"Jamie said there still isn't any news about Noah." Ben, who had been talking with Jamie, walked toward them.

"That's right," Cora confirmed, pursing her lips.

"I'm really sorry, Cora. I can't imagine what Jules must be going through," Marg empathized.

Cora gave her a grateful smile. "I wish the army would be more

forthcoming with what is actually happening.” She looked over at Jamie and raised a brow at the look on his face. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

"I was thinking that maybe I should go to the capital to see if I can get any information. I have a friend there. He is a Brigadier General," Jamie said. "Maybe he'll find something out."

“You’re friends with a Brigadier General?” Cora’s eyes widened in shock.

“Well, we haven’t been in contact for a few years,” Jamie answered, scratching his neck. “But if I go, I would count on the friendship we once had to get him to help.”

“You should go,” Cora encouraged.

"I need to go with him," Jules’ voice carried from the sliding door, firm and determined.

Everyone turned to her, surprised at her appearance.

"Jules, are you sure?" Cora asked, concern etched on her face. "Jamie might not get the results we are hoping for.”

"I don't care," Jules said, her eyes flashing. "I need to be there. I need to know... something."

Jamie nodded in agreement. "She's right, Cora. And maybe we can find something out that will help bring Noah home."

Cora sighed. "Okay, I understand. Just promise me you'll protect her," she implored.

"I will," Jamie promised her.

“Can we go today?” Jules asked, her voice filled with urgency.

“Yes.”

“Good, I’ll go get ready.”

Cora watched her daughter head inside. It felt like a hand was squeezing her heart. Erin took Becca from Cora and went into the house after her sister.

“She’ll be fine,” Jamie reiterated, standing behind her. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

“We’re gonna get going,” Marg alerted them.

“It was great seeing you guys.” Cora mustered a smile.

Shortly after Ben and Marg left, Jules came out dressed and impatient to leave.

“Call me as soon as you guys get there,” Cora instructed Jamie, placing a kiss against his lips.

“I will,” he smiled.

She turned to Jules then. “My sweet baby girl,” she said, placing a gentle hand against her daughter’s cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom,” Jules returned.

Cora walked with them to Jamie’s truck and watched as they got in and pulled away. Her hand went up into a wave as she watched the vehicle disappear.

Chapter Twenty-One

Nikki lay in bed with the soft comforter pulled tightly around her. She could hear the sound of her parents' footsteps as they approached her room, but she didn't bother to move. She knew what was coming. Her father was going to be angry again, and her mother was going to try to talk to her. But Nikki didn't want to talk to anyone, especially not them.

As the door opened, Nikki could see the silhouette of her parents in the dim light. Her mother, Kirsten came closer, her face etched with concern. "Nikki, honey, we need to talk," she said softly.

Nikki didn't respond. She kept the comforter pulled tightly around her head, hoping they would just leave her alone.

But her father, Brian, was less sympathetic. "What the hell is going on with you, Nikki? You quit your job without even giving notice. You can't just sit around here all day, expecting us to support you forever."

Nikki felt a pang of guilt. She knew she should have told them about quitting her job, but she couldn't bear the thought of facing Johnathan again. She stayed quiet, hoping they would just go away.

But her father wasn't finished. "I mean it, Nikki. If you're not going to contribute to this household, then you need to find somewhere else to live."

Nikki felt a lump forming in her throat. She didn't want to leave, but she

also didn't want to talk about what was really bothering her. She felt trapped and alone.

Kirsten came closer to her daughter's bed, her voice soft and soothing. "Nikki, please talk to me. I want to help you, but I don't know how if you don't tell me what's going on."

Nikki stayed silent, not wanting to burden her mother with her problems. She heard the sound of her father storming out of the room, his anger palpable.

Kirsten lingered for a moment longer, her eyes filled with concern. "I love you, Nikki. Please let me know how I can help you."

But Nikki didn't respond. She felt numb and disconnected from everything around her. She knew she needed to face her problems eventually, but for now, she just wanted to stay hidden under the safety of her comforter.

Nikki lay in bed, her room cloaked in darkness. She had been in this state of mind for days, unable to find the motivation to do anything. She heard a knock on the door and then her cousin Diane's voice calling out her name.

"Nikki, what's going on? Why haven't you been answering my calls?" Diane asked, concerned.

Nikki didn't reply. She just lay there, buried under the covers.

Diane walked over to the window and pulled back the curtains, letting in a flood of sunlight. "Come on, Nikki. Get up. You can't stay in bed all day."

Nikki groaned, but Diane wouldn't let up. She pulled the covers off Nikki and helped her out of bed.

"What's wrong with you, Nikki? You can't give up every time things get tough. Life is hard, but you can't let it beat you down," Diane chided.

"I just don't know what to do anymore," Nikki replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

"That's not true. You do know what to do. You just need to stop self-sabotaging. You're a beautiful, intelligent woman who deserves nothing but happiness. Don't let anyone or anything make you feel otherwise," Diane

said, her voice filled with conviction.

Nikki was silent, taking in her cousin's words. After a moment, she nodded, then got up and headed to the bathroom to take a shower.

As the warm water cascaded over her body, Nikki felt the weight of her depression lift. She started to feel better, lighter. Maybe Diane was right. Maybe she did deserve to be happy. And maybe, just maybe, she could find a way to make that happen.

Nikki let out a deep sigh as she stepped out of the shower, feeling the hot water wash away the grime and anxiety she had been carrying around for days. She wrapped a fluffy towel around her slender frame and made her way back to the bedroom. As she rummaged through her suitcase, her cousin Diane walked in, her face beaming with a sly grin.

"Hey, Nikki. Guess who's downstairs waiting for you?" Diane said, her voice laced with amusement.

Nikki's heart skipped a beat. She knew exactly who it was. Jonathan. The man she had broken up with a week ago, not because she didn't care for him, but because she was scared. Scared of the intensity of her feelings for him, scared of getting hurt, scared of losing someone else she loved.

Diane noticed the sudden change in Nikki's demeanor and put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Nikki. You can do this," she said reassuringly.

Taking a deep breath, Nikki made her way downstairs, her heart pounding in her chest. As she turned the corner, she saw him. Jonathan. He was sitting on the couch, his eyes fixed on the TV, but as soon as he heard her footsteps, he turned to look at her.

"Hey," he said softly, a small smile playing on his lips.

Nikki's heart melted at the sight of him. He was wearing a simple T-shirt and jeans, but he looked so good in them. "Hey," she replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

Jonathan stood up and walked over to her, his eyes taking in every inch of her body. "You look beautiful," he said, his voice full of sincerity. "But then

again, you always do."

