

A man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark, heavy winter jacket with a fur-lined hood and a blue turtleneck sweater, stands in a snowy mountain landscape. The background shows snow-covered evergreen trees and distant mountains under a blue sky. The man is looking slightly to the right with a serious expression.

Holiday
HEROES

A NEVER TOO LATE FOR LOVE ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

REGAN BLACK
& JANIE CROUCH

HOLIDAY HEROES

Never Too Late for Love Romantic Suspense

JANIE CROUCH REGAN BLACK JOSIE JADE

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A Calamittie Jane Publishing Book

NEVER TOO LATE FOR LOVE: HOLIDAY HEROES

About this Book

Love isn't just for the young. Unfortunately, neither is danger. These cowboys will do whatever it takes to keep their women safe...

Please enjoy the Never Too Late for Love: Holiday Heroes collection, made up of Prince of Fairytale: Jackson and Hero in Paradise.

And always remember: it's never too late for love.

...

Passionate alpha heroes and the women they'll do anything to protect...

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A Fairytale Hero

Chapter 1

Chandra Priestly looked at the Christmas tree sitting next to the cash register and sighed. She'd wanted to do more as the new owner of the Corner Café. Perhaps some lights in the windows, maybe poinsettias on the tables. But she'd just been so buried in everything involved in getting the café set up like she wanted that Christmas décor had been a distant second.

And she really wasn't feeling in the Christmas spirit anyway. Not with her daughter Lilly so far away. So, there was just the artificial tree with a few wrapped empty boxes under it.

Sort of sad, sort of fitting.

She picked up the coffeepot and made the rounds. There were only two occupied tables, and one of them was preparing to leave. She'd already sent home most of the staff. It was time to send home the rest. Why make everyone stay here? She was only open for another hour, and there was no reason not to send Jeff and Sandy home to their families.

She headed for the kitchen and found her closing waitress Sandy with two pieces of pumpkin pie in her hands. "They're finally on dessert. Thank goodness."

Chandra smiled at her. "After you deliver that, go on home." She looked at her cook, Jeff. "You too."

They both stared at her, eyes wide.

"You sure, Boss?" Jeff asked. "I don't mind staying for the last hour."

“No. It’s fine. Nobody else will come in. You both have little ones at home—I remember those days of staying up to all hours of the night to make sure Christmas morning would be perfect. I’ve got stuff handled here. I’ll close up after this last table leaves.”

Jeff smiled. “Okay. I won’t argue with you. The wife’s been texting me every fifteen minutes.”

She pulled an envelope from her apron pocket for each of her employees “This is for you. Merry Christmas.”

Sandy’s eyes got wide. “Chandra, you didn’t have to do that.”

Chandra was still struggling with making ends meet. Starting over at fifty-one by buying this café had been a bit of a gamble. But it brought her back home to Fairytale, where she’d grown up...

The place where she’d actually been happy. She was hoping maybe someday she could be happy here again. After all, the name of the town was Fairytale.

Giving her employees a small Christmas bonus was the least she could do. The last few months had been rough as she’d gotten her feet underneath her, but they’d stuck with her.

“Well, it’s not much. But I wanted to do something for you guys.”

“Thank you. You’re so sweet.” Sandy gave her a hug. “Are you sure you don’t need help tomorrow? I can come in after the kids open their gifts.”

“No. I don’t want to see you until the twenty-sixth. Now both of you, get out of here.”

“Have you heard from Lilly?”

“She’s going to try to call me tomorrow. With the time difference between here and Singapore, it’s a little hard.”

Sandy touched Chandra’s arm. “Tell her we said hello.”

Chandra missed Lilly. It’d been just the two of them for so long. But Chandra couldn’t let her miss an opportunity to

spend a year in Singapore, not when the internship would further her computer science career so much.

Jeff headed for the door. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

Not long after Jeff and Sandy left, the final table paid their bill. Chandra rung them out then carried the dishes to the back. She looked around the empty kitchen. Jeff had done most of the dishes and had cleaned the grill. It wouldn't take her long at all to finish up. Then she could get home.

When she heard the bell on the front door ring she sighed. Maybe she wouldn't be going home so soon after all.

She went into the dining room and found two men at the hostess stand. She hesitated before approaching them, as she tried to shake off the uneasiness they caused. They looked like they'd be more at home in the back room of a bar, or a dark alley somewhere. Anywhere but here in Fairytale. And certainly not in her café.

But she had a business to run. And honestly she couldn't afford to turn away any paying customers, even ones who looked pretty damned sketchy.

She went to them and managed to pull up a polite smile. "Two tonight?"

Why hadn't she just told them the café was closed?

"Yeah, two," the shorter man said.

She sat them at the booth closest to the door. She didn't want them anywhere near the cash register.

"Our cook is almost out of a lot of stuff, sorry. It's a pretty limited menu right now. We've got coffee and he can make you eggs and bacon." They didn't know no one was in the kitchen with her, and she was going to make sure it stayed that way.

"We'll have coffee," the shorter man said. "We're just passing through."

Chandra relaxed slightly as she went to get the coffee. Just passing through...that made sense. A lot of people traveled on Christmas Eve. She'd serve them their coffee and hopefully they'd take off soon.

They were both looking out the front window as she placed their mugs on the table, hardly paying attention to her. That was probably a good thing too.

She did the rest of her closing duties so she could leave as soon as they were gone. When she went in the back she turned on the radio so it would seem like someone was there. She wanted to flip the sign on the entrance to closed but was afraid that might tip the men off that she was here alone.

They finished their coffee and she reluctantly brought the pot back over. "More coffee?"

"No." The man with a shaved head and a scar under his left eye looked around the restaurant, then pulled a photo from his pocket and showed it to her. "You seen this guy?"

Chandra froze, almost burning her hand on the coffee pot as she gripped it without thinking.

The image was grainy and obviously taken without the subject being aware of it. But that was a photo of Jackson Prince.

His family owned half of Fairytale, but she hadn't seen him in years. Decades really. Not since high school. But those blue eyes were kind of unmistakable. That, paired with a head of dark hair, now touched a little with gray, confirmed it in her mind.

But why were these men looking for Jackson Prince? Anybody from around here would know who he was.

She shook her head. "No, I haven't seen him." That was the truth.

The shorter guy studied her for a moment, eyes narrowed. "Word is everyone in town comes here to eat. You sure you don't know him?"

She forced a smile onto her face. “Well, I wish that was true. If everyone in town came in here to eat, I might not be working on Christmas if it was.” She took a breath. “But in any case. I don’t know this man.”

That was pretty much true too...she hadn’t seen him in thirty years. She definitely didn’t know Jackson Prince in any real way.

The bald guy crossed his arms over his chest. “Maybe I don’t believe you.”

Shit.

“Do you know who he is?” the short guy asked. “Take another look. Maybe you recognize him.”

She didn’t want to look. She wanted to figure out how to get them out of here before they realized she was alone.

She backed up a step. “I’ve only worked here a few months. I don’t know everyone in town. But he doesn’t look familiar.”

She didn’t know why she was lying to protect someone she hadn’t seen in three decades and who definitely wouldn’t do the same for her—probably wouldn’t remember her at all.

The bald guy slid toward the end of the booth, face looking harder with each second that passed. “I don’t think I believe that either.”

She placed the coffee pot out in front of her as if that would ward them off if they tried to attack. “Look, it’s Christmas Eve and I’m tired. The cook in the back is ready to go home. I don’t know why you’re showing me this picture but I don’t know this guy.”

She almost let out a sob of relief when the bell on the door rang, signaling someone else had entered. She didn’t care who it was, as long as she wasn’t alone with these two guys. All three of them turned to look at the man—some sort of business guy with dark pants and a collared blue shirt.

He looked at Chandra then at them, with an eyebrow raised. “Still open?”

“Uh, yeah. Limited menu.” She was glad to see him so she wasn’t alone with these two guys, but still didn’t want to serve him anything. She just wanted to go home.

The two guys didn’t say anything else, just took out enough money to cover the coffee. Without another word, they walked out of the café.

The guy sat at the bar and shot her a smile. “I’ll just have some coffee. I won’t keep you on Christmas Eve.” He glanced over his shoulder at the door. “Those looked like a couple of shady characters. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, they were looking for someone.”

“Well, they looked a little rough. Hope they didn’t scare you.” He offered her his hand. “I’m Miles. I’m just passing through on my way home for Christmas.”

She shook his hand. “Chandra Priestly. Trying to eventually get home for Christmas too.”

He gave her another smile as she poured him a cup of coffee. “I’ll bet you wouldn’t tell those two even if you’d seen the guy, huh?”

She froze. How did he know it had been a man’s picture they’d been showing her?

Maybe she was being paranoid, but something wasn’t sitting right with her about this man. He didn’t look like a thug like the other two, but still...

“Um...No I didn’t recognize the photo, so I couldn’t help them.”

“I see.” He looked around the restaurant. “You know what? I don’t want to keep you on Christmas Eve. I’ll take my coffee to go.”

Yes, please. Just go. She just wanted to get out of here. “Well, if you’re sure.” She poured a fresh cup of coffee in a to-go cup.

“Yeah.” He stood and dropped a five on the table. “Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you.” She followed him to the door and locked it behind him. She held her breath as she watched him through the window. It wasn’t until he got in a car and drove off that she let her breath go. “Okay. A little bit of weirdness there,” she said to herself “Definitely time to call it a night.” She turned off the lights in the dining room, leaving the Christmas tree lights on, then went to the kitchen. She looked around. It’d take her about an hour to close down properly. She shook her head. “It can wait.” She doubted she’d be busy first thing Christmas morning. She was probably the only person in town who had no one to spend it with.

But she wasn’t going to let that bother her. She had a lot to be thankful for. The café was finally starting to break even. She didn’t have a narcissist husband to worry about any longer. And her daughter was on the adventure of a lifetime in Asia—an internship that would launch her computer programming career.

Not to mention she’d just dodged some sort of bullet with the guys who had come in tonight. Maybe tomorrow she’d call the sheriff’s office and tell them what happened. Jackson Prince may not even live here any longer, but someone would be able to get in touch with him and let him know some sketchy people were asking about him.

All in all, spending the holidays alone wasn’t too bad.

She turned everything off in the kitchen, then went out the back door to her car. There was room for one car behind the building and she used it. She was the boss. She should have at least one perk.

She got into her older model Honda and buckled her seatbelt before starting the engine. As she glanced over her shoulder to back out of the space, she gasped and slammed on the brakes.

There was someone in her back seat.

Chapter 2

She scrambled for her door handle, but a hand reached over her seat. All she could see was the gun in it. “I’m not going to hurt you. I just need you to drive. Back the car out slowly.”

It didn’t sound like either of the thugs in the café earlier or even the charming guy, Miles. But somehow the calm, controlled voice seemed familiar.

That didn’t mean she wanted to drive this guy anywhere.

She managed to get some words out, but they came out almost in a whisper. “What do you want?”

The man was crouched down, keeping his face hidden in the shadows. “Like I said, I’m not going to hurt you. Just back out slowly.” He let out a little grunt with the last word.

She glanced at him in the rearview mirror as he shifted in the back seat. She couldn’t stop her gasp when the moonlight shone on his face and illuminated his bright blue eyes.

Maybe it was the picture those men showed her earlier or maybe it was that she’d thought of him way too many times over the past thirty years, but she recognized Jackson Prince right away.

Of all the ways she’d thought of him since the last time she’d seen him in high school, him holding her at gunpoint had not been one of them.

This night just kept getting weirder.

“You’re Jackson Prince.” It wasn’t the most original thing to say but it was all she could manage.

He scowled. “Please, just drive.”

He didn’t recognize her. Chandra wasn’t surprised. He’d basically been a celebrity back in their high school days—handsome, smart, athletic. Plus, a Prince. That was a royalty in itself in this part of Colorado.

But he still had a gun.

She nodded and backed slowly out of the space, then pulled onto the street. “Where am I driving to?”

“It doesn’t matter. Head out of town toward the highway.”

Fairytale was like many of the smaller towns in this part of the country—a two-lane road ran through the main section and everything branched off from there. The highway was about five miles south, but even that was a huge Interstate.

She drove in silence, trusting that the man who’d been relatively friendly to her in high school wasn’t going to kill her now. Every minute they drove away from town meant less chance of getting help from anyone.

He sat up with a groan once they were out of town. She glanced back in the mirror again. He still had the gun in his hand. It wasn’t pointed at her, it was resting on his thigh.

Those blue eyes met hers in the mirror. “What happened to the Stevensons? I thought they owned the café.”

Small-talk? Really? She broke their eye-contact. “They wanted to retire and move to Florida. I bought it a few months ago.”

“So you moved back to town.”

She locked eyes with him again. “You know who I am?”

“Yeah. Chandra Frizzel. I remember you.”

It was hard to believe. He’d been three years ahead of her in school and ran in a whole different crowd. She was the smart, quiet girl whose only accomplishment was being class secretary for three years. There’d only been one time when

they'd really connected at all—under the bleachers during a storm his senior year.

“It’s Priestly, now.”

“Right. Of course you’re married.”

“Not anymore. I got divorced a while ago.”

She’d been wrong. *Now* the night had reached a new level of weirdness. She was having a semi-normal conversation with a man who was basically kidnapping her.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Look, not to be rude, but I don’t really want to chat about my marital status or me moving back into town. Not when you’re holding me at gunpoint.”

He leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes for a moment. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Why don’t I just take you home? We’ll call this entire situation a misunderstanding. I’m not looking to press any charges.” Not that anyone was going to believe her word against one of the most powerful families in the state.

“I can’t go home. There are people after me. That could possibly lead the danger to my family. I’ve got kids. They’re grown, but still...”

Of course he has a family. To think he wouldn’t have married and had children was mere wishful thinking on her part.

“What is going on? Why are those guys looking for you?”

He sat up straighter with a wince. “How do you know people are looking for me?”

She brought her eyes back to the road. “Two guys came in to the café. Showed me your picture and asked if I knew or had seen you.”

“Shit.” He ran his hand through his graying hair. “Did you tell them who I was?”

“No.”

“Look, Chandra, I wouldn’t blame you if you did. It would certainly be understandable. But if so, we need to turn around. I’ve got to make sure my family is safe.”

She understood that sentiment completely. “I’m telling the truth. The guys were freaking me out a little, so I said I didn’t recognize you. I was actually going to put a call in to the sheriff’s office tomorrow so they could get word to you that some sketchy guys were asking about you.”

“What did they look like?”

“The two with the picture were bald, looked like thugs. One was taller than the other and had a scar under his left eye. They weren’t local, that’s for sure.”

“The Bishop cousins. Brady and Trevor. Was there anybody with them?”

“A third guy named Miles something came in after they left—dressed nicer, seemed pleasant. I wasn’t sure if he knew them or not. He wasn’t as overt but seemed like he was trying to ascertain if I’d told them the truth about you.”

“Miles Tanner. You didn’t tell him either? He’s much smoother than the Bishops.”

“No. Something about him seemed off. He smiled too much.”

Jackson let out a humorless chuckle. “Your instincts and his over-the-top smile probably saved my life. The best thing I have going for me in this shitshow of a situation is that they don’t know who I am.”

He shifted again with a groan. She glanced back in the mirror once more. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll live.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I can tell you I’m one of the good guys. Or as much as an old bastard like me can be, anyway. I’ve been working undercover over in Harlen County.”

Harlen County was a few hours away, but this was at least starting to make sense. “Undercover? Are you a cop?”

“No. One of my sons is sheriff in Fairytale and I was just in a unique position to help law enforcement out. I was supposed to look for any suspicious activity at some of the livestock auctions this week then report back. The situation got a little out of control.”

“That sounds ominous. What happened?”

His voice was tight. “I followed some new guys that were making all my internal alarms go off. Turns out my instincts were right. They’re part of an insurance scam involving cattle rustling.”

“An insurance scam has thugs after you and you hiding in my car with a gun on Christmas Eve?”

He grunted again. “Livestock is a billion-dollar industry. People are definitely willing to get violent to get their piece of the pie or to keep someone quiet about what they’re doing.”

“I should’ve done what Beau told me to and reported what I found to him so law enforcement proper could move on it. But I decided to take matters into my own hands. Nearly got me killed. And I’m probably bleeding all over your car. Sorry.”

“Wait. What? You’re hurt?” Her eyes flew to the mirror again.

“Knife wound in my upper arm. I’ll survive.”

Crap. This was getting more dire. “Why didn’t you go to the hospital?”

“I lost my phone trying to escape from the Bishops and Miles Tanner. I needed to get out of Harlen County so I caught a ride with a trucker. I’m pretty sure they don’t know who I am, but it obviously didn’t take them long to figure out I headed in this direction.”

“I can take you to a hospital now. Doesn’t have to be one nearby.”

“Hospital isn’t necessary. I’ll sew it up myself if necessary. I would appreciate if you’d let me use your phone to call my son. I need to report in and see how he wants me to handle the situation.”

“Sure.” She handed it back to him and he put it on speaker.

“Beau Prince.”

That was definitely Jackson’s son. His deep voice sounded just like his dad’s.

“It’s me, Son. I needed to report in. I wanted to let you know that I’m—”

“Dad! Where the heck are you?” Beau’s voice sounded completely different than it had when he’d answered a few seconds ago.

“Things went south in—”

Beau cut Jackson off again. “It’s Christmas Eve. Can you believe I’m just leaving the office now? I’ll bet you’re calling because everyone is mad that I’m so late.”

She glanced at Jackson in the mirror again. His jaw was granite. “Beau, listen. I need to report—”

“You guys already into the sangria? I can’t wait to have some sangria, Dad. Sangria is all I’ve been thinking about all day.”

Jackson paused for a long moment. “Yeah. Sangria. It’s what we’re all thinking about. See you in a bit.”

He disconnected the call.

Chandra shook her head. “I don’t understand what just happened in that call.”

“Sangria is our family code word when something is wrong. Beau didn’t let me get a full sentence in so he’s afraid someone is monitoring the call.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t think of anything better to say. This whole night felt like she’d fallen down a crime rabbit hole: thugs, guns, carjackings, secret code words.

He ducked as a car passed them going the other way, then sat back up. “It’s probably Miles Tanner. He’s the Livestock Commission agent I was sent to get info about. He’s the one behind the whole cattle rustling scheme.”

“Okay, so what should we do now? You need to get your arm looked at and—”

He cut her off. “That’s going to have to wait.”

“Why?”

“Because that car that just passed us turned around. It’s them. They’ve found us.”

Chapter 3

This was an absolute shitshow. Nothing about this day had gone remotely the way he planned, and he certainly hadn't meant to drag Chandra into this danger.

Jackson had hoped the car would simply sit. Or that it was a stranger passing through Fairytale while also *not* being the strangers looking for him. Not Chandra.

He should have known the café had changed ownership. Maybe if he had, he would have chosen differently. *Fuck*. The wound in his arm ached. He needed to get it cleaned and bandaged. But in the choice between being murdered and having a bloody arm, he was choosing the bloody arm.

Glancing at Chandra's face in the mirror, he examined her as lines of worry appeared on her forehead. The Chandra he remembered—the quiet, pretty girl from high school—was long gone. The woman in the driver's seat was still beautiful, but had clearly lived a life. He found himself wanting to know what that life had been and how she'd found herself alone in a café on Christmas Eve. But like she'd pointed out, he had her at gunpoint, and both of them needed to survive if he wanted to ask those questions.

Snow drifted in front of Chandra's headlights. Great. That would definitely help them not get killed. He pressed his mouth into a firm line, trying to keep both his sarcasm and his pain from spilling out. "You know that little valley where we had all the parties back in high school? Pull off there. That'll work."

Chandra's shoulders tightened, and she cleared her throat. "Sorry, you're going to have to be more specific than that. I'm not sure where it is."

"What—"

"I wasn't exactly invited to parties, Jackson." He thought he saw the shadow of a smile tip up before she focused on the road in front of them again. "Too much time spent in the library, remember? I don't know where it is."

He thought some of those parties would have been better if she'd been invited, but he didn't say that. "It's coming up here on the right. A couple of miles. There's no sign. It's just a big split oak. It'll be hard to see, but I'll point it out to you."

"Thanks."

She pushed down on the gas, speeding up. The roads weren't bad *yet*. They had that in their favor, but so did the guys chasing him. At least they wouldn't leave many tracks. By the time the cousins caught up, the quickly falling snow would cover them.

"Here."

They turned off the main highway onto a shadowy dirt road. Jackson smiled. The well-worn tire marks he could see told him this place was still being used as a party location. Some things never changed.

"Should I ask if we're going parking?" Chandra asked.

It took him a second to realize she was teasing him. Referencing...

He'd nearly forgotten the one moment with Chandra that really mattered. Under the bleachers, in the middle of a storm. Breathless desperation and newness, the taste of the forbidden and feeling like he found something he couldn't have.

Jackson allowed himself a smile. "Haven't done that in a while. I'd be out of practice."

"If I remember correctly, you got more than enough practice for a lifetime back in high school."

A laugh scraped out of him. She wasn't wrong. "Pretty sure I lost it all."

"I hear it's like riding a bike. You always remember."

"Know from experience?"

She laughed softly. "I was about as good at riding bikes as I was at being invited to parties."

They came up on the familiar dead end—a copse of trees butting up to one of the rocky hills that framed the small valley.

"What now?"

"Now, we hide the car."

Jackson groaned getting out of the car. His arm hurt like a bitch. He'd played it down earlier, but it was on fire, feeling more like dead weight than he'd like. The injury wasn't severe enough to make him bleed out, but he knew enough about his own body to know it was dangerous to his arm. He needed to get it managed before too long.

The cold bit into him and his jacket, the temperature dropping swiftly now that the sun was down. Chandra smiled tightly. She was trying to keep the mood light, but there were nerves in her eyes. "If I knew we needed camouflage, I would have driven through some mud on the way to the café today."

He chuckled, tucking his gun into the waistband of his pants as he approached the big pile of broken limbs and branches the kids used to hide their cars when they came here. Exactly like he'd done when he was their age.

Chandra caught on and helped him, and before long the car was concealed as well as it could be, fading into the background. "What do we do now?"

"Head back to town on foot," he said. "They think we're in a car. They won't be looking for us on foot. If we're lucky, they'll drive right on by, and I'll call one of my sons. We'll get your car tomorrow."

Before she could say anything, headlights shone through the trees.

They weren't lucky.

Jackson swore, grabbing Chandra and turning her into the trees. "Go, quickly."

She did, and he pushed ahead as much as he could while keeping her close. He knew the area, which worked in their favor. But she didn't. So he couldn't just send her ahead and make a stand. He'd dragged her into this mess, and now he had to be the one to get her out of it.

Doors slamming sounded behind them, and he pulled Chandra down the rocky path into the ravine. "Quiet," he told her, trying to keep her calm. One look in the rising moonlight showed her eyes wide with fear. He'd put that there.

Fuck.

Where could they go?

Dizziness washed over him in a wave, causing him to stumble on the rough rocks on the path.

Chandra gasped. "Jackson?"

"I'm all right," he said. "Just some loose stones." Then he let out a chuckle. "You concerned about the man who kidnapped you?"

She made a sound of annoyance. "Seems like you're trying to save my life right now," she said softly, keeping up with him. "And I know you better than that."

"Do you?" He asked. But the sudden lightness in his head made him wonder where the words came from.

"Oh god," Chandra said, pulling his arm too hard. He barely kept from shouting in pain. "Where did you say you were hurt?"

"My arm."

"That's more than an arm," Chandra hissed. "You've got blood dripping out of your jacket like a leaking faucet."

Voices sounded behind them, and they both momentarily froze. Jackson suddenly forced himself forward, pulling Chandra behind him. The Bishops couldn't find them. They

would kill him, and who knows what they'd do to Chandra. Damn it, this wasn't how any of this was supposed to go.

"There!" A shout rang out, followed by the harsh, echoing sound of a gunshot. Chandra yelped, and they hurried forward. It was a damn good thing he knew this area like the back of his hand. There was a little alcove where they could hide, and a good thing too. He suddenly felt like he might pass out.

He found the entrance and pulled her around the corner, behind some low bushes before the Bishops had caught up enough to see where they'd gone.

"Here?" Her voice was barely audible, and Jackson slumped against the stone wall, breathless and dizzy. Hell, he wasn't in his twenties anymore. Exhaustion and blood loss were doing a number on him.

Chandra was right, though. This felt like more than it should be. But who knew? He'd barely slept, and the wound had been open far longer than advisable.

Had the knife hit something else? He didn't know. But he did know he didn't have time to worry about it, despite the dizziness and tiredness creeping up. The temperature was also dropping faster and the snow falling harder. Then there were the sounds of the Bishops following, wondering where they went. "It's nearly invisible unless you already know it's there," he whispered.

"And what if they know this area as well as you do?"

"I—"

She had him there. But there wasn't another option.

There was just enough light for him to make her out. She studied him before nodding once. "Be quiet and stay here."

Before Jackson could stop her, she'd slipped out of the tiny alcove, barely moving the branches of their cover. He couldn't even tell her to wait before she was gone—not without endangering her.

Was she leaving to save herself?

One quiet chuckle, and he sank back against the stone. He supposed he deserved that after dragging her into this. On Christmas Eve of all days.

The shuffling sounds came closer. “They were right here. It’s not like this place is big enough for them to up and disappear. They’ve got to be here somewhere.”

Jackson’s heart pounded in his ears, every beat throbbing with the pain in his arm.

“We’ll just check everywhere,” the other cousin said. Jackson didn’t know them well enough to tell the difference. “If the blood tells us anything, he’s not moving quickly.”

Flashlights flared around the little ravine, and Jackson fought the urge not to move. If he didn’t, there was a chance they’d miss him. He hadn’t lied. This little crack in the walls was easy to miss. But they were determined.

Only moving in such slow motion he could barely feel it, Jackson reached behind him for his gun, arm screaming in pain.

They were so close, and they were going to find him. Looking in every crack that existed. He’d hoped he’d get out of this without dying, or without having to kill. But he braced himself—

A blaring sound like an alarm, and a scream, came from the other end of the ravine, back from the way they’d come from.

“Fuck,” the man closest to Jackson said. “Over there. *Go.*”

Chandra. They found her.

It took every bit of strength he had left to push himself off the wall of rocks and take the steps to get out of the crevice. He couldn’t let it happen. He did this. He would help her. No matter what.

Pain stabbed through him as his arm scraped against the rock, and darkness flickered over his vision. This was bad. But it didn’t matter. He had to get to Chandra.

Hands landed on his shoulders, startling him, and he nearly fell and took her with him. “Quickly,” she hissed. “I used my phone to distract them, but I had to leave it over there. We need to go somewhere, Jackson. Anywhere.”

“This way. My family owns a cabin a couple of miles from here. Basically a straight line from the end of the ravine.”

The snow fell in thicker flakes and waves, the wind cutting through the both of them and making them shiver.

“Let’s go then,” she said, sounding more determined than he felt. “Before you pass out. I’m not strong enough to carry you.”

Jackson huffed a breathy laugh. “I thought you’d left to save your own skin.”

She slipped an arm beneath his shoulder and around him, allowing them to lean on each other as they moved as quickly as they could.

“Don’t think I didn’t consider it,” she muttered. “Couldn’t live with your death on my conscience.”

“So sure I was going to die?”

She didn’t dignify it with a response, and neither did he. Shouts sounded behind them. They’d found the trap and were pissed about it.

Jackson gritted his teeth and tried to stay awake.

Chapter 4

The door burst open, and the two of them stumbled into the dark cabin together, going to the floor. She'd nearly had to drag Jackson the last bit of the way, her limbs shaking with both exertion and the cold.

Her hands shook as she shoved the door closed behind them and locked it. She hadn't dressed for walking miles through snow at a normal pace, let alone half dragging a wounded man.

Jackson was still conscious, but it was a miracle.

The heat in the air took her by surprise. It was warm and a little damp inside—not what she expected for an uninhabited cabin in December.

Fumbling for the light switch, she gasped when the lights came on. A combination of classic and modern, the cabin was *gorgeous*.

Warm, sandy woods graced the kitchen and furniture, with a lovely table, a couch you could sink into, and a king-sized bed that made her want to immediately curl up and go to sleep. There were little decorative touches here and there, but maintained the cool cleanliness of a place that was rented.

But the overwhelming feature of the cabin was the steaming pool in the corner. A natural hot spring, sprawling and taking up at least a third of the space. All the rest of her examinations would have to come later. Because if they didn't get warm, then neither of them was going to be in good shape.

Chandra stripped off her coat and kicked off her shoes, leaning down to do the same for Jackson. He didn't fight her, huddling where he'd stumbled to the floor. Blood ran out of the coat, and it was clearly seeping from beneath his soaked shirt.

She cursed under her breath. That wound needed to be dealt with. But he also needed to be warm. "We need to get you warm," she said, tugging on his uninjured arm and giving him what little was left of her strength. He helped her as much as he could, but said nothing.

Still, when he was sitting on the edge of the stones, he looked at her. Helped her as she got his shirt off and put his gun aside, got his belt open, lifting enough to yank off his sopping jeans.

"In you go," she said, glancing at his wound. She needed to find a first aid kit.

Her clothes hit the ground next to his, down to her underwear, and while she would normally be self-conscious, neither of them had the time to worry about modesty right now.

Jackson groaned against the heat as he slid into the water, and she did the same. It *burned* because she was so cold, but it felt incredible too. This cabin was quite the getaway. She could see stealing away here with someone you loved, spending time in the springs and then moving to the bed.

She glanced over at Jackson, who'd sunk down into the spring, his head resting against the stone with his eyes closed. Neither of them was young anymore, but Jackson Prince was a man who took care of himself. That was clear. She had no idea what his situation was, and it wasn't really the time to be worrying about it, but she could still look.

The warmth was so nice, she never wanted to leave it. But she pushed herself out of the water anyway, shivering slightly, and went to search for towels. A small closet was fully stocked with sheets, blankets, towels, and what looked like some extra clothes. Those would be nice.

Jackson still rested in the pool, with no sign of moving. His chest rose and fell, but he was clearly exhausted. For better or worse, she wasn't getting out of this without him. Wrapping the thick towel solidly around her, she found the real thermostat and got the heat running, and went exploring in the kitchen.

Not much, but she could work with it. She owned a café — if she couldn't come up with something to feed them, she should hang up her hat.

Heating up a little soup took no time at all, and she put on water for some tea while she took a bowl over to the hot spring and a glass of water. "I hope you're not planning to die on me," she said, keeping her tone light.

A smile pulled at Jackson's tired lips. "A little worse for wear, but I don't think the grim reaper is knocking on the cabin door just yet."

"Here." She set the dishes on the edge. "Eat that. I'm going to hunt and see if there's a first aid kit."

Slowly, Jackson turned in the water, a spark of life in his eyes at the sight of the food and water. "It's in the bathroom cabinet."

Right. That made sense.

The food was a miracle. Jackson looked better after a few bites, color coming back into his skin. She left a towel by the springs before going to grab the first aid kit and opening it up on the dining table. It was... impressive. Definitely more than your average first aid kit. It included supplies for stitching a wound.

"Do you normally prepare to be shot?" She asked. "Seems like it."

Jackson chuckled, and Chandra liked the sound. "No, not usually. But this far out of the way, it's better to be safe than sorry. Looks like it worked in our favor this time."

"Yeah."

Water sloshed, and Chandra looked over to find Jackson pushing his way out of the spring, dripping down onto the floor. For several long beats, she couldn't look away from the sight. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been... interested in someone on sight alone. But wow.

His body disappeared behind the towel, and she went back to setting out first aid supplies, fighting her blush. He sat down in the chair next to her. "Thank you, Chandra."

"You're welcome."

"I hate that I have to ask for more of your help, but this needs to be sewn. Do you know how?"

She swallowed. "I've sewn my fair share, but I don't know if it's the same as fabric."

"Similar, but not entirely the same. I'll walk you through it. You'll be okay?"

"I'm a mother. I've seen worse than this. I'll be fine."

He laughed softly again. "Okay."

The kettle began to whistle, and Jackson cleared his throat. Perfect timing. "We can sterilize the needle with both that and alcohol. Can't be too careful."

She nodded and did as he asked, before coming back to sit across from him. "And is there... anything else to it?"

Swallowing, he shook his head. "Hold it closed in one hand and get both sides as close as you can with the stitches. We just need to get it to stop bleeding."

"Is there any alcohol in this cabin?" She didn't mean the rubbing alcohol in the kit.

"I wish."

Nodding once, Chandra took a deep breath. She could do this. Her statement about seeing worse had mostly been bravado. Though she'd treated her fair share of cuts and scrapes, something this deep and ugly had eluded her. "I don't want to hurt you."

“Can’t hurt me more than it hurts already,” he said gently. “Let’s just get through it.”

She threaded the thin, curving needle and did her best to push the wound close and ignore Jackson’s intake of breath. And keep hold of what little she had in her stomach. One stitch, then two.

“I remember, you know.”

“Remember what?” She didn’t dare look at him, focused on the stitches as she was.

“That night under the bleachers.”

Her face flushed. She recognized that he was trying to distract her from her nerves. It was easy to tell her hands were shaking. “You make it sound much more... illicit than it was.”

Jackson chuckled, the sound evaporating as she started the next stitch. But his distraction had worked, because as she continued to sew the wound, she couldn’t help but think about that night.

She’d decided to stay late at school to work on homework out on the bleachers. It was a nice day, and it seemed a pity to spend it indoors. So she was studying and the football team was practicing, and all of it had been cut short by a storm coming in so fast, the only way to save her books from getting drenched was to drop under the bleachers and cover them with her jacket.

But Chandra hadn’t been the only one to take refuge under the bleachers. For whatever reason, Jackson had as well. She still remembered her shock when he knew who she was, but she shouldn’t have been surprised. Jackson Prince knew everyone.

His smile had been warm and his laugh warmer. With the storm came a sudden chill, and they’d found themselves huddling together in order to keep warmer and drier.

After thirty minutes of easy conversation, it had happened. The rain started to ease, and somehow Jackson’s lips had ended up on hers. Her stomach fluttered with the memory. The

tenderness and the passion. To this day, she couldn't have said how long they kissed under those metal seats.

Her first kiss, and it had been one to remember.

But at some point she realized she'd been kissing *Jackson Prince*.

"Sorry I ran away," she said softly, trying to focus on the task in front of her. It was almost there.

"I've wanted to apologize for it," he said. "I always thought I freaked you out or took it too far."

"No." Chandra shook her head. "No, it was just my first kiss, and a bit overwhelming, considering it was you. You know, Jackson Prince, star of the football team and everyone's dream guy. I was caught between freaking out that my first kiss had been you, and being grateful you'd looked at me at all."

Jackson graduated a few months later. They'd never spoken much after that. Until now...

"Is it wrong to tell you I still think about it sometimes?" He asked. It had to be Chandra's imagination that his voice sounded rougher than it had a moment ago.

"Only as wrong as me admitting the same thing," she said.

She tied off the last stitch, relieved and unsettled by the dark, jagged lines cutting across his arm. Glancing up, she caught Jackson looking at her with a completely different type of interest.

"All finished."

"I appreciate it."

She smiled. "Well, I can't have you dying on me. I need you to get me out of here."

He laughed and groaned as he stood. "I've never been more grateful we keep the basics here." She watched as he pulled dry clothes out of the closet. They were all big—meant for men as big as all the Prince men were—but they were dry, and that was more important.

“Will this do all right to sleep?” He handed her a t-shirt so large it was sure to swamp her.

“It’ll work great.”

They changed one at a time in the bathroom, laying out their wet clothes in hopes the warm air would dry them. Chandra didn’t think or question the fact that she had no underwear now. The shirt Jackson gave her fell nearly to her knees.

When she emerged, he was standing at the end of the bed with a blanket in his hand. “I think we both need some rest.”

“You especially.”

But the elephant in the room appeared, nearly visible. There was only one bed in this small cabin. A big bed, but only one all the same.

“I can sleep on the floor,” he said. “I’m the one who got you into this mess.”

Chandra shook her head. “That’s all right. We’re both adults, and you and I both know we’re too old to be sleeping on the floor.”

He chuckled, and the sound went straight through her. Regardless of what had happened tonight, and despite everything, a little spark of excitement went through her at the idea of climbing into a bed with Jackson Prince. Even if it was entirely platonic.

She got under the covers and he took care of the lights, making sure the door was locked and additionally barricaded with a chair. She noticed he brought his gun to the bedside table, and unlike earlier, she was glad he had it.

The mattress dipped as he made himself comfortable.

“Do you know what time it is?” She asked, wondering how much time had passed since her world had turned upside down.

“A little after midnight.”

Chandra smiled in the darkness. “Merry Christmas.”

Chapter 5

Pulsing pain was the first thing that woke him. Warmth was the second.

When Jackson had fallen asleep, he and Chandra had been on opposite sides of the king-sized bed. Now they were as close as two people could be without being entwined. She was tucked up against his body, snuggling with him like she was made to be there.

He felt stunned. The part that threw him about the last day wasn't the people trying to kill them—that had happened more often than he cared to remember in his life. But Chandra? He hadn't seen her coming.

Their conversation the night before had him strolling down memory lane. It was true, Jackson had thought about Chandra over the years and their single, devastating kiss. He'd even talked to his wife, Lisa, about her a couple of times when they spoke of past adventures. But he'd never questioned why her face stayed with him while so many others hadn't.

Not until now, at least.

With a sigh, he resisted the urge to reach out and touch her further and marveled at the instinct he had to do so. He missed Lisa. Even after five years, there was a hole in his heart where she had been. An incredible wife, an even better mother. He tried to think of her now as the person she was before the cancer stole all of her energy and independence.

He'd lived a life of twenty-five years with her, and there wasn't a regret in him. His sons had a mother that fought for them until her last breath. Who fought for *him* until her last breath.

In the last five years there hadn't been anyone. A few dates, but nothing more than that. The spark he'd been missing simply wasn't there, and he hadn't been interested.

But Chandra?

She interested him. There was a spark that zinged between them he hadn't felt in years. He was more determined than ever to get them out of this situation unscathed, so he could take her on a date. The image of them waking up together after having a *much* better night wasn't one he could let go of.

Moving with aching slowness, he eased away from Chandra and rose. He held back a groan from the stiffness and pain. God, he hated getting older. Back in his active-duty days in the special forces, a few stitches and lack of sleep would have been like skinning his knee.

At the moment he felt like he'd been hit by a sixteen-wheeler and unceremoniously peeled off the asphalt. Even a few years ago he would have felt better than this.

But pain and stiffness didn't matter. People would still be looking for them—both the good guys *and* the bad guys—and he needed to see where everything stood. Beau was probably losing his mind not knowing where he was. The faster he got to a place with cell service and could get everything handled, the better.

His clothes weren't fully dry, but they were close enough. With his gun once again tucked into his belt, he found the keys to the cabin, removed the chair blockade, and slipped out into the bright morning snow, locking the door behind him.

The sky was clear and the air crisp, the entire world buried under six new inches of white. At first glance it looked peaceful, but Jackson had spent time here. Lisa had joined him on this porch with coffee at dawn more mornings than he could count, no matter the season.

It didn't sound like this.

Silence.

The world was far too quiet.

No immediate signs they weren't alone, but every instinct he had told him they weren't. And no matter what he did, if they weren't, it was now obvious. There was no going back and making the snow look untouched. Thankfully it worked both ways.

It didn't take him long to find the footprints.

Too damn close, and too damn obvious that the cabin had been watched. Behind a copse of trees, and exactly where he would have hidden, was the path of tracks. But where were they now?

He followed where the footprints went, trying to keep his steps as quiet as he could in the snow. At least the sound of snow was softer than normal rocks and branches, the whole world wrapped up in the close quiet of being surrounded by snow.

The tracks circled wide and swung back, almost exactly...

Jackson's stomach dropped. They led directly back to the cabin where Chandra was still sleeping. Whichever of the cousins had found them had played musical chairs with him and took advantage of his absence.

Only his desire to keep the element of surprise kept him from sprinting through the snow, no matter how his body felt. But he moved faster.

Peeking around the last tree he needed to see the door, Jackson's breath went tight. Brady Bishop stood on the porch, listening at the door with his hand on the knob. It was locked, but that didn't matter. His gun was in the other hand, and he wasn't a man who would have any qualms shooting through a lock.

He only had one chance to take this fucker down.

Bracing himself, Jackson blocked the pain out of his mind and got ready. Not questioning himself, he launched himself

from behind the tree, using his momentum to spring over the railing straight toward Brady.

The gun swung toward him, and he tackled the man before the shot could go off. It fired into the air, and a second later Jackson's fist was hitting Brady's face and the gun went flying, lost in the snow.

A punch directly to the ribs had Jackson losing his breath, and Brady got out from underneath him with a hoarse laugh. "Is this really the best you could do to hide? Trevor will be back soon with everyone we need. You got away once, but not again, old man."