Nikki blushed at the compliment. "Thank you," she said shyly.

"But you know what I love most about you?" Jonathan asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

"What?" Nikki asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Your mind and your spirit," he said, taking her hand in his. "You keep me on my toes, Nikki. You challenge me in ways no one else ever has."

Nikki felt her heart swell with emotion. Jonathan always knew how to say the right thing. She took a step closer to him and looked up into his deep brown eyes. "Jonathan, there's something I need to tell you," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Anything, Nikki. You can tell me anything," Jonathan replied, his voice full of concern.

Nikki took a deep breath and began to tell him about the accident that killed her best friend, Samantha. She told him about how they were on their way to a modeling audition three years ago, that they were laughing and joking, and then how everything changed in an instant. She told him about the moose in the road, that Samantha had turned her head briefly to say something, and that by the time she turned back, it was too late. Nikki felt tears welling up in her eyes as she relived the memory.

Jonathan listened to her with rapt attention, his eyes never leaving hers. When she finished, he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. "I'm so sorry, Nikki," he said, his voice full of compassion. "I can't even begin to imagine what you've been through."

Nikki buried her face in his chest.

"Thank you, Jonathan," Nikki whispered. "It's been a long road, but I'm trying to move forward."

Jonathan pulled back slightly to look at her, his hand cupping her cheek. "You're so strong, Nikki. I admire that about you."

Nikki smiled weakly, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. "I don't

feel strong, Jonathan. Some days, it takes everything in me just to get out of bed."

"I understand," Jonathan said, his thumb tracing circles on her cheek. "But you're still here, and you're still fighting. That's the definition of strength."

Nikki felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. "Thank you for saying that."

"Of course," Jonathan said, pulling her closer again. "I'll always be here for you, Nikki. No matter what."

Nikki leaned into him, feeling safe and protected in his embrace. "I know you will," she said softly. "And I'm grateful for that."

They stayed like that for a while, wrapped up in each other's arms. Nikki felt a sense of peace wash over her, knowing that she had someone like Jonathan in her corner. It wasn't going to be easy, but with him by her side, she felt like she could face anything.

Nikki's heart was pounding as she made her way down the hallway to her parent's room. She knew that she had a lot to make up for and was determined to do it. She took a deep breath and knocked softly on the door.

"Come in," her father's voice called out.

Nikki pushed the door open and stepped inside, feeling a lump form in her throat as she looked at her parents. They were sitting on their bed, her mother Kirsten reading a book and her father Brian flipping through channels on the TV.

"Hey, Mom and Dad," Nikki said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her parents looked up, surprise and concern etched on their faces. Nikki could feel their eyes on her, and suddenly she felt like a small child again.

"Is everything okay, Nikki?" Kirsten asked, setting her book aside and reaching out to take Nikki's hand.

Nikki swallowed hard, feeling tears pricking at the corners of her eyes.

"No, everything is not okay," she said, her voice breaking.

"I know I've been acting like a spoiled brat and taking advantage of your kindness. I'm sorry for the way I've been acting, and I promise to do better. Please don't put me out. I'll try to get another job."

Brian put down the remote and turned to face Nikki. "We've been worried sick about you, Nikki. It feels like we lost our daughter three years ago in that crash. We don't want to lose you again."

Nikki felt her heartbreak at her father's words. She had no idea how much her behavior had affected her parents.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I should have opened up to you. I missed you, too," Nikki said, her voice shaking with emotion.

Brian looked at her for a moment before standing up and pulling her into a tight embrace. Nikki buried her face in his chest, feeling the tears fall down her cheeks.

"I missed you too, Nikki. I'm so glad you're here," Brian said, his voice thick with emotion.

Kirsten joined in the embrace, wrapping her arms around both Nikki and Brian. Nikki could feel her mother's tears on her cheek, and she knew that they were tears of relief and hope.

"We've missed you so much, Nikki. We want to rebuild our relationship with you if you'll let us," Kirsten said, her voice soft and gentle.

Nikki pulled back from the embrace and looked at her parents, feeling a sense of hope for the first time in a long while.

"I would like that, Mom," Nikki said, a small smile forming on her lips.

As she looked at her parents, Nikki felt a weight lift off her shoulders. She knew that they had a long way to go to rebuild their relationship, but she was ready to try. For the first time in a long while, Nikki felt like she had a family again.

Nikki's father, Brian, leaned back in his chair, his eyes watching her carefully. "So, Nikki, tell me about this young man you've been dating.

Jonathan, isn't it?"

Nikki's face lit up at the mention of Jonathan's name. "Yes, Dad. He's been wonderful. A true tower of strength to me."

Brian nodded thoughtfully, his gaze still fixed on Nikki. "That's good to hear. It's been a while since I've seen you this happy."

Nikki smiled, grateful for her father's support. "Jonathan just has a way of making everything better. He's so kind and thoughtful, and he really listens to me."

Brian's expression softened at his daughter's words. "I'm glad to hear that, Nikki. I'd like to meet him sometime."

Nikki's heart skipped a beat at the mention of her father meeting Jonathan. She knew how protective her father could be, and she didn't want anything to ruin her relationship with Jonathan. "Sure, Dad. I'll ask him if he's free this weekend."

Brian stood up, his eyes sparkling with determination. "Actually, I think I'd like to have a heart-to-heart talk with Jonathan. Get to know him a little better."

Nikki's heart sank at the thought of her father grilling Jonathan with questions. She knew how intimidating her father could be, and she didn't want Jonathan to feel uncomfortable. "Dad, please go easy on him. He's really nervous about meeting you."

Kirsten, Nikki's mother, let out a chuckle. "Oh, Brian. You're not going to scare the poor boy off, are you?"

Brian grinned mischievously. "No promises, dear. But don't worry, Nikki. I'll be gentle."

Nikki rolled her eyes, relieved that her father was at least willing to meet Jonathan. She knew that Jonathan was the one for her, and she was willing to do whatever it took to make sure her father approved of him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nikki sat across from Dr. Grimes, fidgeting with her hands as she spoke. "Things with Jonathan have been really good," she said, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Dr. Grimes nodded, a small smile of his own appearing on his face. "I'm glad to hear that, Nikki. You deserve happiness."

Nikki's smile faded slightly, and she looked down at her hands. "I still miss Samantha," she said softly. "But for the first time, I feel like I'm finding a way to cope and get better."