Jackson huffed out a breath. It was the truth, but no one was going to call Jackson an old man but *him*.

Brady came at him, the momentum crashing them into the railing. *Fuck* the guy was strong. "After we kill you, maybe we'll have a little fun with her before we kill her, too. You won't be there to protect her after I gut you."

A fist to his stomach had Jackson groaning, but he moved past it, adrenaline, fear, and determination flooding his system. He needed to end this quickly. The longer it took, the more likely that he would tire first.

They traded blows, Jackson ignoring the new bursts of pain in his body, finally getting a hold of Brady and shoving him backward down the steps. He took one breath, then another, both men heaving breath and trying to recover for the next round.

Brady groaned, rolling over in the snow. Jackson checked any satisfaction the sound gave him, following the man down into the snow. His lungs burned with the cold air, but he could breathe later. Right now he just needed to finish this.

The creaking sound of the door came from behind, and Jackson turned to find Chandra, wide-eyed and blinking into the sun. Nothing on but the oversized shirt she'd worn to sleep. She was caught between being startled and fear, and even in the tension of the moment, he couldn't help but think she was beautiful.

She gasped, and the glint of sun on metal caught his eye. Brady had found his gun in the snow, and it was pointed straight at her.

No.

He moved without thinking, diving onto the man with his entire weight, knocking the gun away from Chandra and wrapping his hands around Brady's throat. The world tinged red, and Jackson moved, raising his hands and twisting Brady Bishop's neck.

Brady's body went limp beneath Jackson, and he blew out a breath, relieved. He took no joy in killing, but this man had not only threatened him and his family, but Chandra, who had nothing to do with this.

Slowing his breathing, he prepared to turn around. Dead bodies weren't easy to deal with on the best of days, and this certainly wasn't that. There was no way to tell how Chandra might react to what he'd done.

But when he stood and turned, she wasn't standing in the doorway. A second later she appeared, with clothes and shoes on, practically scowling as she came out into the snow. She glanced at the body and away, no hysterics to be found. Instead, she looked at him.

"Did you rip the stitches?" She asked.

"What?"

Chandra pointed to his sleeve, covered in blood. "I can't tell if it's fresh or not. Did you rip them? Do we need to sew you up again?"

Struggling in the snow had wet his shirt and made the blood appear fresher than it was. But of all the things hurting right now, his arm was low on the list. He ran a hand over his sleeve. "I didn't rip them."

"Good." She blew out a breath. "Were did you learn to fight like that?"

"Army Special Forces. I was a Ranger." He looked at her absorb the information with a kind of awe. Chandra had no

reason to know what he'd done with his life after high school and college. But that little widening of her eyes told him she was impressed, and he liked that.

Clearing his throat, he kept going, reaching down and searching Brady's body until he found what he was looking for. The man's phone. "I trained in a lot of hand-to-hand combat. And other kinds. But killing isn't something I do lightly. Ever."

"I know," she said softly.

"He mentioned that his cousin is coming with others. We can't stay here." Not only that, but the signal out here was spotty at best. Closer to the highway they could use the phone to call Beau and tell him everything.

Chandra smirked. "Fine by me. Let's get the hell back to the car and get out of here."

Chapter 6

The snow started again as they walked. What had been a gorgeous and clear morning devolved into a wintry mess in a matter of ten minutes, the storm blowing through and turning the world to a whirling wall of white. Jackson held Chandra close to make sure they didn't get separated in the snow.

It slowed them down, but they made it to the car before the sun had reached overhead. The car was nearly buried with the snow weighing down what was left of the branches they covered it with.

That was the only good news.

Jackson cursed under his breath. The window of Chandra's car was broken, one look telling him they'd gone the quick and dirty route to render the car stationary. The spark plug was gone.

"I'll make sure to get your window fixed," he said.

Chandra chuckled. "Seems like a broken window is a fair trade for still being alive."

He couldn't argue with that.

"Think my phone's still out there?"

"Probably. But buried under the snow it might not work anymore. And the cold probably killed the battery." Jackson pulled Brady's phone out of his pocket and checked the signal. Not much, but enough. "Here. We need to call Beau. If there's

anyone listening to his phone calls, they'll know my voice. But they won't know yours. I'll help you know what to say."

"Are you sure?"

"You can do it." His fingers brushed hers as he passed her the phone. "Disguise anything directly about where we are, but Beau knows to listen for things out of place."

"Should I tell him it's me?"

"No." He shook his head. "Just act like you know him and that he's expecting your call. He'll catch on."

Jackson moved her away from the car and further into the trees where they had more shelter from the quickly falling snow, and were less visible.

Chandra hit the button and placed the call on speaker. Beau answered after one ring, his voice tinged with desperation. "Hello?"

"*Beau,*" Chandra infused her voice with over-polite brightness. "I'm so glad I caught you. I was worried you'd be too busy with Christmas, but you know how things are. Have to check in on one of my favorite people, today of all days."

There was a brief silence before Beau laughed. "You know I always have time for you. We're just finishing up cleaning all the wrapping paper. Have to crunch it up and throw it away before Aunt Sarah gets to ironing it."

Lisa didn't have a sister, but it was a surefire way to tell Jackson Beau knew what was happening. "My buddy still with you?" He asked. "Doing okay?"

"Oh, as good as can be expected. You let him off his leash and he'll get into all kinds of trouble." Her eyes twinkled with amusement as she looked at him. "But he's still breathing, and even the latest trouble wasn't too bad."

Wasn't too bad? He raised an eyebrow at her. Almost bleeding out, almost getting shot, almost a *lot* of things didn't fall under his umbrella of 'not too bad.'

"Will you be around today? Everyone would love to see you."

Chandra flicked her eyes to Jackson's, and he shook his head. "No," she said. "Headed out of town for the holidays. Needed a little space to breathe."

"Oh? Where'd you'd decide on?"

"Little rental. Incredible place with a natural tub in this hot spring that sinks into your bones. You'd like it."

Beau chuckled again. "I've heard of that place. Sounds like a good place to spend a few days."

"But if everyone wants to see me, I could come home early."

"That's okay," Jackson's son said, almost too quickly. "With this storm rolling in and getting worse, nobody's going anywhere. Pretty much all of Fairytale is grounded. Hell, I'm jealous of you and that tub. Stay there and take advantage of it."

"I will."

"I even heard they have a fireplace there. With a new mantle. Someone told me they made it out of a weird new material. Make sure to check it out for me."

"Will do. From where I'm standing, it's definitely unique."

"Thank you for checking in," Beau said. "I've got to run now, but have a good rest of your Christmas Day and I'll talk to you again as soon as I can."

"Sounds good. Bye, Beau."

She ended the call, and Jackson noticed the way she shivered. "That was amazing. Thank you."

"Guess we have to walk all the way to the cabin?"

"At least we'll already have a trail," he said, putting an arm around her shoulders in an attempt to keep her warmer.

They walked in the soft silence for a while. "So he knows where we are?"

"Yes. I don't know what his plans are, but now that he knows, we'll be in good shape."

Chandra looked to the sky where the clouds darkened and it seemed like the snow fell harder with every passing minute. “It’s a good thing you all keep the place stocked with food.”

“You know what the Boy Scouts say. Always be prepared.”

They fell into a comfortable—if cold—silence the rest of the way back. Both Jackson and Chandra were exhausted, and he was more than relieved at the thought of using the hot springs again, at the same time that he hoped Beau was right and the storm would keep Trevor and his ‘reinforcements’ grounded for the time being.

He kept Chandra close and listened through the wind, ignoring the aches of his body in order to make sure they were still safe. It was Christmas Day. He hadn’t planned on letting them die, but he sure as hell wasn’t letting it happen on Christmas Day.

By the time they made it back to the cabin, Brady’s body was buried under fresh snow. They were both damp and freezing, and he was grateful they’d left the heat on.

“Get warm,” he told Chandra as soon as they were inside and he got the door closed, locked, and barricaded. “Please.”

She looked like she might say something against it, glancing at his arm, but decided not to, heading over to the hot springs. Jackson intentionally looked away. The previous night they’d had little choice but to be in the water together to warm up and he’d tried to protect her privacy as much as he could as he studied her face, though he was too much of a man not to notice she’d kept on her underwear.

Chandra groaned as she sank into the heat. “I never thought I needed a tub that was always hot at my beck and call, but I won’t lie. This is nice.”

“It is. After this, feel free to use it whenever you like. It’s the least I can do for dragging you into this mess.”

“Sometimes a little excitement is a good thing.”

He glanced over and met her eyes as she sank low in the water, that same mischievousness from the phone call shining through. Speaking of the phone call...

“Beau said something about the mantle. And as far as I remember, we haven’t actually changed anything about it.” He approached the fireplace, noting the supplies there. Neither of them had been awake enough to consider a real fire last night, but after he figured out what the hell his son was going on about, it was at the top of his list.

“I wasn’t sure what he meant by that either,” Chandra admitted. “But you were right. He caught on very quickly.”

“Good thing, too. Hopefully he’s right and the storm will slow Trevor and his boys down.” He moved all the pictures and knickknacks on the mantle and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Until...

On the underside of the inner corner, there was a small button he was absolutely sure hadn’t been there the last time he visited. He pressed it, and a soft whirring sound had him turning, and then laughing.

A piece of the wall receded to reveal a screen with cameras set up around the perimeter of the cabin. Motion sensors too. It was all running, though muted. Jackson shook his head as he turned up the volume on the alerts. His sons would think of everything.

Though this would have been nice to know about earlier. *Before* Brady had shown up and tried to kill them. Jackson made a note to tell Beau to keep him informed of improvements like this in the future.

“What’s that?”

“Security,” Jackson told her. “Seems like Beau set up a whole system for the place.” He stripped down to his boxers before joining her in the hot water, reveling in the burn that told him his body was coming back to normal.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful for it now. But doesn’t an entire security system for a cabin like this seem a little... overkill?”

He leaned against the rocky side of the springs. “It could be. But we’ve seen enough things, all of us, that we’d rather be

safe than sorry. And like you said. We're grateful for it now."

Jackson was especially grateful. Knowing they'd have at least a little more warning if someone were to come for them allowed the knot between his shoulders to ease just a little. Beau was right.

Glancing toward the windows, he agreed with Beau. No one in their right mind would be out in this storm. Later? Sure. But for the moment, they were as safe as they could be.

Chapter 7

Chandra couldn't remember the last time she was this tired. She worked hard at the café, but between the miles walked, the snow, and all the adrenaline, she was fading fast. The heat of the surrounding water wasn't doing much to help that either.

Shaking herself more awake, she tried not to focus on the fact that Jackson was so close by and that he made her feel things she thought had been long abandoned in her life. She needed a distraction, and she still didn't know nearly enough about his life after Fairytale High.

"Is Beau your only son?" She asked.

A warm, rough laugh tumbled from Jackson's lips. "No. Actually, he's one of ten."

"*Ten?*" Chandra gasped. "How did I not know that? And how?"

His smirk was one more thing she tried to ignore as she pressed herself into the corner of the pool.

"Lisa and I got married in our twenties, and we had three. When her brother and his wife passed, we took in their three. Life came at us and dropped two boys in our lap who needed adopting, and we fell in love with them before we could think twice about it. And then two more additional that aren't Princes, but might as well be. They're part of the family. They're all somewhere in between twenty-five and thirty-five now. I'm a good father, but I'm not keeping track that closely anymore." He chuckled.

Married. He was married. Of course she knew that, but the reality of her thoughts made her blush. She needed to shut anything else down right now. He was saving her life and nothing more.

“Though,” he said, “I’m trying to spend more time with them now that their mother is gone. Keep us all together.”

Chandra closed her eyes. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. Five years ago. Cancer. But we had a good run.”

She nodded. “It’s not the same at all, but I sympathize with thinking your life would go one way when it actually went another.”

“What do you mean?” Jackson frowned at her, watching her almost too closely.

“I got married young, too. I loved him. The plan was for me to work and put him through medical school, then he would work to pay off those loans and I would go to college. It just... it didn’t happen like that.”

The silence hung in the air, and Chandra realized he was waiting for her to continue. She hadn’t meant to derail the conversation with her life’s story, but she was already halfway down the path. Might as well keep going.

“After I had Lilly, he decided he didn’t want to be a father. That his career took precedence, and he didn’t have the time.” She tried to disguise the pain of it in her words, but it was something that would always hurt. Chandra wasn’t hung up on it. Not anymore. But there was a piece of you that never truly healed when the person you loved most tossed you aside like you were worthless.

“Anyway, I was too busy working to support us to go to college, so it never happened. Like I said, it’s not the same.”

Jackson looked at her, and a flush rose to her cheeks. The expression on his face was hard to interpret. Somewhere between fury and horror.

“I’m sorry, Chandra. It’s hard for me to wrap my head around that. You were always smart. Always had your head in your books.” He smiled. “Even under the bleachers. I’m sorry you never got to continue.”

“It’s okay,” she said, making it lighter than she felt. “I didn’t need a school to learn. I found other ways.”

“I’m sure you did.”

Something about the way he said it pulled at her mind, pulled her *closer*, and it was all she could do to stay on her side of the springs.

“How did owning the café happen?” He asked.

Chandra opened her mouth and shut it. There were so many things she could say. Like one of the reasons she came back to Fairytale was thoughts of him. But she wasn’t going to admit *just* how often she thought of him over the years. She had already admitted too much while she was stitching him up.

“Lilly is studying in Singapore.”

His eyes went wide. “Really?”

She grinned. “Yeah. Computer science. She’s having an amazing time. But without her there? City life wasn’t for me. Then, when I saw the café go up for sale, it felt kind of like... fate. It’s only been a few months. But I’m happy. Fairytale is home. I feel better when I’m here.”

The light in Jackson’s eyes was intoxicating. He laughed. “Well, I’m glad you’re here. I’d be dead if you weren’t.”

Chandra didn’t want to think about that. She floated to the edge of the pool, keeping her body fully under the water. “Now that we’re warm, let’s see about using some of that food. I’m sure between the two of us we can come up with something more substantial than soup.”

His answering chuckle seemed strained, but in the corner of her eye, she saw him glance toward her as she climbed out before he respectfully looked away. But he had looked first.

She hid a smile.

Pulling a towel around her, she changed into another too-big shirt in the bathroom. They existed in a pleasant silence for a bit while she investigated the cabinets in the small kitchen. Soon enough she heard the splashing sounds of Jackson exiting the water.

Fair was fair. She looked too.

And looked away. She'd seen him last night, and again when he got in the pool. But even Chandra was affected by the sight of him climbing out of water like a perfume commercial. Even if nothing happened between them, she would remember this.

Pulling out options for their food, she startled when he spoke, closer than she realized. "Chandra?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're back. But I'm also happy to hear you think of Fairytale as your home."

She smiled, because she was too.

Chapter 8

A chirping sound woke him.

Jackson dragged his eyes open and nearly groaned. Chandra was snuggled up next to him again, and if it wasn't the perimeter alarm keeping them alive, he would have thrown something at the damn computer so he didn't have to move from the comfort and warmth of her body next to his.

"What is that?" she asked, waking up, opening her eyes and realizing just how close they were. The day before he'd left her alone. Today there was nothing else to do but to face the gravity that pulled them together in the night.

"It's the alarm," he said. "Get dressed in case we need to go. I'm going to check it out."

Jackson threw on his damp clothes at top speed and shoved his feet into his boots, grabbing his gun. The little cameras on the screen didn't show anyone directly outside, but even if it was just an animal running by the sensor, he needed to check.

The storm had lessened in the night, but snow still swirled in the air as he eased out the door and shut it behind him. He didn't bother to conceal his tracks. If it were an animal it didn't matter, and if it were Trevor and his boys, they already knew he and Chandra were here.

It took no time at all to see multiple sets of human footprints in the snow. Beau was mistaken. The snow didn't stop the ambush after all. And there were too many of them. He felt better after relaxing yesterday and a good meal and

night's sleep, but he was still sore, and even in his prime, taking on multiple tangos in a snowstorm would have been a death sentence *alone*.

And he wasn't alone.

They needed to run.

"Chandra?" He burst into the cabin almost too quickly. She was there, dressed and waiting. "We need to go."

She nodded calmly. "Okay. Where?"

No questions and no hesitation. God, there was a reason she'd never left his thoughts all these years. He was half in love with her already, and the trust she showed him was likely to push him the rest of the way.

"Frankly? Anywhere. But we're going to try to get to the highway. Even with the storm, we're more likely to encounter friendlies there."

"Got it."

"I'm sorry," he said, pulling her to the door. "I'm going to get you out of this."

She smiled up at him, and he pretended it was the cold air outside that stole his breath. "I know."

"Let's go."

He locked the door behind them, pointless as it might be, and they ran. Not as fast as they could—they might need that burst of energy later—but fast enough.

It was quiet in the snow, but nothing to tell him they were being watched or tracked. For a brief moment, Jackson thought they would make it clear of the cabin's vicinity without being seen at all. If he could ask the universe for anything—

"*THERE*. They're over there!" A shout came from behind them. So much for pacing their stamina. He pulled Chandra behind him, sprinting through the snow.

Fuck, it was like running on sand.

One glance behind him showed three men chasing. Another glance showed him five. There was no way to outrun them. Not with both of them.

Chandra needed to leave. They needed to separate in order for her to stay alive. And he had to make it so they didn't see it.

Jackson looked around, searching for something...

A thicker grouping of trees was the best he could do. Pulling her into the center, he stopped briefly, chest heaving. "You have to keep going straight. I'm going to lead them west."

"What?" Her eyes went wide. "No."

"Yes."

He glanced out from behind the trees. They weren't in sight at the moment, and it didn't make him feel any better. They were being stalked.

"I can't do this without help, Chandra. And you're the only person who can get it. Now I can keep them occupied, but I need you to go. *Please.*"

She searched his gaze, looking for something. It didn't bother him if she saw he was starting to care too much. That he wanted her safe and away from here.

"Okay."

Turning her, he pointed in the direction they'd been running. "Straight. Go straight in that direction until you run into a creek. It might be frozen, but it's big enough not to miss. It's along the highway. Turn north and go with the creek until you get to the gas station. And call Beau." He tucked Brady's stolen phone into her pocket. "Got it?"

Chandra looked unsure, but she nodded firmly. "Got it."

Taking his gun out of his pants, he held it out to her. "Do you know how to use it?"

She nodded once. "Yes. But you need it."

“You need it more.” Jackson pressed the weapon into her hand, making it clear he wasn’t taking no for an answer. “Go.”

She hesitated for one more second, like something was on her lips. A tiny shake of her head had her changing her mind. “Please don’t die.”

“I’ll do my very best not to.”

He watched her go straight into the trees, disappearing into the snow before he stepped out from their hiding spot into full view. Taking a full breath, he shouted into the wind. “All right, you fuckers. You want to do this? Let’s do this.”

Then he started to run. Away from Chandra.

He lied.

There was almost no chance of him getting out of this alive.

As he ran, he snapped branches on trees and taunted them, pulling them to him until he could hear them following even in the snow.

He might not make it out, but Chandra would. And that was all that mattered now. Jackson had dragged her into this mess, and this was how to get her out.

Chapter 9

Chandra's lungs burned. She wasn't in bad shape, but these last few days had pushed the limits of her strength and endurance. She needed to go to the gym more.

Then again, she hoped she wouldn't be running for her life on a regular basis.

She found the creek Jackson told her about and was heading to the gas station for help. It didn't feel right that they were separated, even though she knew Jackson was trying to protect her. Still, if he was hurt while doing it, was it worth it?

Crack!

The sound echoed through the silence, loud and sharp. No mistaking that sound for anything but what it was: a gunshot.

But Jackson's gun was in her hand.

Terror rolled through her. She was still at least two miles away from getting help, and Jackson could be dying. She couldn't leave him to fight all those people without a weapon. It wasn't who she was.

Chandra turned back. This time she didn't follow the stream directly, instead angling back toward where she'd been when she left Jackson. It would be faster.

Every muscle in her body screamed with the effort, but she ran anyway, worry swirling rampant through every part of her. It was possible she was already too late, and Jackson was bleeding out in the snow. She prayed that wasn't the case.

She hadn't been that far away. The snow was hard to run through, and she wasn't fast. She saw her own footprints from where she'd passed by and slowed. Where would he have gone?

An awareness prickled on her spine a second before solid weight slammed into her. Bright, sharp panic sliced like a knife, though she was too out of breath to scream. But like hell was she going down without a fight.

Chandra kicked and clawed, thrashing in the snow, trying to buck the weight off her and maybe get a hit in too. She was braced for a blow that never came.

It registered a second later that he was speaking. The man who had her. "I'm Beau," he said. "Beau Prince. Please stop fighting."

All the strength went out of her immediately, and he backed away, keeping low to the ground. "Beau Prince."

"That's me," he whispered.

"The sheriff?"

"And Jackson's son."

She blew out a breath. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to see you. But do you think tackling me was really necessary?"

The smirk on his face reminded her of his father. "I apologize for that. You looked like a woman on a mission, and I wasn't sure if I called out to you that you wouldn't shoot me."

Grudgingly, she admitted he was right. And the snow had broken their fall, so it barely even felt like she'd been tackled. "Where's the gun?"

Beau held it up. "You mind if I take it?"

"Please. I never wanted it."

She watched as he raised a hand. "My brother Clint is here, too."

"You're here to help?" She asked.

“We’re here to do whatever we have to,” Beau said, eyes hardening.

Chandra got to her feet, but kept low, following Beau’s example. “Jackson’s in trouble. Did you hear the shot?”

“Yes.” A new voice. She turned to see another man behind her now. But he didn’t look at all like Jackson.

She shook her head. “He tried to send me for help, but then I heard the shot...”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Priestly,” Beau said. “We know he’s in trouble and we’re here to help. It was you on the phone?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Thank you for that. And well done. Stay here with Clint. We’ll get Dad and be out of this shortly.”

Beau was on his feet and moving before she had a chance to protest. Clint took his spot, crouching in the snow and keeping watch. He seemed quieter than the other man. A different energy.

“If you need to go help them it’s all right. I’ll be fine alone.”

Clint shook his head. “All ten of us are here. He’ll be all right. Jackson would tan my ass if he knew I left you here alone with people like the Bishops and Miles Tanner on the loose. They’ll handle it.”

“Oh.”

Now that she wasn’t moving and her adrenaline was coming down, it was much colder. But she could handle it as long as all of them came back okay. At the same time, her mind was racing and the open silence was wearing on her. “Are you one of Jackson’s biological sons?” She finally asked.

“No.” Clint smiled for the first time. “I’m one of the honorary ones. You don’t even want to know all the shit that happened with my real family, but the Princes took me in when I was fourteen. Last name is James. Legally, at least.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Clint James.”

He shook her outstretched hand. "Pleasure."

Another gunshot rang out, scaring Chandra out of her skin. She leapt all the way to her feet, but Clint didn't seem concerned in the slightest. He looked up at her with mild amusement before he stood to his full height. "Would you like to watch what's going on?"

Chandra blinked. "How?"

Shifting the gun he held, he pulled out his phone and pulled something up before holding it out to her. It was a grid of cameras, all moving together. "Tap on any of them, it'll show you up close."

In one corner, she spotted her face and gasped. Clint tapped his shoulder. "We're all wearing these."

"Why?"

"Same reason law enforcement does. Proof. Accountability. And for reasons like this. So we can see things and go where we need to go and keep tabs on everything."

Chandra nodded, focusing on the cameras, occasionally clicking between the different feeds. They're moving through the woods with ease, and the glimpses she caught of them through each other's cameras showed the same grace of movement Jackson had shown when fighting yesterday. "Were you all in the military?"

"Some of us," Clint said. "But not all. Jackson taught all of us survival and combat here in these woods. We've been working as a team for years. Whoever's out there doesn't stand a chance."

"If they're not too late."

Clint didn't say anything to that.

A sharp whistle sounded from the phone, and Clint looked down. Reaching out, he flicked to the grid and picked up a different video. The screen now showed someone moving slowly. And in front of him was Jackson's gun. They were watching Beau.

On the screen, one bad guy was already down, and she saw one of the brothers take down another one with an arm around the throat. He held on until the man went limp and laid him down in the snow.

A shout drew her eyes to another camera, and a third man went down with no more than a whimper. The Prince boys were ruthless and efficient, tracking down their prey with ease.

Man number four saw them coming, but it wasn't enough. He was unconscious before he had a chance to sound the alarm. That just left one, and Clint shifted the camera back to Beau's.

In front of him, seemingly unaware, was one of the bad guys.

Chandra didn't see Jackson anywhere, but the man who'd been chasing them didn't seem to know where he was. He was moving slow too, ducking behind trees and looking every direction but behind him, assuming there was no one there.

"Here we go," Clint said quietly, backing the phone up to the grid of cameras.

All at once, everyone moved. Loud shouts and yelling, the bad guys being told to get on the ground. There was almost no resistance, and what little there was posed no problem. She felt like she'd nearly missed it because it happened so quickly.

"Woah. That's it?"

Clint laughed. "I wouldn't say that. But I told you. They never stood a chance."

Chandra tapped on Beau's feed again. "Dad?" He called.

"Over here." Jackson's voice was faint on the video. Like the first night when they'd hidden in the ravine, Jackson appeared out of some rocks where it looked like there was nothing. She stifled a gasp. Fresh blood marred his clothes, and she hoped with everything she had it wasn't his.

"Fuck," she heard Beau say. "Are you bleeding?"

"Yup." Jackson's face was hard. "Is she safe? Chandra?"

“She is.”

In the corner of her eye, she felt Clint look down at her. What was there to say? The fact that she was the first thing he asked about warmed her up inside in a way she never thought she'd feel again.

“Is it safe to see him?”

“Should be.” Clint took his phone back, and they walked further into the woods, meeting the conquering heroes.

The men chasing them had their hands behind their backs, and she had little sympathy for the way they struggled in the snow. She smiled to herself, remembering the phrase Lilly had told her recently. *Fuck around and find out*. If it didn't describe this, what would?

Jackson's arms were slung around Beau's shoulder and one of his other sons. His skin was nearly gray, and he was dragging his feet. But he managed a smile when he saw her. “Told you I wouldn't die.”

“You said you were bleeding?”

For a moment, Jackson glared at Clint where he stood beside her, like he was annoyed he'd showed her the feeds. “I'll be all right.”

Beau snorted. “Like hell. We need to get him to a hospital. He's torn his stitches, and it's bleeding pretty badly.”

“You get everyone?” Clint asked.

“Everyone but Tanner. But my deputies have eyes on him. He'll be picked up soon.”

Sirens echoed from the highway as they walked back. Chandra felt a little lost in the midst of all of them. Jackson kept looking for her, but the pallor of his skin was starting to match the snow. She didn't want to be the reason he got any worse.

The ambulance was already waiting, the EMTs bundling him up and onto the stretcher in record time. All she got was a wave before the doors closed behind him.

It was strange, like the sensation of standing on dry land after spending days at sea. Nothing quite fit together and everything felt like it should still be moving. All of it was over. Just like that.

Beau found her as other officers from the sheriff's department and the state police began to arrive. "Will you be all right if Clint takes you home?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I'd like that."

Following him to a car, Chandra stared into the lightly falling snow, wondering how to go back to normal life.

Chapter 10

“Thanks, Beau.” Chandra said as she hung up the call on her landline. She needed to get a new cell phone. Hers was still buried in the snow somewhere in the woods.

She didn’t know if ‘lost it while fleeing from men actively shooting at you,’ was covered in the warranty, but she was willing to give it a go.

Beau had called to let her know she needed to make a statement and ask her to stop by the station when she had the time. He offered to help her retrieve her car as well, and get it repaired, which she appreciated.

But the most important thing from the call brought her relief. Jackson was home and resting. Doing well.

He hadn’t called her himself, and it was fine.

It was fine.

Did her stomach tie itself in knots at the fact that he hadn’t? Yes.

Was her mind racing, wondering if she’d read too much into their connection after all these years? Definitely.

Logically, Chandra knew it was probably something innocent. He’d had to go to the hospital. For all she knew he’d been sleeping since he got back and hadn’t had a chance to call her. After everything he’d done to save them, the man deserved some sleep.

Yet deep down, she feared it was more.

Maybe what she'd imagined between them was just politeness and necessity. Two people needing each other to survive and nothing more. Maybe like the kiss they shared under the bleachers all those years ago, it would fade into nothing more than a pleasant memory she would think about sometimes.

The thought made her chest ache, but there was nothing she could do about it. She'd left begging for attention in the past. If a man wanted to do something, he would do it no matter the consequences.

Chandra had learned that the hard way.

At least she'd gotten to talk to Lilly, offer a belated merry Christmas. Chandra hadn't told her daughter any of the details of what had happened—she didn't want Lilly catching the first flight home from Singapore—she'd just mentioned that she'd been busy and definitely hadn't felt lonely.

That had been the truth at least.

Chandra stared out the window now, watching the steam rise from her coffee in the afternoon light. The sun was already fading even though it was early. That's what happened in winter.

A knock at the door startled her.

Hope leapt into her chest. Maybe Jackson hadn't called her because he was coming over in person. She wouldn't say no to seeing him right now. As she walked to the front door, she glanced at herself in the mirror, butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

"I was hoping to hear from you so—"

It wasn't Jackson.

Chandra couldn't place the man in front of her for a heartbeat too long. The café. He came in behind the thugs. He was one of *them*. What was his name?

She grabbed the door and forced it shut, too slow. He caught the door and pushed in through the opening, ripping it

from her hands and shoving it roughly closed behind him before locking it.

“Get the hell out of my house.”

He grinned, and the expression made her skin crawl. “But I thought you were hoping to hear from me?”

“That wasn’t meant for you and you know it.”

The man extended his hand. “Miles Tanner. We weren’t introduced properly on Christmas Eve.”

She didn’t take his hand, just staring at him, heart pounding. There was nothing she could do in this situation. The closest things she had to weapons were in the kitchen, and with one look Chandra knew she couldn’t outrun this man, let alone out-muscle him.

Miles sighed. “Fine. I hoped we could do this the civilized way, but I guess we’ll have to skip over that bit.” He pulled out a gun and held it casually. “Let’s go have a seat.”

Chandra retreated to the breakfast nook where she’d been sitting with her coffee, her heart pounding. What could she do?

Sitting across from her, Miles put the gun on the table and glared at her. “You and your little friend have caused a lot of trouble for me, you know that?”

“I don’t even know who you are,” she said. “I certainly don’t know what you’re doing here.”

He laughed. “So you’re going to pretend you weren’t involved in killing my colleagues?”

Chandra scoffed. “You think I killed someone? Seriously?”

“This is getting old.” Miles pulled out a cell phone and slid it across the table to her. “Call him. Right now.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

In less than a second, he picked up the gun and pointed it straight at her. The *click* was loud in the quiet of her kitchen. “Call Jackson *fucking* Prince right now. Or your interior decorating is going to get a very violent makeover.”

She swallowed. “What do you want me to say?”

“Get him to come over here. And if you give him any kind of hint about trouble, I’ll know, and I’ll make him listen while I kill you. Got it?”

Chandra’s mouth and hands felt numb as she grabbed the phone. “Got it.”

She stood to go to the landline and Miles snapped out a hand to catch her arm. “Where are you going?”

“To get the phone number. I don’t just keep everyone’s phone number in my brain. Enjoy that privilege while you’re still young.”

He let her go, though she could feel his eyes watching her like she was prey. Her fingers shook as she found the number. Beau had called from their home number today. Quickly, she dialed the number and lifted it to her ear.

“Speaker,” Miles mouthed. She put the phone on speaker so he could hear everything. Silently, she prayed this could go as well as the first time she pretended with the Prince family.

It rang a couple of times, and one of his sons answered. Not Beau. Her heart was beating so loudly she missed the name.

“Hi.” She cleared her throat. “Can I speak to Jackson, please?”

“He’s still resting,” the son said. She thought it was Clint but wasn’t certain. “But I know he plans to call you later.”

Relief flowed through her, and she couldn’t even enjoy it. Instead, she laughed like he’d said something funny. “I know. I heard about that. I just need to talk to him for a minute and then I’ll let him rest. Promise.”

“But—”

“It’s a question only for him. If I thought you knew the answer, I’d just talk to you. But you know how it is.” Somehow she managed to keep her voice light and breezy. Miles watched her carefully, the gun in his hand, but he didn’t look suspicious. *Yet.*

A long silence filled the other end of the line.

“Hello?”

“Sure,” he finally said. “Let me get him for you.”

She blew out a breath in relief. “Thank you.”

A minute later Jackson’s voice came on the line, clearly groggy. He *had* been sleeping. “Chandra?”

“Jackson,” she put her voice into the light and airy tone she’d used on the phone call with Beau. Clearly fake and over the top. “I was hoping to talk to you.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t called you yet—”

“I was just calling to see if you wanted to make good on that offer to have a drink with me.” She cut him off. “I just made a new batch of sangria, and you said it’s your favorite. But you know how it is. It’s so much better when it’s fresh.”

Another silence. “You know what? Sangria sounds amazing. You want to watch a movie? I’ll bring over *Holiday Inn*.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“I’ll be right over.”

Tension flowed out of her shoulders. “See you soon.” Ending the call, she put the phone back on the table. “Satisfied?”

The man smirked. “Jackson Prince likes sangria?”

“What of it? Sangria is delicious. Liking sweet things doesn’t make you less manly, or whatever bullshit you’ve got in your head about it.”

“You really want to speak to me that way with a gun aimed at you?”

Chandra sat back down and took a sip of her coffee. “As you pointed out, it’s not the first time a gun has been pointed at me in the last few days. And I think you’ve already decided what you want to do. So I’m just going to drink my coffee while we wait, okay?”

He chuckled. "I can see why he likes you."

"He doesn't," she snapped. "Wrong place, wrong time. We managed to survive you. That's all."

Miles Tanner looked at her the way a snake might look at a mouse. "Well, keep cooperating and you'll survive me this time too."

She didn't believe him.



JACKSON'S HEAD POUNDED, and everything still hurt. But none of it mattered because Chandra was in trouble. He'd known the second she spoke in that too-bright, happy tone. The word *sangria* was just icing on the cake. He didn't know who was listening, so he'd played along.

"You shouldn't go anywhere, dad."

"And what would you like me to do? Just leave her in trouble? I'm the one who got her into this mess. Like hell am I leaving her to clean it up alone."

Clint sighed. "You're right. But you're barely on your feet."

"I'm fine. Call Beau. Have him meet us there."

"Got it."

Jackson checked his gun before shrugging on his coat and grabbing his keys. More than Clint came with him. Declan, Ezra, and Garrett piled into the car too. Garrett grinned at him. "You didn't think we'd let you have all the fun alone, did you?"

He nodded once. This wasn't something he could joke about, and he was in too much pain to care about levity right now. He broke about a dozen traffic laws on the way to Chandra's house so it was a good thing one of his sons was the mayor. He knew where she was because Clint dropped her off the night before.

Once he'd woken up, he'd planned on calling her and doing exactly what she'd just done. Asking her out on a date. Now he just hoped she was still alive.

They turned onto the block, and he stopped the truck. "Out. If someone's watching, I can't pull up with the four of you."

His sons exited, jogging into hiding places among the trees. They'd make their way around the house and back him up however they could, but this was on him. Deep in his gut, he knew the outcome of this situation was entirely in his hands.

Everything looked normal at the little house on the edge of town. It suited her. Jackson imagined her waking up early and enjoying the dawn in the rocking chair on the small porch, and smiled.

The gun went in the back of his pants beneath his jacket, and he approached the house to ring the doorbell. Footsteps sounded inside, and Chandra opened the door.

For a second, he froze and forgot the danger to them both hadn't ended. Refreshed and in the comfort of her own home, she was beautiful. God, he wished he were here doing this because he'd chosen it and not because his choices threw her in harm's way.

"Jackson," she said. "I'm glad you're here."

Her eyes flickered to her left quickly. And again.

"I wouldn't miss it," he said with a grin. "And I can't wait to taste that sangria you promised me."

She stepped aside to let him in, and he went.

The barrel of the gun came from the left, exactly where she'd looked. It pressed into his temple. "You're a hard man to track down, Mr. Prince."

"I always was good at hide and seek."

He turned slowly to face the man with his hands raised. Miles Tanner stared back at him. Mild shock rolled through Jackson. Beau said he had eyes on Tanner. What happened? If

Beau had known Tanner was here, he would have woken Jackson up before Chandra even had a chance.

“You wanted him,” Chandra said. “Now you have him. Get the hell out of my house.”

Jackson admired the steadiness of her tone and appreciated that she was trying to get him outside where there was room to maneuver.

“Sorry, no can-do.”

“You said if I cooperated I’d make it through this,” Chandra pointed out, stepping up to Jackson’s shoulder. “I’ve done everything you asked.”

“And I thank you for it,” Miles said, with his eyes on Jackson. “Now I need you to shut up while I deal with him.”

“I will *not* shut up—”

Jackson saw the fury in Tanner’s eyes. “I said *shut up*.”

He moved, going to hit Chandra, and Jackson moved. His hand slammed into the one with the gun, and pain *exploded* in his shoulder even as his weight took Miles to the ground.

The man was faster than he thought, recovering and grappling with Jackson. But he’d had enough. This man threatened him, threatened his family, and now had threatened Chandra. He would end this.

He drove his knee upward into the man’s stomach and rolled them, punching Miles Tanner in the face. Once. Again. And again. The pain in his hand wasn’t anything compared to the satisfaction of finally getting to hit the bastard.

Beneath him, the man went limp, but he couldn’t quite stop himself from hitting him again.

A hand came down on his shoulder and he shook it off, lunging.

“*Dad*. I think you got him. I can take it from here.” Beau hauled him off Miles Tanner’s unconscious body and rolled it over, handcuffing the man.

“You said he was being pulled in yesterday.”

“I thought he was. He slipped his tail, and everything we had said he’d left town.”

“Jackson,” Chandra said.

He took her by the shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, but you’re not.”

“What?”

Her hands fluttered over his shoulder. All the adrenaline chose that moment to slide into him. “Shit.”

The gun had fired into his shoulder, and he was bleeding again. Helping him over to a chair, Chandra smiled. “One of these days I’m going to meet you when you’re not bleeding out.”

Clint was on the phone, calling the hospital. He better not be calling another ambulance. Jackson was perfectly capable of walking his ass to the emergency room.

“I hope so,” he told her. “If you hadn’t called, I was going to. The doctor gave me this stuff that knocked me out.”

“I thought you might,” she said softly. “But I thought maybe it would be another bleachers scenario, too. Something we just think about.”

Jackson’s stomach twisted. “Is that what you want?”

The smile she gave him sent feelings rushing through his body he hadn’t felt in years. “No, that’s not what I want.”

“Me either,” he told her.

Staring at each other for a long moment, the pain slipped back in. “I’ll make you a deal,” he told her.

“And what’s that?”

“I’ll get bandaged up, and tomorrow, I’ll come here and pick you up for a date. No guns, no blood, and no running. Just some food.”

Chandra smirked. “No sangria?”

“Definitely no sangria.”

She laughed, eyes sparkling. “Then it’s a date.”

Epilogue

One Week Later

"I'M JUST SAYING. If I tell you the car's going to be ready on Friday, you can't show up on Wednesday expecting it to be finished and accuse me of bad customer service," Declan growled.

"I suppose it depends on which Friday," Beau said with a grin. "The Friday before? Sure."

Declan rolled his eyes. "You know that's not what I mean, asshole."

"Don't pretend you don't enjoy it when she comes by," Walker said. "I think you like the attention."

Jackson chuckled and sipped his beer. Declan was one of his adopted sons, and Walker was his nephew. But it didn't make a difference. All these men were his sons in every way that mattered. They were there for each other and there for him. Even if that meant helping him change the dressing on his shoulder and managing to get him into a suit for this party.

With a huffed breath, Declan shook his head. "Next thing I know you'll be suggesting I bring my female clients to our parties."

Walker shrugged. "If it'll make you less grumpy, I'm all for it."

“Speaking of coming to the party,” Beau said. “Will Chandra be here soon?”

Jackson nodded. “Should be.”

It was New Year’s Eve, and the Princes always hosted a party every year. Nearly the entire town of Fairytale showed up on their doorstep, and everyone had a good time. The big house was already crowded with people.

He loved this party, but this year excitement fizzed in his veins. Chandra was coming. Not just as his guest, but as his date. True to his word, he’d taken her out to dinner where there was no danger and no blood, and nothing changed for him. He was interested in her, and for the first time since Lisa passed, Jackson felt like it was a good thing.

Beau put his hand on Jackson’s shoulder, like he knew what he was thinking. “All of us saw, dad.”

“Saw what?”

A faint smile. “How much she meant to you. Means to you. Clint said you were out of bed and dressed faster than someone telling you there were pancakes for breakfast. And we all know how you feel about pancakes.”