Dr. Grimes reached across the desk and placed a reassuring hand on Nikki's arm. "That's a huge step, Nikki. I'm proud of you for opening your heart to the possibility of love and hope."

Nikki's eyes met his, and she felt a swell of gratitude in her chest. "Thank you, Dr. Grimes," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

Dr. Grimes leaned back in his chair, his eyes studying Nikki thoughtfully. "And what about your relationship with your parents?" he asked.

Nikki's expression turned sheepish. "I apologized to them for the way I'd been treating them," she admitted. "And we're on good terms now. We're rebuilding our relationship."

Dr. Grimes nodded, a proud smile on his face. "I'm happy to hear that, Nikki. It takes a lot of courage to admit when we're wrong and make amends.

You're making great progress."

Nikki felt a sense of warmth spread through her as she absorbed Dr. Grimes' words. She was grateful for his support and guidance and for Jonathan's love and patience. It wasn't easy, but she was finally finding a way forward.

Nikki felt her heart flutter as she glanced at Jonathan, her dear boyfriend, who was walking beside her. They were strolling downtown Oak Harbor, the city buzzing with activity. The sun was shining bright, casting a warm glow on the busy streets. Nikki couldn't help but smile as she thought about how lucky she was to have Jonathan by her side.

As they walked, Jonathan suddenly turned to her and said, "So, how's the job hunt going?"

Nikki sighed, "It's been tough. I've applied to so many places, but no luck yet."

Jonathan nodded understandingly, "Well, don't give up. You'll find something soon. And hey, maybe we can find some leads together today."

Nikki's heart swelled with gratitude. Jonathan was always so supportive of her dreams. "Thanks, Jonathan. I really appreciate it."

As they continued their walk, Nikki couldn't help but admire the way Jonathan held himself with confidence and ease. His black hair was swept back, and his jawline was sharp. He wore a simple white t-shirt paired with jeans but somehow managed to look effortlessly stylish.

"You know," Jonathan said suddenly, breaking Nikki out of her thoughts. "I was thinking maybe we could grab some lunch after we finish job hunting. There's this new sushi place that just opened up, and I heard it's amazing."

Nikki's eyes lit up. "I love sushi! That sounds perfect."

Jonathan grinned, "Great, it's a date then."

They continued their walk down the busy streets, passing by shops and restaurants. Nikki felt a sense of excitement building within her. She was excited about the job hunt and the prospect of finding something new and

exciting. But most of all, she was excited about spending time with Jonathan, the person who had become so dear to her heart.

Nikki sat at her desk, scrolling through her emails absentmindedly. Her mind was elsewhere, preoccupied with thoughts of her new boyfriend, Johnathan. They had only been dating for a few months, but she already felt a strong connection with him. He was kind, supportive, and had a great sense of humor. Nikki couldn't help but smile every time she thought about him.

Suddenly, an email caught her eye. It was from a major fashion modeling agency, one that she had sent her portfolio to months ago. Nikki's heart raced as she read the email. The agency was interested in her and wanted her to come to New York to be a part of their new campaign, which was focused on diversity and inclusivity.

Nikki couldn't believe it. She had always dreamed of being a model, but she never thought it would actually happen. She had sent her portfolio to countless agencies over the years but had never received a response until now.

As she read through the email again, Nikki's excitement was tempered by a sense of skepticism. She had only been dating Johnathan for a few months, and the idea of leaving him behind to go to New York was daunting. She didn't want to jeopardize their relationship, but at the same time, she couldn't pass up this opportunity.

With a deep breath, Nikki picked up her phone and dialed Johnathan's number. He answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Nikki! What's up?" he said cheerfully.

Nikki took a moment to compose herself before speaking. "I just got an email from a modeling agency," she said, her voice shaking slightly. "They want me to come to New York for a campaign they're doing. It's a big opportunity, but I don't know if I should go."

Johnathan was silent for a moment before responding. "Wow, that's amazing, Nikki," he said. "I'm so happy for you. But I understand why you're

hesitant. It's a big decision to make."

Nikki let out a sigh of relief. She was grateful for Johnathan's understanding. "Yeah, I just don't want to mess things up between us," she said.

Johnathan chuckled. "You won't mess anything up, Nikki. I'll still be here when you get back," he said reassuringly.

Nikki smiled at his words. "Thank you, Johnathan. That means a lot to me," she said.

As she hung up the phone, Nikki's mind raced with thoughts of what her future could hold. She knew that going to New York would be a huge step forward in her career, but she also knew that it would be a major adjustment. She had never been to New York before, and the thought of living there was both thrilling and terrifying.

Nikki walked into her cousin Diane's bistro, admiring the progress she had made with the renovations. The space was almost complete, and Nikki could tell that Diane had put in a lot of hard work. "Wow, Diane, this place looks amazing," Nikki said, looking around in awe.

Diane beamed with pride, "Thanks, Nikki! I've been working tirelessly to get this place ready for opening day."

Nikki nodded, "I can tell. It looks like you've put your heart and soul into this place."

Diane chuckled, "You know me too well. Listen, I actually need your help with something. I've already asked our other cousins, but I was hoping you could help me paint the space. It's the last thing I need to finish before we can open."

Nikki smiled, "Of course, I'll help you paint. But I also have some news to tell you."

Diane put down her paintbrush, "What is it?"

"I received an offer to model in New York for a major campaign," Nikki said, her voice filled with excitement.

Diane's eyes widened in excitement, "That's amazing, Nikki! Congratulations."

Nikki hesitated, "Thanks, Diane. But I'm also afraid of what this will mean for Jonathan and me. Our relationship is still new, and I don't want to mess it up by being away for so long."

Diane put a reassuring hand on Nikki's shoulder, "Nikki if Jonathan is the right one for you, he'll understand and support you. You deserve this opportunity, and you can't let fear hold you back."

Nikki nodded, "You're right. I'm just scared that my scar will be ridiculed again, and I won't be good enough."

Diane shook her head, "Nikki, you are beautiful, scars and all. You've come so far in your progress, and this opportunity could be the next step in your journey. Don't let fear hold you back."

Nikki took a deep breath, "Okay, I'll do it. I'll take the opportunity and see where it takes me."

Diane grinned, "That's the spirit! Now, let's get to painting!"

Nikki's heart was pounding as she approached her parents. She took a deep breath and sat them down on the couch. She could feel her palms sweating as she prepared to tell them her news.

"Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you," she said, her voice shaking slightly.