Looking between the three men in front of him, Jackson looked for some sign of resistance. Part of his reluctance had always been worry his sons would think he was leaving Lisa behind.

It wasn’t the case. It would never be the case. Lisa would always hold a place in his heart. But Jackson was learning his heart was bigger than he imagined.

“She held it together,” Clint said, stepping up to their little cluster. “Calm while she watched us come get you when most people would have been hysterical. She was brave.”

“I know,” Jackson said. “I—”

“Mom would have liked her,” Beau said. “I think they would have been friends if they’d gotten to know each other.”

Jackson blew out a breath. “So it doesn’t bother you?”

Declan shook his head. “You deserve to be happy. If she makes you happy, then we’re happy too. Besides, if she’s a secret badass, we want her around.”

“Thank you.”

Clapping him on his good arm, Walker looked across the party. “You should get over there and stake your claim before someone else has the same idea.”

He looked across the party and was immediately grateful he’d put on his best suit and made sure he looked good. Chandra stood in the foyer in a red dress that reminded him of the time they spent in the hot springs. In a good way. He’d had to avoid looking at her curves then, too.

Beau laughed. “Go get her, Dad.”

“Hush, boy. I’m working up to it.”

Looking at her felt like getting hit by a train. It was the same feeling he used to get when he first met Lisa. Jackson never imagined he could feel like this again, and he needed a second to catch his breath.

Chandra locked eyes with him across the room and smiled. His feet were suddenly moving without him realizing. He stood in front of her, still taller even though she wore silver high heels which made her taller.

“You look beautiful.” He leaned in to kiss her cheek, the perfume on her skin intoxicating. He didn’t want to pull back, but he did.

“Not so bad yourself,” Chandra murmured. “Thank you for inviting me.”

He held out a hand. “Would you like to dance?”

“Isn’t it a little early for dancing?” She laughed.

“Not with you.”

Jackson savored the delicate pink blush as she took his hand, not caring at all when people watched him pull her to the empty space they used as a dance floor and held her close. “Hope you don’t mind everyone staring,” he said.

“It’s a little like what I imagine being prom queen was like,” she said. “If I’d been anywhere close.”

“This is better,” he promised.

“How so?”

Smirking, he turned her under his arm. “Well, we’re not in high school, so that’s a plus.”

She laughed. “True.”

“Second, we know what it’s like to *live*. We know we’re mortal, and it makes every moment matter.”

More couples joined in the dancing, but Chandra kept looking at him, awe in her gaze. “Yeah.”

Jackson danced with her until they were tired, and then he got them both drinks. Then food. He didn’t leave her side unless he had to, and people noticed. Let them notice. If he had his way, they’d be seeing a lot more of Chandra and he together.

As midnight approached, he took her hand and pulled her outside. The boys always created this, but they kept it hidden from the party guests in case the family needed a place to retreat. Which meant he and Chandra were entirely alone.

“Oh *wow*,” she breathed the words. “This is beautiful.”

The entire deck was surrounded with heaters keeping the cold and the snow at bay, with Christmas lights strung overhead in a spangled canopy. The result was a gentle, glowing gazebo just for the two of them.

“I’m glad you like it.” He only looked at her.

She looked at him right back. “I do.”

Inside, cheers began, and people were counting down from ten. Jackson smiled. “I’ve seen a lot of new years, but I’m glad to be starting this one with you.”

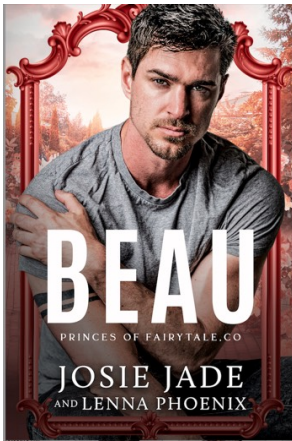
“Think we’ll be here next year?” She asked.

“We better be. Cause I’m done only thinking about that kiss. And I don’t plan on stopping this time.”

Chandra closed her eyes as Jackson leaned in, and his lips met hers as the clock struck midnight. She wrapped her arms around his neck, deepening their kiss, and didn't let go.

He never planned on letting her go again.

•••



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A Hero in Paradise

Chapter 1

“Patio’s clear, Mo.”

From behind the bar, Maureen Lassiter smiled at Lisa, the lone waitress on duty tonight. “Thanks. You set the gate?”

“Windows and door too,” Lisa confirmed. “We’re zipped up tight,” she said, breezing into the kitchen.

“Great.”

Maureen and Lisa were the only staff remaining at the Beachcomber. She’d sent the cook home to his family after the final call for food a couple of hours ago. She could serve up a salad or some of the soup they kept simmering if a customer insisted on eating. Otherwise, everything from here on out would be easy clean-up. She didn’t want to keep Lisa a minute longer than necessary. The woman had a big extended family and the little ones were hyped up for the holiday.

Maureen eyed the Beachcomber’s main room with pride. This place was her responsibility and she figured the regulars were a testament to her good work. She’d tended bar here since coming to Key West for a fresh start. And when the original owner had sold it to her, she’d continued his legacy, keeping things geared toward the locals with great food and company. The Beachcomber had been the perfect venture for her as a single mom, giving her the challenge she craved and the flexibility to be available for her son, Tim.

These days, he did most of the heavy lifting, though Maureen remained the owner on paper. But she didn’t work

full shifts too often and her legs and feet were protesting. Maybe she should've accepted Tim's offer to tag along on his family vacation to Walt Disney World.

That place knew how to infuse the holidays with magic. Definitely more magic than the strings of colorful lights in shark and mermaid shapes and the swags of greenery she'd draped over the doorways and around the bar top.

Except her feet would be aching just as much in Orlando. Probably more. Tim's four-year-old twins would be having the time of their lives meeting their favorite characters and heroes. Loading up on treats, marveling at shows, and squealing through age-appropriate rides.

It would've been a blast.

"And it'll be even better when you go back with them in a year or two." Her son and his wife were big Disney fans.

The man sitting alone at the bar cocked his head. "What's that?"

She glanced over at the familiar face. Officer Jenkins was with the Key West police department. Experienced and kind, he was one of the good guys in the world. He was alone tonight, but he and his wife were regulars. More than that, they both constantly sent new business her way.

"Just muttering to myself," she said, smiling. "Tim took the family to Disney World."

"The twins must be flying high." Jenkins shook his head. "Why'd you stay behind?"

"Because the twins must be flying high." She chuckled and he joined in. No point in mentioning her doctor's recent orders to rest a knee that was giving her trouble. "This first trip is special. I'll join them next time."

"Good for you. Just remember the winter months aren't nearly as hot."

"Please." She waved that off. "We live in the tropics. We know how to cope with heat and humidity."

“True. And it is the happiest place on earth in any weather.” He cashed out and wished her a Merry Christmas. He and his wife usually traveled to see her family in Atlanta, so Maureen didn’t expect to see him again until after New Year’s.

Lisa cruised through the dining room, gently nudging along the last few customers while Maureen’s thoughts drifted back to her family. At this hour, they were surely sacked out in the hotel room, dreaming sweetly of the day’s adventures.

The happiest place on earth wasn’t for the faint of heart or a bum knee.

She took a breath and carried glassware back to the dishwasher. This wasn’t a day for self-pity, despite the unexpected changes she’d been dealing with since passing fifty. If anyone had issued warnings that gray hair, achy joints, and wrinkles could appear overnight, she missed those alerts.

Of course, she wouldn’t have been thrilled about those telltale signs of a body’s experience even if she’d been vigilant. Ignoring her grumbling knee and her crying feet, she carried clean glassware back to the bar, pleased to see the last customers had headed out.

“It’s officially only two more days until Christmas,” Maureen said just after midnight as they worked through the last of the closing chores.

“Do you want to join us for dinner on Christmas Day?” Lisa offered, not for the first time.

“No, thank you,” Maureen declined once again. The girl was an absolute love. “I have my grocery order all set, including champagne for Christmas morning. It’s going to be amazing.”

“If you change your mind, you know where to find us. We serve dinner at three.”

Maureen knew the time as well as the one-rule dress code: no jammies at the table. “If I change my mind, I’ll let you know.”

Lisa shook her head. “Not necessary. Just come on over and join the chaos.”

“I promise to do that if I get lonely.”

When they finished, Maureen stood in the open doorway, soaking up the salty night air blowing in from the ocean as she watched Lisa walk out to her car. Lisa drove off with a wave and Maureen stepped inside and locked the door. Maybe Lisa was too young to understand or maybe she just didn't share Maureen's need for quiet time. Being alone never bothered her.

Though it had bothered plenty of other people in her past.

“One reason they are in the past,” she told herself briskly. She turned up the music to finish the register count and prep the deposit. It was late and she was tired, but half an hour now would make a world of difference tomorrow.

She felt more than heard something bump into the patio. It wasn't uncommon. The bar backed right onto the beach and people wandered through all the time, not always sober enough to navigate the pathway.

As she turned down the music and turned on the security lights, she saw a shadow and a quick blur of movement.

Swearing under her breath, she checked the lock between the patio and the bar. Lisa had secured everything, just as she'd said. There was no reason to think anyone could come in. No way she was going to invite trouble in by opening that door.

She could, however, go around from the kitchen and make sure everything was okay.

With her phone in hand and the flashlight carving a path through the darkness, she marched back, making no attempt to be quiet. If someone was up to something, she wanted them to know she was coming. If they were smart, they'd move along. “We lock the door for a reason,” she called out. “The bar is closed!” No sound at all. “You're trespassing.” Maybe the extra motivation would be helpful.

Instead, her flashlight caught on two people, one slouched back against the half wall of the porch and the other turning and bolting away into the darkness beyond the reach of her security lights.

She had half a mind to let the person sleep it off. The police patrolled the area and eventually they would find this person and make them leave. But something about the person's stillness bothered her. She noticed the scruffy beard and shaggy hair. He looked as if he'd been out on the water all day. Maybe a few days. Mirrored sunglasses were hooked in the pocket of his shirt, reflecting the security lights overhead.

"Hey are you okay?" She walked outside. "Sorry I scared off your friend." She took a step closer and still no reaction. This guy was out cold.

Cautiously, she approached, until she was close enough to realize he wasn't passed out. He was dead.

She pressed her fingers to his throat, looking for a pulse. Instead, she found a hole in his shirt and under it, a small wound near his collarbone.

Doing her best not to disturb anything further, she scurried back to the bar. Fumbling with her keys, she managed to get inside and lock the door again. Heart racing, she called the police.

So much for going home and putting up her feet.

Chapter 2

Will Frasier did a double take when he saw Jess Keller's number pop up on his cell phone. Like him, she was a cop. Well, she had been. Still, as a father, he felt that immediate prickle of concern for his boys. Didn't matter that they were all grown. Parenting habits died hard and his boys were good at getting into trouble. Of course, they were all within eyesight right this second, fueling up at the hotel breakfast bar for an active vacation day ahead.

Was something wrong with his house? More trouble on the island?

His oldest son looked over and raised an eyebrow. They were all supposed to be unplugged for the vacation. Not a hard rule, but he'd been trying to set a good example.

"I've gotta take this." He walked away from the table and outside into a sunny morning and the heady fragrance of a lush tropical garden. Not the traditional December holiday scents, but he enjoyed the change-up and the clear weather. "Hey, Jess."

"Frasier." She sounded relieved. "Glad I caught you. I need a favor."

"Happy holidays to you too," he said.

"Right. Whoops." He could imagine the cringe on her face. "I'm sorry to call while you're on vacation. I'm a terrible person." A thread of apology wound through her voice. "You're all having a good time, right?"

This was the first real break he'd taken all year. No small holiday miracle, in his opinion, that all three of his sons agreed to take off the same chunk of time so the four of them could travel together. And this destination, the Ellington Cove resort in particular, was all thanks to Jess helping him make the arrangements.

"Go down to the Keys for Christmas, you said. It'll be a great vacation experience." He glanced around. So far, it was incredible.

"You're not having fun?"

Her disappointment was palpable and he felt guilty for stressing her out. "Relax, Jess. We're having a great time." He chuckled.

"Oh, that's good."

Will considered the younger woman a good friend. She'd recently moved away from police work to a more lucrative position managing personnel and assignments for the elite Guardian Agency. The group specialized in private protection and discreet investigation. A few of their people had helped resolve a situation back home on Brookwell Island, South Carolina.

Will moved deeper into the garden, toward an array of tall spiky flowers his wife would've been able to name. Jeannie had been all about those details. It had been years since they'd lost her and still, the grief reached out and grabbed him in the most unexpected moments.

"What kind of favor?" he asked.

"I can feel you glaring," Jess replied with a smile in her voice.

He'd known her since she was a kid growing up alongside his own boys in their small island town, just a short ferry ride from Charleston.

"Let me hit the restart button," Jess said. "How's your vacation going, Frasier? Are the four of you having fun?"

He played along. “Why, yes, Jessica. Thank you for asking. We’re having a lovely time here at Ellington Cove. The tropical weather is perfect, there’s holiday music and cheer everywhere we turn. Even the fishing charter we took was sporting Christmas greenery.”

“That’s wonderful,” she gushed. “What are you doing right now?”

He smiled. “Soaking up the salt air in the garden while the boys destroy the breakfast buffet.”

“Nice.”

Her sincerity made it impossible to stay irritated. “Sure is,” he agreed.” And he did owe her. When he’d grumbled about needing something different for the holidays, she’d come to his rescue, helping him plan this last-minute trip for himself and his sons. She’d called in favors with her contacts to get them a suite and gone out of her way to book three separate hard-to-get tours. “Thanks for making it happen.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What is it?” She’d called, clearly feeling pressed about something. “How can I help?”

“Frasier, I swear I didn’t expect this,” she began. “I would’ve sent you to Tahoe or something if I’d known there’d be trouble down there.”

“I believe you.” He did. Jess didn’t do drama. She didn’t use people.

On the other end of the call, he heard her breath hitch and sigh. “Wow. Thanks for that. We got a call from a local business owner. A friend, really. She called the agency for help and I want to deliver, but I’m short on people.”

“It’s the holidays.”

“Exactly.”

She was wincing again. “Spit it out, Jess.”

“I’m sure I mentioned the Beachcomber.”

“You did.” She’d told him the bar had some of the best food around, along with beach access and a spectacular selection of local craft beer. His middle son, Lance, dreamed of owning a brewery someday and was all about getting over there as soon as possible.

“The owner found a body behind her place last night. The cops are working the case, but she called the agency too, asking for protection.”

“Why?”

“There was a second person. A person who ran away. The beach was dark and she didn’t get a good look, but—”

Will swore. “The person who ran doesn’t know that.”

“Correct. She’s been too unsettled to leave the bar.” Jess cleared her throat. “I know you’re on vacation, but can you make time to protect her, at least until the KWPD gets a grip on the situation?”

“Sure.”

“You mean it?”

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “Working or not, it’s paradise here in Key West, right?”

She snorted. “Usually, yes. I’ll send you all the details. And send your information to her if that works.”

“It does.” He wandered toward the pool and sat down on a lounge. “I should’ve come down to the Keys ages ago,” he told her. “The plastic flamingos decked out in Santa Claus hats were unexpected, but like everything else, it’s growing on me.”

“That’s a tradition I’d love to implement here, but Nash voted me down.”

Will laughed. “Obviously he has good taste in women and lawn decor.”

“You’re a riot, Frasier.” But he heard the smile in her voice. “And your boys won’t mind?”

“They’re grown. Probably have more fun without me underfoot.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute,” she said.

“We’ll see.”

Although his sons were all grown up and out doing their own thing in the world, on Brookwell, they’d always been known as his “boys”. Will appreciated Jess’s indulgence with the phrase he couldn’t seem to break. Something about being a dad, watching them mature, didn’t change the fact that he could still picture each one of them as toddlers, wide-eyed and wowed by the smallest things, especially at the holidays.

When the boys had been young, Will and Jeannie had stayed close to home during Christmas to give them strong roots, traditions, and good memories. But Jeannie’s death changed everything. Although he and the boys spent plenty of time together, he could feel his sons aching for traditions they just couldn’t duplicate. Age didn’t make any difference. Hell, he was in his fifties and he felt the same way they did. Baking her favorite cookies was fine, but it sure wasn’t the same experience as *helping* her bake those cookies. If he tried to make a list, it would never end.

They missed their mom. He missed his wife. Missed her laughter and silly jokes. Her cold feet and warm spirit and her innate ability to connect with others. The holiday season just emphasized the magnitude of what they’d all lost.

“They want to be down at the beach all the time,” he continued. “To hear them talk, you’d think they were raised somewhere with bitter-cold winters.” In reality, the worst weather on Brookwell involved the occasional tropical storm or hurricane. Of course, the weather in Key West was warmer and the general atmosphere was far more unique.

“Oh.” She stretched out the word. “They must’ve discovered holiday bikinis.”

Will laughed. “Got it in one. Better than the Santa flamingos.” Her laughter was contagious. “They’ll manage the holiday vacay vibes just fine without me.”

“Truly, I didn’t plan this.” Jess switched to business mode, her voice cool and even. “It shouldn’t take me more than a day or two to find someone to take over.”

“Please don’t worry about it. One question first.” He braced his elbows on his knees. “Am I your first or second choice?”

“First choice,” she said a little too quickly. “Seriously, Frasier. When I saw this request, you were the only person I wanted to put on it.”

“Why is that?”

“Aside from your sparkling personality?”

He barked a laugh despite the hesitation she’d tried to hide. “Spill it.”

“It’s your experience,” she continued. “Your common sense. You don’t fly off the handle or panic.”

“Think I’m gonna need all that, huh? You’re making this case sound more and more interesting.”

She ignored his sarcasm. “This is a short-term thing, I swear. She’s nervous, understandably. The police don’t have any solid leads and they’re short-handed right now, so posting a patrol isn’t high on their list.”

“I get it.” He’d covered plenty of holiday weeks during his tenure on the police force even in a town as small as Brookwell. “Does this make me a Guardian agent?” It didn’t have the same ring as James Bond, then again, this protection gig wasn’t likely to involve seduction or crazy gunfights. He’d brought along the revolver he often carried in an ankle holster, but that was just habit.

“It makes you a special consultant,” she said, her voice prim.

He chuckled. That was the same title they’d given her when she’d returned to assist the Brookwell PD with security for a drug seizure. “Fair enough. What can I tell my boys?”

“As little as possible, please. I’ll send you all the details and get you connected with a Guardian Agency assistant.”

He'd never heard of that. "What do they do?" And why did she think he'd need help?

"We assign assistants to every case. They work in the background on research and can offer oversight if you need it. Consider them the remote answer to someone watching your six."

"Shouldn't that be your job?"

She was the one pulling him into this.

"Trust me, you want one of the pros. My focus is putting the right people on the right ops, the research team folks are much faster than me at all the behind-the-scenes stuff."

"And all of this is legal?" He wasn't sure how he felt about trusting an absolute stranger, one working remotely, to watch his back.

"Come on. I would never jeopardize your pension, Frasier."

"Just making sure." She knew him too well. "Us old guys need to be cautious. Can you put it in writing? I'm kidding," he added quickly. "I'll head over there as soon as I tell the boys."

"Thanks," she said. "I've cleared it for you to use a Cove courtesy car. My plan is to find someone to trade shifts with you, but right now—"

"It's just me. That's fine. And what if trouble finds your friend?"

"Call the KWPD, then call your assistant. He'll coordinate. Your job is to keep the client safe."

"Got it." Frasier caught sight of David, his oldest, coming outside. "All right. Get me the info and give Nash my best. I'm wishing the two of you a very merry first Christmas."

"Oh." She sounded surprised. "Thank you."

He probably needed to work on his people skills if his warm comments shocked his friends.

"Give my best to the boys," she said.

“Consider it done.” The call ended and he slid the phone into his pocket.

“What’s up?” David asked, his brow puckered.

“Are y’all done with breakfast?”

“Most of us.” David glanced back toward the building. “Eli could eat all day.” He folded his arms over his chest. “Spill it, Dad.”

Will thought about his youngest with a wry smile. At twenty-six he ate as if he were still growing. “I picked up a side job,” he said. “Nothing serious or involved. Just doing Jess a favor for the next day or two. She is the one who hooked us up with everything here.”

David’s skepticism was as clear as the sky overhead. “The next day or two? That’s Christmas Eve and Christmas.”

Naturally, David—aka Mr. Responsible—would take issue with the timing. Will couldn’t fault him. This wasn’t anything close to normal for their family. Before or after Jeannie.

“Fine. Technically, she means today and tomorrow. And yes, I realize tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Jess is working to get someone else on board after that, but for right now—”

“On board by Christmas Day. Right. What’s the job?”

“Nothing serious,” he repeated. His phone chimed in his pocket. Likely the details he needed to get rolling. “You boys go on and have fun. I’ll catch up in a bit.”

“Wait.” David held out his hand. “Give me your phone.”

Will refused. “Why?”

“Turn on location sharing. If you’re working, we have a right to know where you are.”

Hard to argue with that logic, so Will complied. “You boys can take the rental. I’ll be borrowing a courtesy car. That’s how short term this is.”

“Uh-huh.” David obviously wasn’t convinced. “Be safe, Dad.”

“Always.”

His son walked off and Will opened the messages from Jess. He had a couple of pictures to go along with the name and current location. Maureen Lassiter was gorgeous, posing in what was obviously a publicity shot for her Beachcomber bar. It wasn't easy to discern her age, and he had no idea how long ago the picture had been taken, but confident independence pulsed from the image. It was only a guess, but he got the impression that very little rattled this woman. And that intrigued him considerably.

According to his phone app, the place was close by. Will considered walking and thought better of it. The car would be faster and reassure the client that he was taking this seriously.

He didn't want to do anything to undermine Jess or her new role.

Going back inside, he hustled toward the front desk to inquire about the courtesy car.

Chapter 3

Maureen groaned as the alarm blared, her hand smacking at the small table in the general direction of her cell phone. It had been a short night and she was feeling every individual day of her fifty-one years this morning.

She didn't like it.

It wasn't her first time spending a late night in the Beachcomber. There were special events and inventory days among other reasons she got stuck here occasionally. That's why she insisted on keeping a chair in the office that pulled out into a twin bed.

The fold-out chair was better than the floor, she reminded herself as her joints popped and creaked. Better than trying to sleep in the desk chair. Rolling to her feet, she stretched, already eager for a nap on her good mattress once she got home.

She could've gone home. Should have. But once the police had finished—somewhere after three a.m.—she couldn't force herself to walk out to her car. The streetlights didn't make her feel any more secure than the KWPD's promise to double the regular patrol for the next few days.

Someone had been killed on her property. Fear and dread kept her here, behind locked doors backed up by an alarm system with a viciously loud siren.

She'd get home eventually. And likely fall immediately into bed. It sounded like heaven. She just had to survive the

next few hours.

Right now, she felt as if she'd been flattened by a steamroller and yet there was nothing to do but keep going. The police told her they'd be back to examine the scene again in the daylight. And the private security agency she'd called told her someone would be here first thing.

She certainly didn't want to greet anyone feeling so scuzzy and ruffled. Her overnight bag was stashed on the top shelf of the small storage closet. She headed for the bathroom, doing her best to ignore the dark circles under her eyes as she freshened up and changed clothes.

She laughed when she pulled a St. Patrick's Day event t-shirt from the bag. At least it was green. Clean too, which was important considering she would likely spend the morning with strangers.

Maureen had no idea what to expect from the Guardian Agency. The woman on the other end of the line last night had assured her they would have someone in place as soon as possible. Whoever showed up would be a vast improvement over being alone.

That sentiment only proved how rattled she was.

She forced herself to walk over and peek out the front window. Everything looked normal on the street, as if the sunlight could wash away the murder scene out back. Not a chance she'd be walking toward the back patio. Not alone. The admission left her feeling fragile and weak, but she was too tired to fight it.

Everyone had limits. Although she had spent a great deal of her life ignoring those limits or shoving at them with all her willpower, she couldn't ignore this.

In the kitchen, she scrambled eggs for a quick breakfast. Her appearance was rough enough already. No sense going into the day feeling hungry.

First impressions mattered. And she wanted whoever the Guardian Agency sent out to like her well enough to stick around and help her through this uncharted territory.

Her phone hummed against the counter as several messages flooded in. The first two were from her son with pictures of the twins that made her smile. The next one was from the Guardian Agency.

Your protector will be arriving shortly. His name is Will Frasier. He is from South Carolina and will show his SC driver's license.

Maureen appreciated the efficiency as well as the attention to security details.

When her son had handed her the card and told her to call if she had any trouble, she'd chalked it up to his overprotective streak. After all, she'd been running this bar for pretty much all his life. She felt comfortable here, with the usual common-sense precautions.

Last night changed her opinion. And whoever ran the agency had trained their people well. She hoped the assigned protector lived up to the hype, because the police were stretched too thin over the holidays to effectively keep an eye on her and the bar.

She carried her breakfast to the bar top, poured herself some orange juice, and then forced herself to eat. One bite at a time. She was about halfway done, and wondering how much more nutrition she could force down, when her phone signaled another text message.

Your protector has arrived.

For whatever reason, that made her laugh and if the sound was a bit brittle, at least there was no one else around to hear it.

She reached the front door about the same time someone knocked on it from the other side. Bracing herself, she threw open the locks and pulled open one half of the double door.

“Good morning.”

Whatever she'd been expecting, this man standing in front of her was different. In all the best ways. She resisted the urge to fan her face.

Sunlight painted his features in a warm glow. His posture was perfect, his jaw set in a stern line. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses that he quickly pushed to the top of his head. He was clearly older than she'd expected, his close-cropped hair going gray at the temples and across his forehead. His eyes were a warm brown, framed by crow's feet that only made him look more distinguished. More capable. He held out his identification for her.

"I'm Will Frasier," he said. "The Guardian Agency sent me over. Are you Maureen Lassiter?"

She studied the South Carolina driver's license. Years of practice checking IDs helped her sort the real deal from the fakes. The name matched. The picture was a few years old based on the hair color, but this was a legit ID.

"I am." She stepped back to let him in, nearly catching his heel in her rush to lock the door as soon as he crossed the threshold.

"Feeling unsettled?" he asked.

That assessment was hardly a stretch. "What gave it away?"

He tucked his license back into his wallet and dropped his wallet back into the pocket on the side of his cargo shorts. Shamelessly captivated, she finally noticed his shirt was printed with palm trees decorated for Christmas.

Of course, he noticed that too.

"Please forgive the casual attire. I wasn't expecting to work this week."

She seized on the veiled invitation to take a closer look. He was a man in his prime, maybe just past it. Either way, she had no doubt he had skills to keep her safe. He exuded an undeniable confidence. A deeply-rooted strength that made her want to melt against that broad chest.

Outrageous but true.

She'd been in the people-watching business for years. A large part of running a bar safely and successfully came down

to an ability to assess and pinpoint the troublemakers quickly.

Mr. Frasier was a man with some serious life experience, no doubt. But everything about him reassured her that he could hold his own if push came to shove.

According to the police reaction to the scene last night, pushing and shoving—and worse—was a likely scenario.

“The tourist look will probably help you blend in,” she said. “I’m sure it’s more comfortable than a suit or uniform, especially down here.”

“Can’t argue with that, Ms. Lassiter.”

“Please, call me Maureen.” She often went by Mo with people she worked closely with, but for some reason, she didn’t want him to use the nickname.

“Maureen.”

Hearing him say her name in that mellow, stoic voice sent a flutter through her system. A flutter that erased some of her earlier angst about aging. She wished they’d met under better circumstances. If he’d walked into the Beachcomber as a single customer, she would’ve coaxed him into conversation just to enjoy his buttery-soft southern accent. As it was, she felt a smidge of guilt for the instant attraction simmering low in her belly. He wasn’t here as a potential date, he was here to do a job.

“You can call me Will.”

Oh, yeah. She wanted to hear more of that voice. “Have you had breakfast, Will?” She walked toward the bar and the meal she’d left behind. “I’m happy to fix you something.”

“No thanks. The buffet over at the Cove filled me up.” He rested a palm over his stomach.

Under that shirt, he probably wasn’t as ripped as a younger man might be, but he didn’t seem to be carrying any extra weight. Only that heft and sturdiness that came along with aging well. A distinction that appealed to her more and more as she matured herself.

She was probably too focused on her changing personal preferences. It couldn't be that weird for her tastes to have changed, to look at people and situations with a new lens honed by experience and wisdom. Tim's father had been tall and lean with a lanky swagger that mesmerized her. She'd fallen hard and fast and straight into bed.

Though she wouldn't trade anything in the world for the joy of her son, her taste in men had improved. She expected more and refused to settle or compromise. There were worse things than being a single mother, or grandmother in her case. She could appreciate physical beauty in its many forms. Good thing too, since she lived in a beach town where full-coverage shirts were optional in most places. Being a healthy, sex-positive adult, she admittedly enjoyed those views most of the time.

She imagined Will, shirt open, would be a view to savor.

And why was she thinking about his open shirt or whether or not he was ripped? His *body* wasn't her concern. The shape of him had no bearing on how well he could protect her. She was overtired, stressed out, and she needed to get a grip.

"I'm sure they're a vast improvement on doughnuts and coffee."

He arched an eyebrow. "Being a cop is that obvious?"

She smiled warmly. "I have a lot of practice assessing people," she said. "I've been working in and around bars and restaurants since I was a kid."

"Some careers are like that," he said. Of course, he had to have similar assessment skills to be a good cop. He gave a nod toward her plate. "You should finish up before it gets cold."

He was right. After the brutally short night, she needed to eat. She just couldn't get motivated to clean her plate. Still, under that steady gaze, she did her best.

Taking a measured, fortifying breath, she said, "For what it's worth, you don't look like the typical cop." His mouth twitched at one corner, setting off another spate of flutters. At this rate, she felt like a teenager again, captivated by every

little thing her crush did or said. “More like a private investigator.”

He arched an eyebrow. “It’s the shirt, isn’t it?”

She nodded, keeping her mouth shut. Sleep. She needed more of it and soon if she hoped to spare herself serious embarrassment. When she was this tired her filters disappeared and she blurted out whatever flitted through her mind.

Not exactly the best habit when she needed Will around to feel safe.

“The coffee’s fresh.” She pointed toward the coffee maker behind the bar. “Help yourself.”

“Do you want a cup?” He moved around the bar as if he too had spent plenty of time in them.

Her stomach cramped, rejecting the idea. “I’ll stick with eggs and juice.”

“All right.” He filled a mug and leaned back, inhaling the rising steam. “When you’re finished you can fill me in on what you need and how you want this to go.”

Need? That felt like shaky ground. Sleep deprivation and fear were proving to be a dangerous combination. She pushed her eggs around on her plate. “I suppose it’s too much to ask it to just go away?”

“You aren’t the first witness to wish it could.” A smile flickered across his handsome face, gone far too soon. “Life dishes out things that are hard to forget. Harder to unsee.”

She knew what he meant and his pragmatic response settled her more than any excuses or platitudes. As a restaurant worker, a bar owner, and a mom, she’d seen plenty in her life. “This was my first murder. Did your agency tell you anything about the situation?”

He shook his head before taking a deep gulp of coffee.

The spark of pleasure she felt while watching him swallow was as strange as the rest of her day so far. One more new experience to add to the growing list.

When experts discussed life-long learning as a key to longevity, as an essential element to keep the mind and body sharp, she had her doubts they meant this.

And yet she did not care. Not at all.

Focusing on Will Frasier, on the appealing surface details she found attractive and intriguing, was much more fun than thinking about what had brought him into her bar. She'd rather imagine them sharing breakfast conversation after an exciting date.

Oh, well. She was familiar with the universe's warped sense of humor and propensity for throwing curveballs her way.

She pushed aside the half-eaten plate of eggs. Cold eggs would be worse than no eggs at this point. Drawing her glass of orange juice closer, she took a long drink. And then she tried to explain what she'd seen and found a few hours ago.

It took a few stops and starts, but Will was a remarkably patient listener. He didn't interrupt, didn't ask any questions. He just let her tell it the way it came out with all the hitches and backtracking she needed.

The hardest part was admitting her failure to provide a working description of the man who had run off. "It offends me on a deep level that I can't tell the police what he looks like," she said.

"You said it was dark," he reminded her. "Hard to identify anybody without lighting."

"There were security lights," she argued, unhappy with herself. "The police said they would download whatever the camera caught."

"That's good. They'll have people who know how to dissect those images and find a lead. Even in low-light or poor-quality situations."

His words were comforting and she wanted to accept it, to rest in it. But a man had died almost in her arms. Something about the scene wouldn't let her go, spurring her to keep searching for a way to help.

“I’ll have to take your word on that.” She rubbed her gritty eyes. “It just... I mean...” Her heart suddenly pounded in a hard rhythm that echoed up from her chest and into her throat. She stopped and caught her breath, willing herself to calm down.

Will stepped forward, a worried frown knitting his brow. “You okay?”

“Yes,” she managed.

“In through your nose. Slow. Slow,” he repeated.

She nodded to indicate she was trying. After several more tense seconds, her heart and lungs relaxed. “There.”

“Better?” He still looked as if he might leap over the bar top to help her.

“Fine,” she rasped. Her weak voice was a serious annoyance. She took one more deep, slow breath. “I’m trying to say this place has been around a long time. Might as well be a landmark. People know the Beachcomber. And—” Her breath caught again. “And everyone knows I own it. It wouldn’t take much effort to... to...” She just couldn’t bring herself to say those words. As an investigator, surely he understood what she couldn’t say. He had to realize that around here it wouldn’t require much effort for the killer to find her. Here on Key West, the entire island felt like home anyway and the permanent residents, especially the business owners, were generally close. Even if it had been possible, it would’ve been more of an oddity if she’d tried to hide her home address.

If the killer—alleged killer—was planning to come back for her, she could only be thankful that Tim and his family were out of town. It was bad enough that she might be in serious trouble, but she would never be able to cope if the people who mattered most got caught in the middle of this mess.

“You’ll probably have more information today.” Will eased back, his gaze still intent as he stood directly across from her.

“How does that help?”

His salt and pepper eyebrows arched. “A few possibilities,” he began. “They might’ve found the guy you saw. Or maybe the medical examiner ruled out any foul play.”

She snorted. Both options sounded far-fetched. If he was trying to comfort her, it fell flat. Though she gave him points for trying. “You think the cops followed his tracks in the sand and found him with the bloody knife?”

“Stranger things have happened.” He raised his cup of coffee. “Criminals are rarely as smart as they think they are.”

She sat up straight on the bar stool and rubbed her hands up and down her arms. The friction did nothing to erase the chill in her bones. “Just spit it out, Will. How much danger am I in? Because it feels like a lot. It feels overwhelming. I need to know what to expect.” She bit her lip, determined to stop rambling.

“You don’t like surprises?”

“Not so much, no.”

He nodded once, set his coffee cup on the bar top with a click. “It could be nothing,” he said. “If it’s an accident or a crime of passion, I’d say you don’t need to worry much at all.” He frowned at her. “You’re not connected, are you?”

“What?” She’d started to relax, trying to fit what she’d seen into the scenario he’d presented. “Do you mean mob connected?”

“Yes. No judgment,” he added a beat too late.

She did *not* care for the flat, clinical tone. “None needed.”

“I’ve offended you.”

“A little, yes,” she admitted. “Then again, I’m overtired and edgy.” She watched him, that edgy feeling increasing as he came out from behind the bar, an apology swimming in his warm eyes. “Did you forget you’re in Key West? This isn’t Vegas.”

He pulled out the closest bar stool, sat down and leaned an elbow on the bar, his gaze still locked with hers. “So I should’ve asked about cartels?”

She glared, pulling out the unrelenting expression that had subdued her son in his most rebellious moments as a teenager. “Should I ask for another protector?”

To her shock, he smiled. It was slow, striking, and completely disarming on his stern, weathered face.

That smile ignited a fire low in her belly and the heat blazed through her. All the way to her fingertips, tingling now. She had enough self-control to hide the reaction—she hoped. And she had to be grateful because that smile chased away the chill that had settled in since she’d found the body. *Finally.*

“I’ve been a cop for too many years not to ask questions. Especially the difficult questions. But I’m *your* protector and I’m here on your behalf. Besides, the Guardian Agency doesn’t make a habit of taking on clients with criminal ties.”

She shook her head. “Then why ask?”

He shrugged one of those strong shoulders. “To sort things out. You’re the owner, but you have family ties, plenty of employees. Just because you’re not tied to the mob or cartels doesn’t rule out someone on your staff.”

“Oh.” He made a valid point. “I’m going to remind myself I would’ve made the connection if I wasn’t running on fumes.” How much longer until she could get a nap? She peeked at her phone and managed not to groan. Not much sense going home before the police returned.

“I’m sure you would’ve,” he agreed. “How about this? You can be sure if I ask a question it’s because I’m trying to help *you*. I’m not here as a cop, Maureen, I’m here for you. We’ll leave the particulars to the police. I’m only asking so I can assess the potential threats to you.”

Everything inside her believed him. The way he emphasized the “you” and the way his gaze lingered on her face with singular intensity only made him harder to resist. Not that she was managing that in any way, shape, or form at the moment.

Truly, she should admire his logic. Her own had flown right out the window, chased away by the punch of awareness

and tingle of desire rocketing through her system. She wanted to blame it all on being overtired, but that was a flimsy excuse. No matter where her path might've crossed his, she would've been drawn to Will Frasier.

“The answer's no,” she said. “I don't usually run the day to day anymore,” she explained. “That's my son's job. He's on vacation with his family right now, but I know he doesn't have any criminal ties.”

“You're sure?”

“Sure as I'm sitting here,” she insisted. “He'd never take that kind of risk. Besides, he left the card for me to call your agency in case of trouble.”

“All right.” Will laced his fingers together and she tracked the movement, wondered what it would feel like to weave her fingers through his. “What about your staff?”

“Again, I don't believe there's any criminal connection,” Maureen replied. “Definitely not with the two people working with me last night.”

He frowned. “Only two?”

“We're slow this time of year,” she explained. “My son is on vacation with his family. As are most of the regulars.”

“You don't have security?”

She laughed. It was an edgy sound, but she couldn't rein it in. “The Beachcomber isn't a club or a tourist-trap bar. We serve good drinks and great food and occasionally we have live music and events. A criminal enterprise would stand out like a sore thumb.”

His lips parted, but a hard knock on the door cut him off and startled her. Before she could pull herself together, Will stood in front of her. “Stay behind me.”

“It's my bar.” She reached out for his hand and quickly curled her fingers back. Not her place to touch him.

“And you and the bar are under my protection.”

“Okay.” That tone did not invite any discussion.

“It’s probably the police,” she pointed out. “They told me they would be back.”

“Let me confirm that.” He reached back without looking and caught her hand in his firm grasp. Together they moved toward the door.

“Mo!” A voice boomed through the heavy wood door. “Mo! Are you in there?”

She tugged her hand free of Will’s, relaxing immediately. “That’s Officer Jenkins,” she said. “He’s KWPD and a regular customer.”

“All right.” Will stepped aside, not looking the least bit welcoming. “You can let him in.”

Despite her ease with Jenkins, she felt a rush of nerves and a flood of what-ifs as she unlocked the door. What if Jenkins wasn’t alone? What if he had criminal ties? Exasperated with herself, she blamed those silly thoughts on Will. She didn’t live her life with this level of doubt and uncertainty and she was ready to be done with both.

Jenkins came through the door in a hurry and pulled her into a hug. “Good grief, Mo. Are you okay? I saw the report and came straight over. Why didn’t you call?”

She appreciated the comfort. “Aren’t you traveling today?”

“Not until later,” he replied. “I would’ve been here. You should’ve called. I can go up tomorrow if you need me.”

Will cleared his throat and she patted Jenkins’s shoulder. “I’m fine, really,” Maureen managed. “It was just a long night. Or a short one.”

Jenkins’s gaze finally shifted beyond her. To Will. “And you are?” he queried, a scowl on his face.

“Will Frasier,” he replied. “Jess Keller sent me.”

The scowl evaporated and Jenkins’s entire demeanor morphed into something far more friendly. He snapped his fingers. “You’re with her new company.” He stuck out his hand.

“I am,” Will confirmed, meeting the handshake.

Maureen waited, but Will didn’t elaborate further.

Even without any details, Jenkins sighed. “Well good. That makes me feel a thousand times better.” He planted his hands on his hips. “What can I do?”

At this rate, Jenkins would take her bodyguard out for a round of golf. She had no idea why she felt so surly about her friend’s quick acceptance of the man hired to protect her. Wasn’t that a good thing? A positive endorsement more meaningful than a genuine ID?

“Glad one of us feels better.” She crossed back to the bar, needing a minute to pull herself together. “Forgive me. I’m having a pity party.”