Her mother, Kirsten, looked up from her book, her eyes curious. Nikki's father, Brian, peered over his newspaper, an eyebrow raised in anticipation.

"I've been offered a modeling contract in New York," Nikki said, her words coming out in a rush.

There was a moment of stunned silence as her parents processed the news. Nikki could feel their eyes on her, and she squirmed under their scrutiny. She knew that her parents had never fully supported her modeling aspirations, despite her success in the industry.

Kirsten was the first to speak. "That's amazing, Nikki! Congratulations!"

she exclaimed, a smile spreading across her face.

Nikki felt a wave of relief wash over her. She turned to her mother and hugged her tightly.

"Thank you, Mom," she said, her voice muffled by Kirsten's shoulder.

Brian was still silent, and Nikki could sense his apprehension. She pulled away from her mother and looked at him, waiting for his reaction.

After a few tense moments, Brian spoke up. "You deserve your happiness, Nikki," he said, his tone serious. "If modeling makes you happy, then I will support you no matter what."

Nikki felt a lump form in her throat as she looked at her father. His words meant more to her than she could express. She knew that he had never been fully on board with her modeling career, but his support now meant everything to her.

"Thank you, Dad," she said, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes.

The room was filled with a sense of relief and joy as Nikki's parents hugged her, congratulating her on her achievement. Nikki knew that there would be challenges ahead, but with her family's support, she felt ready to take on anything.

Nikki eagerly set out on the North Beach Trail at Deception Pass, her hiking boots crunching on the gravel path. The trail was flanked by towering evergreen trees, their branches swaying gently in the cool breeze. She could hear the distant roar of the ocean and the calls of seagulls overhead.

As she walked, her thoughts kept drifting back to the modeling contract in New York. She knew it was an opportunity of a lifetime, but the idea of leaving everything she knew behind was daunting. She wondered if she was ready for such a big change.

Lost in thought, she almost didn't notice the hiker coming toward her until they were nearly face to face. He was tall and lean with a bushy beard and piercing blue eyes.

"Beautiful day for a hike, isn't it?" he said, smiling warmly.

Nikki smiled back, "Sure is. I'm Nikki, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Nikki. I'm Jake. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," she said, feeling a sense of relief at the prospect of some company.

They walked in silence for a while, the sound of their footsteps and the rustling of leaves the only sound. Nikki's mind was still on the modeling contract, but she couldn't help but notice the way the sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the forest floor with golden light.

"So, what brings you out here?" Jake asked, breaking the silence.

Nikki hesitated for a moment before answering, "I'm trying to clear my head. I have a big decision to make, and I just can't seem to make up my mind."

Jake nodded knowingly, "I know how that goes. Mind if I ask what the decision is?"

"It's about a modeling contract in New York. It's a huge opportunity, but it would mean leaving everything I know behind."

Jake smiled sympathetically, "That's a tough one. But sometimes, the biggest risks reap the biggest rewards."

Nikki thought about that for a moment, letting the words sink in. "You're right. I think I just needed to hear that from someone else."

They walked on, the conversation flowing easily between them. Nikki felt a sense of calm wash over her as if the forest itself was offering her guidance.

As they neared the end of the trail, Jake turned to her and said, "Whatever you decide, just remember that the world is full of possibilities. Sometimes all it takes is a leap of faith."

Nikki smiled, feeling grateful for the chance encounter with this wise stranger. She knew the decision wouldn't be easy, but for the first time in a long time, she felt hopeful about the future.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Nikki stepped out of the taxi and looked up at the towering skyscrapers that loomed over her. She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of hot dogs and roasted peanuts that wafted through the air. It had been a week since she left Oak Harbor, and she was already falling in love with New York City. The hustle and bustle of the city was invigorating, and she loved the diversity that she had heard so much about.

As she walked into the modeling agency, she was greeted with smiles and compliments from the agents. They loved her look and were eager to get her booked for jobs. However, not everyone was so welcoming. Some of the other models gave her the side-eye and whispered behind her back. Nikki knew why. It was the scar on her stomach, a reminder of the accident that had nearly taken her life.

She tried to ignore the stares and focus on her work, but it was hard not to feel self-conscious. One day, as she was getting ready for a shoot, one of the other models approached her.

"Hey, I heard you got that scar from a botched tummy tuck," the model said, a smirk on her face.

Nikki bristled. "No, actually, I got it from a car accident."

The model rolled her eyes. "Sure, whatever you say. I just think it's kind of gross, you know? Like, why would anyone want to book a model with a

scar like that?"

Nikki felt her face flush with anger. "Maybe because it shows that I'm tough and resilient. Maybe because it makes me stand out from all you cookie-cutter models."

The other model sneered. "Whatever, it's your funeral. But don't be surprised if you don't get booked for anything with that thing on your stomach."

Nikki gritted her teeth and turned away, not wanting to give the other model the satisfaction of seeing her upset. But the comment stung, and she couldn't help but wonder if the scar would hold her back in the competitive world of modeling.

"Listen to me. Don't listen to what those girls are saying. They're jealous and realize that you're a formidable opponent; otherwise, they wouldn't have gone out of their way to make you feel so unwelcome," Max, her agent, encouraged. After rubbing the shimmery body butter over her body and making sure she moisturized her scar, Nikki stepped back to look at herself.

"I know, but their words still hurt," Nikki sighed. "I have come a long way from the girl who runs at the first nasty comment, but I have come to develop a thick skin against their words. It's just that I am alone out here, and it would have made it easier to deal with these mean girls' personas if my family was here," she explained.

"Listen to me," Max spoke, turning her to face him. His grey eyes bore into her with determination. "When you get on that catwalk, nothing else matters but what is ahead of you. You were born to do this, regardless of who is in your corner. Own it."

Nikki nodded. "Thanks, Max," she smiled, grateful.

"Go kick some butts," he replied, walking away from her.

Nikki stepped onto the runway, feeling the heat of the lights on her skin and the rush of adrenaline that always came with a show. She was wearing a daring bikini that showed off the scar on her stomach, a mark that some of

the other models had tried to use against her. But as she walked with confidence, she knew that the only thing that mattered was her fierce and unique beauty.

The flashes from the cameras were blinding, but Nikki kept her eyes forward, strutting with purpose and poise. She could feel the eyes of the audience on her, taking in every curve and angle of her body.

As she reached the end of the runway, the applause erupted, and Nikki felt a sense of pride and accomplishment that was hard to describe. The agents rushed over to her, gushing with compliments and offers for future shows.