“Ah, Mo. You must be exhausted.”

“A key ingredient for all the best pity parties.” She just wanted to go home and hibernate until the new year. But she owned a business and the staff had to factor into her decisions. If possible. “Do I need to close? I could shut things down for a day or two, but then it’s Christmas and I may as well lock up for the whole week.” Shoving a hand through her hair, she pleaded with Jenkins. “I need answers. Guidance. Please.”

The sympathy in his gaze would’ve annoyed her on any other day. She just couldn’t spare the energy to be irritated right now.

“As a cop, I have to say the department would be happier if you didn’t open. Makes it easier to keep people away from the scene.”

“I thought they processed the scene last night,” Will interjected.

“That was my impression,” Maureen said. “It’s taped off.” Or it was supposed to be. She hadn’t looked this morning. She caught Jenkins’s gaze. “They said they’d be back in the daylight.”

“They will be,” Jenkins assured her.

“Good,” Will said. He hadn’t moved and yet, she felt as if he was standing directly between her and her friend. “Let’s get you home,” he suggested. “The cops know how to find you.”

“True.”

Jenkins nodded along. “How long are you staying, Mr. Frasier?”

“As long as she needs me.”

He said it as if he had forever. That Will-induced flutter returned, along with the heat that probably put a refreshing color in her cheeks. It didn’t take much effort to imagine a forever with Will as her comforting and ever-present shadow.

In fact, the image took on a life of its own, filling her mind with everything that wasn’t the tragedy and fear of last night.

She couldn’t drag her eyes away from him. Forgot all about Jenkins standing by. “You mean you’ll just be joined to my hip from now until... when exactly?”

“Until you feel safe. Until the threat is neutralized.” Will rolled his shoulders and the holiday palm trees rippled. “It’s up to you. You’re the client.”

Chapter 4

Will waited, watching her blue eyes for some clue about her thoughts. But she wasn't easy to read. Probably impossible on a normal day. He was doing his best to keep it simple here, and yet his instincts were getting the best of him. Or at least the best of him that was fascinated by Maureen in general.

She was beautiful, no doubt. Gorgeous with sharp edges. A grandma that didn't resemble the softly rounded women in commercials who made tea and knitted mittens for the grandkids.

Finding a body—possibly witnessing the murder—had clearly thrown her, but he sensed she'd put it behind her sooner rather than later. She didn't strike him as a woman who wallowed or floundered when life threw a curveball. No, he suspected Maureen would either duck or hit a home run.

He looked around the place, wondering if she was responsible for the festive holiday decor woven in with the expected nautical theme. Fishing nets, displays of shells and driftwood and the occasional trophy fish mount were sporting seasonal garlands wound with strings of shark and mermaid lights. He assumed it made for quite the atmosphere during business hours.

He'd counted five stockings pinned up on the top shelf behind the bar, the names spelled out in gold glitter. Employees, he assumed.

He made a mental note to ask her about each person. Once they were alone. He figured Jenkins was trustworthy, but he

wasn't going to take any chances.

Will hadn't had much time to do any real background on the restaurant or the clientele. Based on the first text messages from Connor, that was the assistant's job anyway. If something or someone popped up as a concern, Will would know soon enough.

"Maureen?" he prompted when she remained quiet. "What do you need?"

Color rushed into her face once more. Enough that he thought maybe the attraction he felt wasn't one sided.

Not the time, obviously, but a definite confidence boost.

Wasn't as if he'd planned to hook up on his vacation anyway. He was here with his sons. No, that didn't mean they were inseparable—he knew his boys—but of the four Frasier men, he wasn't exactly the player.

That would be Eli.

"I need to go home." She sounded woefully defeated, though she managed a smile as she looked at her cop friend. "That's okay, right? I'll call the crew and let them know I probably won't be back until the scheduled New Year's Eve party."

Worked for Will. Easier to protect her if she wasn't distracted with work and surrounded by customers.

"I'll pass it on," Jenkins assured her. "Can I steal your bodyguard for a minute?"

At her dismissive wave, Will told her to sit tight and followed Jenkins out the front door. The man didn't say anything until they'd circled around back. Yellow crime-scene tape snapped and rippled in the morning breeze. They'd staked out a wide area behind the Beachcomber patio, blocking access to the restaurant from the beach.

Will studied the scene, Maureen's recollection running through his mind. Seeing it, he wasn't the least bit surprised she didn't get a look at the alleged killer. Even with security lights, the shadows would've worked in a perp's favor. He

turned in the direction Maureen said the alleged killer had gone, but there weren't any tracks left in the sand.

Having been called to similar crime scenes, Will knew the beach was unforgiving about sharing evidence.

"I trust Jess, but I don't know you," Jenkins began, cutting into Will's thoughts.

The statement earned Will's respect. Still, he put on his implacable cop face. One he figured was a fair mirror to the other man's expression. "I could say the same."

With a heavy sigh, Jenkins pulled a cell phone from his pocket. "I wanted to ask if she'd seen this guy around, but she's in no shape to make an ID."

One thing they agreed on. "Want me to have her reach out when she's rested?" Will offered. It wasn't any guarantee of cooperation, but this way he couldn't be accused of obstructing an investigation.

"I'd rather send the photo to you," Jenkins said. "You're a cop, right? Or were."

"That's right." Will didn't clarify that he was still on the job. The connection to Jess meant Jenkins wouldn't have any trouble getting some background if he needed it. He gave the other man his cell phone number. When the text came through with a photo and name, he took a long look. Then he quickly forwarded the message to Connor.

"Who is Dan Harold?"

"Possibly a person of interest," the cop explained. "Or completely unrelated." Jenkins sighed, his gaze tracking over the scene, much as Will had done moments ago. "He's a troublemaker, runs any scam that suits him. Has loose ties to drug runners. They use him to knock heads together or worse. He's never been connected to anything like this." Jenkins gestured toward the taped-off area. "There's always a first time."

Will knew that was true. Even back home, on that small barrier island off the coast of South Carolina, career criminals

usually developed a pattern, even as they escalated. “Any known ties to Maureen or the bar or the victim?”

“Nothing obvious so far.” Jenkins shook his head. “It’s early.”

So why had he shared it at all? With that question and more rolling through his mind, he inched closer to the crime scene. “Anything like this ever happen around here before?”

“A body on this beach specifically? Sure. Murder? No.” Jenkins tapped his sunglasses against his palm. “This place was never a dive, but under Mo it’s become better than ever. Take care of her.”

“I intend to.”

“The department’s solid,” he said in the general direction of the ocean.

“That so?”

His chin jerked up and down. “Yeah. Knowing Jess, I’m sure she’s told you the same thing.”

“And still you bring it up,” Will pointed out.

Jenkins’s mouth tipped down at one corner. “In your shoes, in charge of someone’s safety, I’d have doubts about everything.”

“Trust is hard won in our line of work,” Will said.

“No truer words,” Jenkins agreed. “Mo is important,” he continued. “She’s a legend among the locals and all-in when it comes to the welfare of everyone on this island. Raised her son to the same standard.”

Will knew he liked her. And maybe it was a bit too much holiday spirit or wishful thinking, but his first impression was that he shared some core values with her. Which wasn’t the point out here with her friend who was also a local cop.

“I don’t like leaving when she’s alone,” Jenkins said.

Will had noticed the wedding band Jenkins wore and it didn’t change a thing. He was still jealous of this guy—a man he didn’t know who admired Maureen.

“She’s not alone,” Will grumbled. “She’s got me. As you said, I’ll doubt everything and keep her safe from whatever is going on.”

“Thanks.” Jenkins didn’t sound relieved. He didn’t look relieved. “Hell, even my wife was talking about delaying our travel plans to take care of her.”

“Going to see family?”

Jenkins grunted. “The whole clan, including my mother-in-law. I’m only in it for the grandkids.”

Will laughed. “We should all be so lucky.”

“You have any?”

“My boys haven’t chosen to settle down yet,” Will said. “Their generation seems to be waiting longer.” Though he’d never shared it with anyone, he worried that maybe losing their mom when they did had put a damper on their desire to settle down. Not that he had a clock on any of them. There was no rush. He’d rather they find the right person than hurry into the wrong relationship. David, his oldest, was only thirty-one. Lance had a serious girlfriend in college, but they’d gone their separate ways after graduation. And Eli... Well, he was searching for all the wild oats he could find.

It made him feel older than the sand under his feet to think that when he’d been Eli’s age, he and Jeannie had two sons already.

Life had been hectic and wonderful and Will didn’t have a single regret. They’d married young and just stumbled through, relying on love, hope, and each other. He couldn’t claim times were simpler, it was just different.

“Seems to be,” Jenkins agreed. “Look, I’ll do what I can to stay in the loop.” He clapped Will on the shoulder. “Be careful.”

Jenkins walked out to his car and Will turned to the bar. He pushed at the door, but it was locked again. Good. He knocked hard and called out to her.

The door opened almost immediately. She must've been close. "Vic left?" she asked, looking past him.

"He's eager to see the grandkids," Will replied.

Maureen smiled. "Always a joy," she agreed. "Do you have any?" she queried as he stepped inside once more.

"Not so far."

"You probably already know I have two. Twins."

He did, but it seemed rude to say so. "You said your son was vacationing with his family. I assumed children were involved."

She cocked her head. "I'll give you that fib because I don't feel like making it an issue."

"Thanks." He didn't want it to be an issue either. The more roadblocks or doubts she had, the harder it would be to keep her safe.

"But you already knew." She tucked her hair behind her ear. "I did some digging while you were outside. The Guardian Agency has a reputation for gathering background and intel."

Also true, but again, what was the point of making her feel uncomfortable?

Her mouth curved into a smile that knocked the breath from his lungs. He stood there, trying to regain his equilibrium while she strode away, unaware of the wreckage in her wake. He hurried to catch up with her in the kitchen. "Did you, ah, have any trouble while I was outside?"

"No," she replied over her shoulder. "I also called my lead waitress and cook and we adjusted the hours. We'll only offer dinner service today."

He glanced around the gleaming kitchen. "Why not close entirely?"

"Because the staff could use the pay and I know for a fact some of my regulars can't make toast without burning it. We already have take-out orders requested for Christmas Eve."

Jenkins had said she was committed to the community. Will thought maybe a little selfishness was in order. Wouldn't her customers understand if she had to shut down for her own safety? He followed, pausing at the doorway of a tiny office space. "No way to cancel those or shift them to another restaurant?"

She gawked at him. "You're kidding right?"

He hadn't been, no.

Gathering a tote bag and her purse, she said, "Let's go. Please. I need a nap in the worst way."



MAUREEN GLANCED BACK over her shoulder and did a double take. Will was staring at her intently. Not as though she were a suspect. Or a victim. No, she'd been around long enough to recognize the heat in his gaze.

He was staring at her like a *woman*. A woman he found interesting. A woman he desired.

Because she was independent? Because she cared about her staff? Maybe because these jeans made her legs look amazing?

A quick abbreviated fantasy about her bodyguard wouldn't hurt anyone. And Will certainly fit the bill. Granted, they'd just met, but she liked everything she could see on the surface including his obvious interest in her.

Not as though she'd pursue him or act on any of these wild feelings. She was an adult. She had self-control. And she definitely didn't need to complicate her life any further. Her body seemed to take that as a challenge and the flutter caught her off guard. She shivered, visibly, one hand trembling as she reached for the back door.

"You okay?"

His voice sent another deliciously warm tingle through her system. "Fine." Probably best if she didn't turn around and

jump the bodyguard she'd just told herself she could resist. Could she even manage jumping into anyone's arms these days? Highly unlikely. She chuckled, thinking about what a mess she'd make if she tried.

“Maureen.”

“Hmm?”

“Either open the door or let me do it for you.”

His words were as gentle as a caress feathering over her ear. A whisper of breath brushed her cheek. She was done for at this rate.

“Would you rather stay and talk with the police when they get here?”

She shook her head, the movement causing her weary body to swerve right into him. He caught her, his hands firm at her shoulders. “Easy, now. I've got you.”

She was glad someone did. “I'm not used to being this needy,” she admitted.

“If it's any consolation,” he said, lifting the keys from her hand, “That much is obvious and I just met you.”

That was exactly the right thing to say. For a moment, she felt like herself: strong and capable, if caught up in the periphery of a frustrating situation.

“You probably have a great deal of experience dealing with frazzled people.”

“That's true.” With one hand on her elbow, he guided her out the door. They paused there until she heard the lock engage.

Another shiver moved through her, but this time it wasn't attraction or fantasy. Standing outside, staring at her car, she was paralyzed by fear.

“You can do it,” Will said.

“I-I'm not sure I can.” She gulped in the ocean air, felt the salt in the back of her throat. “Last time.” She swallowed.

“Last time it was dark and... and...” She swore, frustrated with her reactions.

“Last time you were alone and you found a victim,” Will stated firmly. “It will take time to shake that off.”

“Time?” She scoffed. “Is that all?”

“Sleep will help.”

Now that she was out here, only a few paces from where she’d found the body, she wasn’t so sure about that. The few hours she’d managed so far hadn’t done much good. She’d been trying to convince herself that going home and resting in her own bed would make the difference.

Only one way to find out.

Pretending her knees didn’t feel like jelly, she let Will hover at her elbow as he escorted her to her car.

“Would you rather we take my car?”

It was more than a mild concern that he could see straight through her efforts to behave normally. “No. I don’t want to leave my car here.”

Irrational, but true. The likelihood that the killer would return was low. That the person would do anything to her property was lower still. And yet something inside her nagged at her. She wanted to be all-in here or all-in at home.

“All right.” He walked around and opened the passenger door for her.

“You’re coddling me,” she accused when they were both situated.

He shoved the key into the ignition and started the engine. “Only feels that way because you’ve been through a shock and you need to rest.”

“And there you go again.” Oh, she sounded petulant. Why couldn’t she keep her mouth shut?

“You want tough love?” His lips twitched. “I can do that too. My boys would tell you I have a master’s degree in that.”

Why don't we just chalk up all of this to my protective nature for now?"

"Fine. Good."

He paused to put her address into his navigation app. "I'm right here."

"You are," he agreed. "And now you can fall asleep on the drive and I can still get you home."

She stared out the window. Better than running off at the mouth again. It didn't last. "This isn't me," she said. "I'm not the person without a plan. I'm not the one who gets scared."

"Of course not. You're a mom."

"And a business owner. So what? How does any of that connect?"

He shifted in the seat, one elbow propped on the door as he drove. Why was that sexy? She gave herself a mental shake. She was overtired and needed to stop fighting it.

"My boys didn't just hatch. My wife was one of the strongest women ever and she hated it when fear got the better of her. She kept it all locked down in front of the boys most of the time, but she'd let it all out when we were alone. Drove her up a wall." He chuckled. "David, he was straight and narrow from the start, rarely put a toe out of line. Lance took some stupid chances with that careless second-child attitude. But Eli? That boy is convinced he's made of Teflon. If Eli had shown up first, he'd probably be an only child."

It took her a few seconds to absorb all that information. He clearly loved his sons. She had so many questions and asked the one that felt most important. "Was?"

At the next traffic light, Will looked her way, confused.

"You said your wife 'was'. Past tense," she clarified. "You're divorced?"

"No." His jaw tensed. "Widowed. Cancer. We lost her several years ago."

She reached over and rested her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry."

He swallowed. "Thanks," he said, his voice rusty.

"You must've been a close family."

"Yup. We were. I'm over it. Mostly," he said. "I mean the deep grieving is over."

She didn't need any explanations and she felt terrible for making him uncomfortable. "Holidays must be hard."

"Yes." He shifted in the seat again. "I don't know why. Well, I do. But it's been years. Should've adjusted by now."

She snorted, drawing his attention. "Sorry. But that's a load of crap. Grief is grief. No way to know when or why it hurts more one day than another. But the holidays? We should call it the season of baggage."

He rubbed a hand over his mouth and she was half-afraid she'd made him cry. Guess she was the one doing the tough love routine. Then his shoulders shook and she realized he was laughing.

"Which of us is hysterical?" she wondered.

"Neither," he sputtered. "I was just mentally rewriting a few Christmas carols to reference baggage instead of joy and cheer."

She liked that she'd made him laugh and turned his mind away from sorrow to something silly. "I'm telling you, they'd be hits."

"Have to agree." The laughter subsided. "I don't talk about Jeannie unless the boys bring her up," he said. "The last time I talked about her with anyone outside the family, it was to ask my boss for time off on the first anniversary of her death. Since then, I've never been scheduled during that week."

"Your boss sounds like a compassionate man."

"He is definitely one of the good guys." He stopped at a red light and turned to her. "Thanks for making me laugh."

"You're welcome. Do you always travel at Christmas?"

“Usually we’re closer to home. For a few years we were diligent about keeping the traditions going, but things aren’t the same since we lost her.”

Her heart ached for this man and his sons. “I bet.”

“What about you? Where is your Mr. Lassiter?”

“That isn’t in the background file?”

“Probably is. I’ve only skimmed the cursory details. I can do some deeper reading and catch up while you’re sleeping.”

She rolled her eyes. “The only Mr. Lassiter I know is my son. He’s currently at Disney World with his wife and their twins. It’s their first trip.”

“And you didn’t go?” His eyebrows arched. “We went when Eli was five. Talk about a wild time, but we all have great memories.”

“Well, I’m wishing I’d gone along now,” she confessed. Disney was better than just about anything, but it was lightyears better than stumbling across a murder in progress.

“Why did you stay?”

She wasn’t about to tell him she’d been feeling creaky and old. “Primarily, I wanted them to have their own memories. Especially with this first visit. The twins are only four-years-old. And I know Tim. This won’t be their only trip.”

“Well, that’s good.”

She shook off the lingering regret of making excuses to stay behind. Not just because of the harrowing circumstances here, but because there was a magic she would only know through pictures. “It’ll be easier for all of us and just as much fun when I tag along next time.”

“Absolutely.”

Besides, the theme parks were always adding new rides and shows, so every trip was bound to be different. The sunlight pouring through the windows and the motion of the car was making her drowsy. Her eyelids grew heavy and she struggled to keep her eyes open.

“Does Tim have any relationship with his father?”

That query destroyed the soft haze she'd been floating in. “You really don't want to read the file for yourself, do you?”

His lips tilted up. “Always better to get intel directly from the source.”

“How does Tim's father intersect with this situation?”

He shot her a mega-watt smile. “Simple curiosity. I'm from South Carolina. Back home, if we don't get all up in your business, it's rude.”

“Good to know.” She laughed, thinking that smile had brought forth all sorts of intel when he'd wanted it. Especially from enamored women. For a second, she was jealous of the wife he'd lost.

“The simple answer is no. I raised Tim on my own from the moment that little plus sign appeared on the pregnancy test.” Though she didn't mean to, she heard herself telling him all of it. “My parents did not approve of me having a child out of wedlock. They would've approved less if I had married the bastard who fathered him. I was a willing participant,” she added quickly when his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

The man really was a protector to his core. And even though it was thirty years too late in this particular instance, it was fascinating how much his reaction comforted her.

“Tim's father was older. And married, although I didn't know it. Still irritates me that I didn't see the signs. I've always been good at reading people. Except him.”

“Some people are master manipulators.”

“Ain't that the truth.” It made her wonder who had manipulated him? Not his wife, obviously. Maybe he was just talking from his experiences on the job as a cop.

“In case it's not clear in the background file,” she continued. “I have zero regrets about raising Tim on my own. The two of us were a complete family. His wife and kids only add to my joy and underscore that my decisions were on point all along.”

“But no one since then?”

“No one that I wanted to keep.” She caught just a rumble of amusement from him. Tucking her hair behind her ears, she continued. “I probably have trust issues. Even now,” she admitted with a stiff laugh. “Tim always came first. Keeping him healthy and grounded and secure was my top priority. We came down here and made a life and I’ve never regretted a moment.”

At one time she would’ve declared regrets over meeting Tim’s father, but if she hadn’t, she wouldn’t have her incredible son. She wouldn’t have this life that was damn close to perfect. Although she could do with less of the current murder and exhaustion problems, she believed in gratitude and knew how to look for the silver linings. Even during the storm.

She glanced at Will and gave a quick thanks for his presence. He was here, as a professional, but she wanted to find a way to thank him for being so kind to her during this really awful day.

“Single-parenting is tough,” Will said. “I’m not sure what would’ve happened if I’d been on my own when the boys were young.” He gave his head a small shake. “Our family dynamic probably would’ve ended up like something resembling the Lord of the Flies.”