"You were amazing, Nikki! That scar only adds to your beauty," one agent exclaimed, while another added, "We can't wait to see you on runways all over the world."

Nikki smiled, feeling a sense of validation that she had worked so hard to achieve. She knew that not everyone understood her journey, but she was proud of the woman she had become.

As she made her way back to the dressing room, other models congratulated her, and Nikki felt a sense of camaraderie that she had never experienced before. "You killed it out there," one model said, while another added, "I wish I had your confidence."

Nikki grinned, feeling a sense of sisterhood with the other models. She knew that the industry could be cutthroat, but she was determined to rise above the negativity and show the world what true beauty looked like.

As she changed out of her bikini, Nikki felt a sense of excitement for what the future held. She had proven that she was more than just a pretty face, and she knew that the offers to walk in other shows across the globe were just the beginning.

Nikki sat on the plush sofa in her New York apartment, holding her phone to her ear with a grin on her face. "Johnathan, you won't believe it. My first runway walk was a hit! I got so many offers to walk in other shows

across the continent!" she exclaimed.

"Wow, Nikki, that's amazing! I'm so proud of you," Johnathan's voice crackled through the phone.

Nikki's heart swelled with happiness at his words. "Thank you, babe," she replied, twirling a strand of her long, dark hair around her finger.

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line before Johnathan spoke up again. "Hey, I've got some news too. I saved a little girl from a burning house last night and reunited her with her family."

Nikki's eyes widened in shock. "Oh my god, Johnathan, that's incredible! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's all in a day's work," he replied nonchalantly.

Nikki couldn't help but admire his bravery. "You're amazing, Johnathan. But please, please be careful out there," she admonished.

"I will, babe. You know I always am," he reassured her.

Their conversation flowed easily, as it always did, but Nikki found herself struggling to stay awake. "I'm sorry, Johnathan, I'm just so tired. My schedule has been getting more and more hectic," she yawned.

"It's okay, Nikki. Get some rest. I'll talk to you tomorrow," Johnathan said gently.

"Okay, goodnight. I love you," Nikki said, feeling a pang of guilt for not being able to talk to him for longer.

"I love you too," Johnathan replied before hanging up.

Nikki sighed and set her phone down on the coffee table. As much as she loved talking to Johnathan, the demands of her modeling career were taking their toll. But she knew that as long as they kept supporting each other, they could make it work.

Nikki looked out the window of her high-rise apartment, taking in the bustling city below. It had been two weeks since she arrived in New York to pursue her modeling career, and she couldn't believe how quickly time had flown by. She was living her dream, walking runways, doing photo shoots,

and getting more exposure than she ever thought possible. But despite all the excitement, there was a part of her that missed her old life.

As she thought back to her hometown, she couldn't help but feel a pang of longing for the things she had left behind. "I miss hiking the trail at Deception Pass," she said to herself, "feeling the crunch of leaves under my feet and the warmth of the sun on my skin."

Just then, her phone rang, interrupting her thoughts. It was Johnathan, her boyfriend, back home. "Hey babe, how's the big city treating you?" he asked.

"It's amazing, Johnathan," Nikki replied, "but it's not the same without you. I miss walking the boardwalk down by Bayshore Drive and feeling the salty air from the sea on my face. I miss our hikes together and the sound of our laughter echoing through the trees."

"I miss you too, Nikki," Johnathan said, his voice filled with longing. "But remember why you're there. You're living your dream, and nothing can stop you. You're strong, beautiful, and talented beyond measure. And you have us, your family and your grandparents, cheering you on every step of the way."

Nikki felt a tear roll down her cheek as she listened to Johnathan's words. She knew he was right. She had come too far to let a little homesickness get in the way of her goals. She wiped away the tear and took a deep breath, steadying herself.

"You're right, Johnathan," she said, her voice filled with determination. "I'm going to make the most of this opportunity, and when I come back, we're going to hike that trail and walk that boardwalk together, stronger than ever."

"Sounds like a plan," Johnathan said, his voice filled with pride. "I'll be waiting for you, Nikki. You got this."

Nikki hung up the phone, feeling a renewed sense of purpose. She looked out the window once more, taking in the city below. It was a new chapter in her life, and she was ready to make the most of it.

Nikki stood on the rooftop of a skyscraper in New York, staring out at the

city skyline. Despite the bustling energy of the city, her mind was elsewhere. She couldn't shake the thought of her grandparents back in Oak Harbor. Her grandmother, Maria, had recently been diagnosed with a degenerative form of dementia, and the news had hit Nikki hard.

As she gazed out at the city, Nikki felt a sudden urge to call her grandparents. She fished her phone out of her pocket and dialed their number. The phone rang several times before her grandfather, Luke, answered.

"Hello?" His voice was warm and familiar.

"Hi, Grandpa. It's Nikki," she said, her voice catching slightly.

"Nikki! It's so good to hear from you," he exclaimed. "How's New York treating you?"

"It's good. It's busy," Nikki replied. "But I miss you guys."

"We miss you too, sweetheart," Grampa Luke said. "But we're happy you're following your dreams."

Nikki felt a lump form in her throat. "How's Grandma doing?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Grampa Luke let out a heavy sigh. "We've had good days and bad days," he said. "Some days, she doesn't even remember how to button her blouse."

Nikki's heart sank. "Can I talk to her?" she asked.

"Sure thing, kiddo," Grampa Luke said. Nikki could hear him calling out to Maria in the background.

"Maria, it's Nikki on the phone," he said.

There was a moment of silence before Grandma Maria's voice crackled through the phone. "Whose Nikki?" she asked.

Luke's voice softened. "She's your granddaughter, honey," he said gently.

Nikki's heart broke at the sound of her grandmother's confusion. She could hear the sadness in Luke's voice as he tried to explain who she was.

"Hey, Grandma," Nikki said softly. "It's me, Nikki."

There was a long pause before Grandma Maria spoke again. "Nikki?" she repeated. "I'm sorry, I don't remember."

Nikki swallowed the lump in her throat. "It's okay, Grandma," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I just wanted to say hi and tell you I love you."

There was another pause before Grandma Maria spoke again. "I love you too," she said, her voice distant and confused.

Nikki could feel tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. It was moments like these that made her miss home. She longed to be back in Oak Harbor, surrounded by the familiar comforts of her grandparents' home. But she knew she couldn't stay there forever. She had to keep pursuing her dreams, even if it meant being far from the people she loved. But it hurt so much.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It had been almost a month since Noah had gone missing, and there had been no news of his whereabouts. Cora felt helpless and frustrated, not knowing where her daughter's boyfriend and the father of her granddaughter were. She had spent countless hours on the phone with military officials, but they couldn't give her any information about Noah's location, except that he was last seen in combat overseas.

One evening, Cora sat on the porch, staring into the distance, lost in thought. Jamie, her fiancé, came up and sat next to her. "Any news?" he asked.

Cora shook her head. "No, nothing. It's like he vanished into thin air."

Jamie put his arm around her. "We'll find him, Cora. We won't give up until we do."

Cora leaned into him, grateful for his support. "I know, but it's just so hard not knowing. Jules is struggling too. She's trying to be strong for the baby, but I can see the worry in her eyes."

Just then, Jules came out onto the porch, carrying her daughter in her arms. Cora and Jamie both stood up to greet her.

"How's my little princess?" Cora asked, taking the baby from Jules.

"She's doing okay," Jules said, but Cora could see the exhaustion on her face. "I just wish we knew something about Noah. It's like he's been erased

from existence."

Jamie put his arm around Jules. "We'll keep trying, Jules. We won't stop until we find him."

Jules looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "Thank you, Jamie. It means a lot to us."

Cora handed the baby back to Jules, and they all sat down on the porch together, watching the sunset over the horizon. It was a peaceful moment, but they all knew that the uncertainty and worry would continue until Noah was found.

"So, are you guys ready to take that next leap of faith?" Jules asked.

Cora smiled as she looked up at Jamie, who was already staring back at her. "We are," she replied, turning to her daughter.

"I want you to know that I'm happy for you both, and Jamie, I'm glad Mom has you in her corner," Jules smiled.

"Thanks, Jules. I appreciate it." Jamie smiled. "And know that I'm in your corner as well."

Jules gave him an appreciative smile.

The following evening was the rehearsal dinner.

The night of the rehearsal dinner was a magical one. The air was filled with the sweet aroma of the flowers that adorned every table, and the soft glow of the candles cast a warm and intimate light. Cora sat at the head of the table, feeling grateful to be surrounded by her loved ones. She was wearing a stunning emerald, green dress that perfectly complemented her olive skin, and her hair was styled in a chic updo.

Lily, Jamie's daughter, stood up to give her speech. She looked radiant in her pink dress, and her blond hair cascaded in soft waves down her back. She spoke with a confidence that belied her young age, and her words were filled with sincerity and love. "Cora, I just want to say how happy I am that you're marrying my dad. You're an amazing woman, and I'm so lucky to have you as my stepmom. I hope that someday I can be just like you."

Cora's eyes filled with tears as she listened to Lily's words. She felt a deep sense of gratitude that this young woman saw her as a role model. "Thank you, Lily," Cora said, her voice choked with emotion. "That means more to me than you know."

Andrea and Josephine also gave speeches, both filled with love and support for their sister. They talked about how happy they were to see Cora finally find love again and how excited they were for the wedding.

Donny, Jamie's best man and Andrea's fiancé stood up to give his speech. He was a tall, handsome man with dark hair and light eyes. "Cora, I just want to say how happy I am for you and Jamie. You two are perfect for each other, and I can't wait to see you get married." He paused for a moment, then added, "And Jules, I know you're hurting right now, but we're all here for you. Noah will be back soon, and everything will be okay."

Cora's heart sank as she heard Donny's words. She felt a deep sadness for her daughter, who was trying so hard to be strong but was clearly hurting. Jules sat at the table, her eyes fixed on her plate, trying to hide her tears. Cora reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "It's okay to be sad, Jules," she whispered. "We're all here for you, and we love you."

Jules looked up at her mother, her eyes filled with tears. "I know, Mom," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "But it still hurts."

Cora pulled her daughter into a tight embrace, holding her close as she cried. She felt the weight of Jules' pain and wished there was something she could do to make it go away. But all she could do was hold her and love her and hope that someday soon, the pain would ease.

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the room, jolting Cora out of her conversation. She turned her head to see her sister Josephine briskly walking away from the table, her heels clicking on the marble floor. A stunned Daniel stood frozen in his spot, watching her retreat. Jamie, always the peacemaker, got up from his seat and whispered something into Daniel's ear before nodding in the direction of Josephine's exit.

Without hesitation, Daniel took off in pursuit of Josephine, his long strides eating up the distance between them. Cora couldn't help but feel a pang of concern for her sister. She turned to Jules, her youngest daughter, who was eyeing the commotion with a mixture of curiosity and confusion.

"What happened?" Cora asked, her voice laced with worry as she and Jules made their way to the table where the incident had occurred.

"I'm not sure," Jamie responded, his expression grim. "But I think Josephine thought Daniel was flirting with one of the guests, and the champagne flute just slipped out of her hand."

"Oh, no," Cora murmured, putting a hand to her mouth. She knew her sister's temper all too well, and it wasn't uncommon for her to lash out when she felt threatened.

"Sweetie, I'll be back," Cora informed Jules, her eyes scanning the room for any other signs of trouble. "I just need to check on your aunt."

"Okay, Mom," Jules replied, her attention already drawn to the commotion outside.

Cora turned to Jamie, who was hovering nearby. "It's fine. Go talk to your sister," he encouraged a hint of concern in his voice.

Cora nodded, grateful for Jamie's support. She made her way outside, where she saw Andrea, also heading in the direction of Josephine's escape.

"Is she okay?" Cora asked, falling into step beside Andrea.

"I'm not sure," Andrea replied, her voice tight with worry. "But knowing Josephine, she's probably just embarrassed."

Cora nodded, knowing that her sister had a tendency to let her emotions get the best of her. She quickened her pace, her heart pounding with anticipation. As she approached the exit, she saw Daniel standing outside, his back to the door.

"Daniel?" Cora called out, her voice was soft and gentle.

Daniel turned around, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy. "She's gone," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Cora felt a pang of sympathy for Daniel. She knew how much he still cared for Josephine, despite their breakup a month ago. "Come on," she said, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Go back inside. We'll find her."

Cora and Andrea made their way across the lawn in search of their sister. As they approached the old oak tree, they could see Jo's silhouette on the tire swing, swaying back and forth in the gentle breeze.

"Are you okay?" Andrea's voice was soft and gentle, the concern evident in her tone. Jo's hand came up to wipe her face, and even in the dim light, they could see the tracks of tears on her cheeks. Cora's heart ached for her sister, knowing all too well the pain of heartbreak.

"I thought I could do this, but it's hard," Jo sighed, her voice barely above a whisper. "Seeing him talking and laughing with that woman made me feel bad, and I keep wondering if I made the right decision to end it."

Cora felt a lump form in her throat as she listened to Jo's words. She knew firsthand the agony of second-guessing a difficult decision. "You did the right thing," she said firmly, her voice laced with conviction. "You deserve someone who loves and respects you, Jo. Don't settle for anything less."

Andrea nodded in agreement, her eyes shining with empathy. "We're here for you, Jo. We'll help you get through this," she said, her arms wrapping around her sister in a comforting embrace.

Jo leaned into her sisters, feeling their love and support like a warm blanket on a cold night. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Cora's heart was heavy with the weight of their sister's pain. But she knew that together, they would weather any storm.

Cora wrapped her arms tightly around her sister Jo, feeling the warmth of her embrace and the softness of her hair against her cheek. Jo's words of encouragement and love were like a balm to her soul, soothing the anxiety and doubts that had been gnawing at her all day. "Thank you, Jo," Cora

whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "I'm so grateful to have you as my sister."

Jo pulled back and looked at her with tears in her eyes. "I mean every word, Cora. You deserve to be happy, and I know Jamie will make you very happy."

Cora smiled, feeling a sense of peace and contentment wash over her. "I know he will. He's an amazing man, and I love him more than words can say."

As they made their way back to the rehearsal dinner, Cora felt a renewed sense of energy and joy. She was determined to enjoy the rest of the evening and savor every moment with her family and friends.

As she approached the table where Jamie was sitting, he looked up and smiled at her, his eyes shining with love and admiration. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, and she felt her heart skip a beat.

The speeches continued, each one filled with heartfelt sentiment and love for the happy couple. When it was Jamie's turn to speak, he stood up and took Cora's hand, pulling her close to him.

"I am the luckiest man in the world," he began, his voice strong and clear. "To have found love again and to have found it with such a beautiful, kind, and loving woman as Cora. I know that we will have a happy life together, filled with love, laughter, and adventure."

Cora blushed as she looked up at him, feeling the warmth of his love and the depth of his commitment.

"And I want to say how much I love and admire Cora's daughters, Erin and Jules," Jamie continued. "They have welcomed me into their family with open hearts and open arms, and I am honored to call them my own. And Lily, my sweet Lily, I am so happy that you have two wonderful sisters to share your life experiences with. You are the light of my life, and I promise to always love and protect you, just as I promise to love and cherish your mother for all eternity."

He raised his glass in a toast, and everyone at the table joined in, clinking glasses, and cheering.

Jamie leaned down and kissed Cora, his lips soft and tender against hers. She closed her eyes and savored the moment, feeling the love and joy that surrounded her. She was marrying the man of her dreams, and she knew that their love would only grow stronger with each passing day.

The first thing she noticed the moment they separated was that Evelyn and Kenneth were standing at the entrance, but the moment they stepped aside, there was the sound of collective gasps and a flurry of movements.

"Noah?" Jules asked in confusion, rising to her feet. Slowly she walked toward where he was standing, her hands on her lips. She tentatively reached out to touch his cheek as if afraid he would disappear. Cora watched as tears slipped down her daughter's cheeks and the realization that he was really there. Jules flung herself into his arms. Noah winced as if in pain, and it was then that Cora noticed that one of his hands was in a sling. A smile graced her lips when her daughter separated from her boyfriend, only to plant a solid kiss on his lips. Cheers went up all around the room.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Nikki's heart was pounding as the plane began its descent into Tacoma International Airport. She had been away from home for so long, and the anticipation of seeing her family again was almost too much to bear. As the plane touched down and taxied to the gate, Nikki couldn't resist the urge to peek out the window and catch a glimpse of the familiar surroundings.

As she stepped off the plane, Nikki was greeted by the cool, crisp air of the Pacific Northwest. She took a deep breath, savoring the scent of pine and saltwater that filled her lungs. She grabbed her bags and made her way through the airport, her eyes scanning the crowd for her cousin Diane.

When she finally spotted her, Diane was waving frantically from the other side of the security checkpoint. Nikki grinned and hurried over, throwing her arms around her cousin in a tight embrace.

"It's so good to see you, Nikki!" Diane exclaimed, her voice filled with excitement.

"It's good to see you too, Diane," Nikki replied, feeling a warm sense of familiarity wash over her.

As they made their way to the car, Diane filled Nikki in on all the latest news from home. They chatted about family, friends, and the changes that had taken place in Oak Harbor since Nikki had left.

As they approached Deception Pass Bridge, Nikki couldn't help but feel a sense of awe. The iconic bridge stretched out over the sparkling blue waters of Puget Sound, its towering pillars disappearing into the mist.

"Wow," Nikki breathed, taking in the breathtaking scenery. "I forgot how beautiful it is here."

Diane nodded a wistful smile on her face. "Yeah, it's something else. I always feel so small when I'm standing here like the world is so much bigger than me."

Nikki nodded in agreement, feeling a sense of peace wash over her. There was something about the bridge, the water, and the mist that made her feel connected to something deeper and more profound than herself.

Nikki stepped out of her car and took a deep breath as she walked toward the cemetery gates. She felt a lump form in her throat as she made her way down the familiar path toward Samantha's grave. The sun was shining down on the gravestone, casting a warm glow on the engraved letters. Nikki knelt down and brushed away the small leaves that had accumulated on the stone.

"Hey, Sam," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to come back here. I've been busy, you know? Life just gets in the way sometimes."

She paused for a moment, her eyes fixed on the gravestone as she gathered her thoughts. "I'm sorry I haven't been to see your parents either. I know I should have, but it just felt too hard. I felt guilty like it was my fault that you're not here anymore. But I'm doing better now, Sam. I really am."

Nikki took a deep breath and looked up at the sky, her eyes closing for a moment as she gathered her strength. "There's someone in my life now, Sam. His name is Jonathan, and he's amazing. He makes me feel alive, you know? Like anything is possible. I love him, Sam. I really do."

She paused, waiting for a response that would never come. "I wish you could meet him, Sam. You would have loved him too."

Nikki stood up and dusted off her jeans, taking one last look at the

gravestone before turning to leave. "I'll come back soon, I promise. I won't let so much time pass again." As she walked away, Nikki felt a sense of peace wash over her. She knew that Samantha was watching over her and that everything was going to be okay.

After three long years of avoiding Samantha's parents, Nikki finally found the courage to visit them. As she pulled up to the house, her nerves were on edge. She could feel the sweat on her palms as she rang the doorbell. The door creaked open, and before Nikki could say anything, Samantha's mother, Martha, pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Nikki, sweetie, it's so good to see you," Martha said, her voice breaking with emotion as she held Nikki close.

Overcome with emotion, Nikki cried against Martha's shoulder as she apologized for not being there for Samantha when she needed her most. "I'm so sorry, Martha. I should have been there for her."

Martha pulled back, wiping away Nikki's tears. "Sweetheart, we never blamed you for Samantha's death. She loved you like a sister, and we know you did the best you could."

Feeling a weight lifted off her shoulders, Nikki finally breathed a sigh of relief. Martha invited her inside, and Nikki followed her into the living room. The walls were adorned with pictures of Samantha, her smile beaming from every frame.

As they sat down, Martha brought out a photo album filled with pictures of Samantha and Nikki participating in the beauty pageant back in high school. Nikki couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of their over-the-top hairstyles and bright pink dresses.

"Samantha always loved dressing up," Martha said with a smile. "She was so proud of you, Nikki. You were her best friend, and she loved you like family."

Just then, Samantha's father, Jim, walked into the room. Nikki stood up, unsure of what to do, but he walked straight over to her and pulled her into a

tight hug.

"Thank you for coming, Nikki," Jim said, his voice gruff with emotion.

The moment Nikki stepped through the door of her parent's house, her mother wrapped her up in a hug.

"We heard you went to visit Samantha and her parents today," Kirsten breathed understandingly against her cheek. "We're so glad you're home," her mother said, brushing a stray hair from Nikki's face. "We've missed you so much."

Nikki felt tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice barely audible as she stepped out of her mother's embrace.

Her father pulled her in for a hug, "We've already forgiven you, Nikki," he said. "We understand that you were going through a tough time."

"I know, but I still feel terrible for the way I treated you guys," Nikki said, her voice thick with emotion.

Her mother squeezed her hand, "We're just happy to see you healing. That's all that matters to us."

Nikki took a deep breath, "I have something to tell you guys," she said. "I've quit modeling."

Her parents' faces lit up with surprise, "Really?" her father asked.

Nikki nodded, "I realized that it wasn't making me happy anymore. I've decided to go to fashion school instead, and I was hoping you guys could help me out."

Her mother's eyes sparkled with pride, "Of course we will, Nikki. We're so proud of you for making this decision."

Nikki felt a weight lifted off her shoulders, "Thank you, guys," she said. "I'm so grateful to have you both in my life."

Her parents enveloped her in a group hug, "We love you, Nikki," they said in unison.

Nikki smiled, feeling a sense of contentment wash over her. She had

finally made amends with her parents and was on the path to pursuing her dreams.

"I've gotta go," she said, separating from them.

"You just got here," Brian said in confusion.

"I know, but I need to see Jonathan," she explained. "I'm going by the fire station."

"Okay, sweetie. We'll be here when you get back."

Nikki's heart was racing as she walked through the doors of the fire station. She had been planning this surprise visit for weeks, and she couldn't wait to see the look on Jonathan's face when he saw her standing there.

Donny, Andrea's fiancé and the fire house's lieutenant greeted her with a warm smile. "Hey Nikki, long time no see!" he said cheerfully.

"Hey Donny, is Jonathan here?" Nikki asked, trying to hide her excitement.

Donny's expression turned serious. "He's on call right now, but he should be back soon. Why don't you wait for him?"

Nikki nodded, trying to hide her disappointment. She took a seat on the couch in the waiting area and tried to calm her nerves. She couldn't believe that she was actually doing this. She had left Jonathan behind to pursue her dream of becoming a supermodel, but now she was back, and she didn't know what to expect.

As she waited, she could hear the sound of sirens in the distance. Her heart leaped as she realized that Jonathan must be on his way back. A few minutes later, he burst through the door, his face lighting up when he saw her.

"Nikki! What are you doing here?" he exclaimed, sweeping her up in his arms.

"I missed you," she whispered, looking up into his eyes.

Jonathan's smile faded slightly as he looked at her. "What about your dream to become a supermodel? I thought that was everything to you."

Nikki took a deep breath, realizing that this was the moment of truth. "My

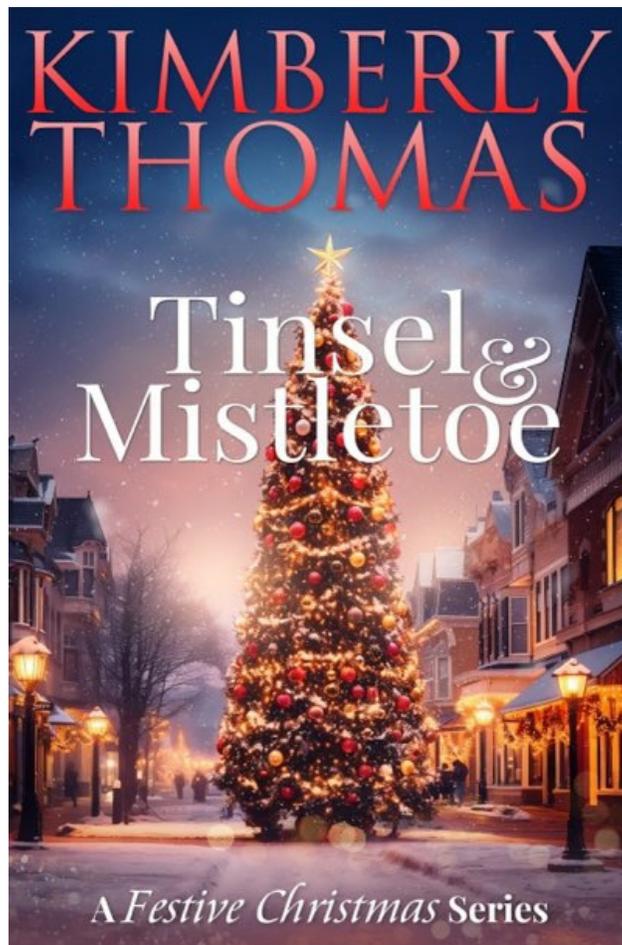
dream has already come true," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "I have you, Jonathan. That's all I need."

Jonathan's eyes softened as he looked at her. "I love you, Nikki," he said, pulling her into a tender embrace.

As they held each other, Nikki knew that she had made the right decision. She had realized that her dream had been right in front of her all along, and she wasn't going to let it slip away again.

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