She snorted. “I seriously doubt that.” Will struck her as too regimented, too by-the-book, to let his children turn into unruly hellions.

“There were times when I questioned my sanity—just like every parent in history.” A yawn got the better of her. “Excuse me. And times when I was lonely without another adult in the house. But whenever Tim asked, I told him honestly his dad had other commitments. Once he was old enough, I told him the whole story.”

She had the strangest urge to share the whole story. Surely Will’s broad shoulders could cope with her awkward and embarrassing tale. All of her foolishness and inexperience. All of the fears she’d buried under a wall of bravado until she’d gained the maturity to look back and give herself a little grace.

When she thought about those frightening days learning everything she could about pregnancy and motherhood while fighting off morning sickness, she marveled that she'd survived at all.

“Was Tim a good baby?”

Her heart squeezed that he would ask. “The best. Especially once we got past the colic and his little body learned to sleep. I think that was somewhere in his early twenties,” she joked.

Will's hearty laughter rolled through the car, through her, making her warm and tingly from her heart all the way to her fingertips.

If she wasn't careful, if she didn't get some rest soon, she would be halfway in love with a man she'd just met. Once in her life was plenty for that kind of mistake. Even if she couldn't get pregnant again.

The navigation cut in, prompting him to turn into her neighborhood. “I'm gonna crash on you,” she warned. “Probably the second we're inside.”

“Feel free,” he replied. “I promise to carry you to the nearest soft surface.”

Somehow she managed not to blurt out how wonderful that suggestion sounded as her cheeks flamed with heat, along with other parts of her body that were, thankfully, less obvious.

Chapter 5

Will was struggling to keep himself in check and the dozens of questions to himself. This was hardly the time to grill her about anything, past or present. And yet he wanted to hear the whole story. He'd gladly listen to anything she wanted to share.

Why?

He couldn't pinpoint *why* he wanted to peel back every layer of this particular woman. But he did. He hadn't felt this way about anyone other than Jeannie.

"You can't let me sleep past three," she said. "I should be up and awake by four. In case they need me to help at the bar."

He had no intention of letting her go back to work tonight. "You told them you wouldn't be in."

"I know." She brushed at her hair. "Everything should be fine, but if there's a problem, I'm the solver. My assistant manager took a long holiday with her fiancé. After last night I'm extra glad she did. If anyone had to stumble into that scene, better me than anyone else."

"I get it," he sympathized. He made every effort to spare others any pain if he could. The drivers who got speeding tickets might disagree, but that was a different issue.

Besides, it was impossible to protect everyone. As a parent, there were things he had to sit back and watch his boys learn on their own. Although it was challenging to stand by, it

was better for everyone. His boys didn't resent him for meddling, and any mistakes they made built character.

Even the big ones. "How did you come to own the bar?"

"You're not going to toss the mob in my face again, are you?"

"Of course not," he replied. "We're not in Vegas."

That earned him a little smirk. "I came by it honestly," she said. "I worked many years as a bartender and manager for the original owner. Taking over a little more year by year. When he was ready to retire, we struck a deal and I bought him out."

"Good for you."

"It definitely was. Restaurant hours may not seem conducive to raising a kid, but it worked for me. Mainly because I had good people around me once I came here."

He stiffened at another reference to trouble in her past. He couldn't change anything for her and she'd just said she didn't have regrets. It bothered him that she'd been hurt, that she'd been left to deal with serious, life-changing things by herself. He shouldn't let it get under his skin, especially not when the issues were so long ago. Why did some people go out of their way to make things difficult for others?

"I'm glad to hear that," he managed.

The navigation app guided him around to the front of her house. The neighborhood was tidy and well kept. It looked to him as if the grounds were maintained by a homeowners' association. Another factor that would help a single woman with a thriving business.

"Let's get you inside so you can rest."

"Sounds like a plan." She yawned. "Maybe I'll even be charming again afterward."

He chuckled to himself. He found her plenty charming already. "You don't have to make an effort on my account."

She pushed open the car door and stopped. "What are you going to do while I'm sleeping?"

“I’ll be here, standing guard.”

“In the house.”

“Yes.” If he left, she was vulnerable. Her face turned pink. It was the cutest thing and he did his best to ignore it. “Come on. I’ll do a quick walk through and then you can rest easy while I keep watch.”

“All right.” She sounded as if he was walking her to the gallows rather than a long-overdue nap.

She unlocked the door and he followed her inside. Her home was clean and smelled like cinnamon and citrus and pine. With the front door locked behind him, he took it all in. She clearly loved the holidays. There were garlands of evergreen and holly framing every doorway. Big candles were set out, and a table runner was anchored with a Santa and Rudolph centerpiece that had clearly been well loved. A village of charming little houses were arranged on the sideboard in her dining area. He saw fat candles and stockings and in the corner of her living room, an artificial Christmas tree, on the smaller side, held a place of honor. Several gifts were wrapped and waiting under the branches decorated with tinsel and ornaments.

He was right behind her, cataloging the details of the layout when she stopped short. Reaching back, her hand locked on his wrist. “Will.”

He followed her gaze to the sliding glass door at the far end of her kitchen. It wasn’t closed. Damn it. He tucked her behind his body, running through his options. There were no signs of a typical break-in or burglary. The hair on the back of his neck lifted. Someone was here, lying in wait.

He had to search the house, but couldn’t leave her alone. Not inside or out. They had to leave. “To the car,” he turned, sheltering her body with his while they hurried to the front door.

He heard the squeak of a floorboard behind him and shoved Maureen down as gently as possible. A gunshot

blasted through the quiet house, the bullet passing right over his shoulder and lodging in the doorframe.

Maureen screamed and Will swore.

“Call the police!” he shouted, turning toward the intruder.

He found himself charging Dan Harold. He recognized the face from the picture Jenkins had shared. The man had his gun raised and Will braced for the impact of a bullet as he lunged. He would *not* let this bastard hurt Maureen.

But Harold dropped the gun. Unfortunately, he didn't surrender, coming at Will with his fists. A couple of blows landed, but Will knew how to dodge and defuse a fight. He was looking for the opportunity to take the man to the ground when Harold jumped over the kitchen island, knocking everything off the surface. He ran for the slider and, in his rush, slammed it open so hard it cracked and shattered.

Will gave chase, glass crunching under his feet. He slipped, but stayed upright and was almost to the retaining pond when he remembered Maureen was the real target. He let Harold go to get back to protect her.

“Maureen!” His heart hammered as he looked around. A sick feeling lodged in his stomach, fear that Harold had an accomplice, until she finally peeked out of the hall closet.

Her phone to her ear, her voice shook as she relayed her address and the nature of the emergency. Sagging with relief, he called Connor. “It was Harold. In her house,” he reported. He paused to catch his breath. “Police are on the way.”

“Are you safe?” Connor asked.

“No idea.” Will explained the break-in, the shattered door, the dropped gun, and why he'd let Harold run. Why hadn't Harold shot him? “We are currently alone in the house.”

“I'm reviewing the cameras I can find,” Connor said. “I'll do what I can to get the police on his trail.”

Any doubts he might've had about her being a target evaporated in the wake of this attempt. Harold would've shot

her without a second thought. She needed protection and he wasn't about to let her down.

"The slider will need boarded up until it can be replaced," Will said, taking stock. Based on the holiday schedule, he figured that would be a few days at best. "My boys can manage the temporary repair once the police give the all clear." Probably the installation too, but he didn't know if he'd be on the case that long.

"I'll send them the information," Connor said.

"She can't stay here." Her home was no longer secure. Seemed she was right about being easy to find.

"Working on that too," Connor mumbled. "Hold on."

The line went quiet and Will moved closer to Maureen. She was clutching her phone in both hands and staring at the mess in her kitchen. "Don't touch anything," he warned her gently. "Wait for the cops."

"Right."

She was so pale, her eyes round and dazed. She kept pressing her lips together as if holding back tears. He wanted to hug her. To just hold her until the shock wore off. Not his typical reaction when dealing with victims. He shook it off. "We'll be out of here soon," he promised.

"Out of here?" she echoed. "To where? I don't understand."

He held up a finger as Connor came back on the line. "I have a suite booked for her at the Cove and I've alerted security to work as your backup."

"All right." He lifted his chin as the police knocked on her front door. "Police are here."

"Good."

With Maureen distracted, he asked Connor for a favor. "Any chance they can put up some Christmas decorations? We'll be here at least another hour." Likely more than that. "It might be a helpful distraction for her when we arrive."

“Standard procedure is to make sure the rooms or safe houses are stocked to client preferences. If you notice or she asks for something specific, send me a text,” Connor instructed. “As for the decorating, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.”

“Be careful out there.”

That was the plan. Always.

He returned to Maureen, walked along with her as the police took their report and the inventory. He waited to give his statement and a description of the assailant, letting them know he recognized Harold and who had given him the man’s description. The responding officers also recognized the name and reputation, echoing Jenkins’s claims that this behavior was a departure for the career criminal.

Will didn’t care about Harold, beyond the threat to Maureen. He hoped the familiarity meant they could catch him quickly.

When the police asked where she’d be staying, she stared. At the cops, then at him. He explained she’d be moving to the Cove. The cops were satisfied with that and confirmed her direct contact information.

In the moment, with police and crime scene techs milling around, she seemed too overwhelmed to argue. He hoped that her cooperation held up until they reached her suite at the Cove.

The police gave her permission to pack up the personal items she would need for a few days once the techs were done processing the scene. Will and Maureen went outside to wait in his car. She didn’t talk, but she didn’t rest either. Will continued to sit quietly with her, keeping watch and hoping she’d doze off in the late afternoon sunshine.

At last, they were allowed back inside and when Maureen got another look at the damage, she grabbed Will’s hand. “I’m not going to the Cove.”

It took him a second to process her words. Tendrils of warmth were radiating upward from her touch, straight to his

heart. His breathing hitched, delaying his reply. “It’s the best option.”

She glared. “What does that mean?”

“We’re moving you out of here to a suite where you’ll be secure,” he explained.

“No.” She released him but she didn’t move. “This is my home. I’m staying.”

He understood the sentiment. “It’s not safe here. Let’s pack a bag and—”

“I can’t leave my house open to the elements and... And more intruders.”

“My sons will be here soon to board up the door until we can get a new slider installed.” He tried to steer her toward the bedroom. “They have experience,” he assured her. “I recommend you pack for a few days at first. We can always come back if necessary.”

“No.” She folded her arms over her chest. “I’m not going anywhere. And you can stop treating me like a toddler.”

That wasn’t his intention at all. He took a breath. “Maureen.” He reminded himself she was scared and digging in her heels because everything had been ripped out of her control. “Think of it as a stay-cation. We’ll take it one night at a time. It won’t be forever.”

“A stay-cation means *staying*.” She spun around, saw the broken cookie jar that had been on her kitchen island and swore. “You’re pushy,” she snapped. Marching over to the closet, she pulled out a broom to sweep up the mess. “You’re a bully,” she accused. “This is my home.”

“Are we interrupting?”

Will looked up to see his boys standing at the broken glass door. David had spoken and, at Will’s invitation, he led the way inside. Eli leaned sheets of plywood against the wall outside. “Maureen, these are my sons. David, Lance, and Eli.”

Some of her ire with him seemed to fade as he introduced them. The boys were on their best behavior, pleasant without

being patronizing and somehow, Lance relieved her of the broom as he shook her hand.

“Let us take care of this,” Lance said.

“Oh... I can do it,” she murmured as he started sweeping up glass, broken ceramic, and cookies.

“Of course you can,” Eli chimed in with his notorious charm. “But now you don’t have too.” As if he’d lived in her house all his life, he found the dustpan and garbage bags and moved to help Lance.

“Were those chocolate chip cookies?” David asked. At her nod, he gave an exaggerated sniff. “With mint.”

“That’s right,” she said. “My son’s favorite.”

“Do you like to bake?” David blocked her view of the broken cookie jar, effectively nudging her out of her own kitchen.

“It’s a great stress reliever. And a holiday tradition.”

“My mom always said the same thing,” David continued. He moved toward the Christmas village on display. “These are cute. So much detail.”

Will had never seen his oldest put anyone at ease so quickly. Instead of his usual serious reserve, he was acting like a greeter at Disney World. David asked Maureen questions about the village and Will sent him a grateful look over her head.

“Did you know the suites at the Cove have kitchens? I know it’s been a tough day, but if you want, we can bring over ingredients and stuff and help you bake cookies if that would make any of this easier. If not, they have amazing cookies at their evening decorating parties.”

“The Cove has cookie parties?”

David nodded. “We all went the other night. I felt like a little kid.” He glanced up. “Dad too, right?”

“That’s right.” It had been fun. And a good memory that balanced some of the heartache that weighed down their early

memories of baking with Jeannie. “Maybe we can join in tonight, after you get some rest.”

“Maybe.” She covered her face with her hands and then looked up at him once more, eyes swimming with emotion. “Fine. I’ll pack. There’s Black Forest cheesecake in the fridge. A Lassiter Christmas Day tradition. You guys should help yourselves so it doesn’t go to waste...” She shrugged and hurried away.

Will used the opportunity to speak to his boys, asking them to pack up the special cheesecake, along with Maureen’s Christmas tree and a few other pieces that would make her suite feel more like home. The four of them also worked out a schedule to keep eyes on her home and bar until Harold was caught.

Fifteen minutes later, she returned with a small tote bag and a suitcase and he guided her outside. When she paused at the car, he worried they would argue again. “You’re sure they’ll be okay? I don’t want them to get hurt.”

“My boys can handle themselves. Besides, the police and the Guardian Agency team are helping us keep watch.”

“If you’re sure.”

He nodded. Unless Harold brought reinforcements, at three against one his boys had the advantage. Somehow, he didn’t think Harold was the type that played well with others.

It was a big assumption to make so early in the case, but he’d leave that to the authorities. His priority was her. Her safety and her comfort. And with the help of his sons, the Cove, and Connor, he figured they could manage it.



HOURS LATER, Maureen walked out of the bedroom and into the living area of her suite at the Cove. It was dark outside, but a couple of lamps made the space feel inviting. Cozy.

Yawning, she felt guilty about leaving her staff to fend for themselves tonight. But, as Will had pointed out earlier, she

would've been more of a hindrance than a help even if they had called her in.

When Will had brought her here, she'd been surprised to find the place decorated for the holidays. Frosted green garlands were draped around the room and lush poinsettias gave pops of festive color here and there. A gift basket was on the counter of the kitchenette and a stack of presents with her name on the tag had been left on an end table.

She was embarrassed to recall that she'd fussed about the lack of originality rather than show an ounce of gratitude. Someone had brought in a Christmas tree while she'd been sleeping.

The twinkling lights were a lovely touch.

It took her a minute—muddled as she was—to recognize the tree was from her house. The decorations were *hers*. All the memories and personal treasures she'd built with her son through the years were here. *Here*.

“Oh.” She pressed her fingers to her lips. “Oh. Seriously?” Her stomach dropped as her gaze landed on the worn Santa Claus and Rudolph characters in the center of the table. A homey centerpiece that hit her square in the heart.

She'd found the charming set for Tim's first Christmas. All through his toddler years, he'd carried the pair everywhere, even to bed. When he married, she'd suggested he take the set with him. Instead, he told her to keep it, asking her to gift something similar to his children when the time came. And she had.

Will must've done this. He must've created the only staycation possible. And she'd been so rude to him. How had he known exactly what she needed most? She looked around for her phone, needing to call him. To apologize. To say thanks.

The curtain fluttered at the balcony door. Had she left that open? No. Another breeze gusted and she spotted Will out there, leaning against the rail, his gaze on the ocean view.

He hadn't left her here alone. As he should've done. As she'd expected. Well, maybe as her official protector he was

required to stay. Officially, it was probably his job to put up with her, whatever mood she was in.

But there he was. She was so glad to see him. To not be alone.

Ashamed, her feet felt rooted to the floor. She had to go out there and apologize. Being exhausted and stressed or even in shock was no excuse. She shook her head. She'd called him a bully and he'd done... This.

She straightened her spine and marched herself to the door. The cement balcony was cool under her bare feet and the breeze caught her hair. "Will?"

He turned and her mouth went dry. He looked so good. So strong and good and safe. He'd changed into a t-shirt with the iconic zero mile-marker sign and a pair of jeans. Like her, he was barefoot. He might as well be wearing the gleaming armor of a knight. He was a hero to her, in more ways than one.

"Thank you." She walked around the small table and met his assessing gaze. "Thank you. For bringing my Christmas to me. Here."

"You're welcome. Are you feeling better?"

"Better than a mean and nasty shrew? Yes. I'm so sorry for my behavior. You were only doing your job and watching out for me." His chest rose and fell on a deep breath. She shouldn't find that so exciting. Clearing her throat, she plowed on, "The nap did wonders. Thank you. But the decorations... Seeing all of that? I'm floored. Why?"

"It seemed important to you." His salt-and-pepper eyebrows rose and fell. "Being displaced during the holidays is rough. More so without family around. I'm glad you like it."

"I more than like it." She pressed up on her toes, without thinking, and kissed him on the lips. It wasn't meant to be anything more than friendly. Instead, heat flared—tinder to flame. She wanted to leap away and get closer simultaneously. "Thank you," she murmured, her gaze locked with his. He looked as shell-shocked as she felt.

Something else took over. Not gratitude. Not weariness. Not even curiosity. Because she felt like she knew him. Knew this sensation igniting between them. She brushed her mouth across his again, gliding a hand up into his hair and reaching for his shoulder to keep her balance.

She shouldn't have worried about that. His arms came around her, pulling her into the heat and breadth of his body and she sank deeper into the kiss. Into the moment that was so far away from her normal life that she was sure anything was possible.

Even kissing a man she'd just met. A man she'd been mean to.

A man who'd brought her Christmas just to make her feel better.

“Dad?”

He went still under her hands while her heart thundered and her lips throbbed. Gently, he moved between her and the balcony door. “Right here.”

He walked away, into the suite to greet one of his sons and she took a minute to gather herself. What the heck had happened? She couldn't recall the last time she'd felt all of that during a kiss. Possibly never. Her last first kiss hadn't been nearly as spectacular and though she'd gone out with that man another few times, it never became a relationship. In fact, that was so not-memorable that she'd been avoiding the dating pool altogether.

“I brought dinner.”

“Thanks, Lance.”

“Is she still asleep?”

Once more, she gathered up her courage. “No, I'm right here.” She smiled at his middle son.

Lance grinned at her, the resemblance between him and his dad so strong. She suspected all the Frasier men were heartbreakers. “Did you help move the decorations?”

He smiled. “We all pitched in. The Cove stocked the kitchen for you.”

“Thank you. It means the world to me.” She caught Will watching her, his mouth twitching, as if he thought she might give Lance a kiss as well. Giving the older Frasier an arch look, she moved toward the kitchenette for a closer look. Opening the fridge, she saw he hadn’t been kidding about stocking up. Then she did a double-take. “You brought the cheesecake too?”

Lance shrugged a shoulder. “Seemed important. You mentioned it’s a tradition.”

“Thanks.” If she wasn’t careful, she’d cry. Blubbering all over them didn’t seem like a fair reward for their hard work. “That’s just so thoughtful.” She set the box on the counter. “Would you like a slice?”

Will walked up, leaning his forearms on the raised counter. “Thought that was for Christmas Day.”

She swallowed, trying not to think about having those arms around her moments ago. “It is. But we can dig in early.” This holiday was already off the rails and she could order another cheesecake for Tim and his family.

Lance exchanged a look with his father. “Then we’d better wait.” He smiled at her. “Anticipation and all that.”

“All right.” She returned the cheesecake to the fridge.

“I’ll leave you to dinner,” Lance said into the awkward silence. “Everything is secure,” he said to Maureen. “We’ll make sure it stays that way.”

“Thanks,” she called out as Will walked him to the door.

And now what? They’d have dinner and he’d go back to the suite he shared with the boys, she told herself. Practical. Nothing else had to happen. No more kisses. Definitely no need to discuss that kiss.

It was the heat of the moment, that’s all. A product of the emotional upheaval. And a far better reaction to stress—in her opinion—than being grumpy and mean. He’d been kind,

capable, and compassionate. Time for her to get on the same page and behave in a way that she could feel good about.

None of this was Will's fault. Without him, Harold would've killed her a few hours ago. In her own house. In front of that Christmas tree decorated with her sweetest memories.

She shivered.

Then she turned to the cabinet, pulling out plates and utensils. More than ready to dive into whatever savory meal Lance had brought for them.

Chapter 6

Though Will would've preferred keeping Maureen safe at the Cove, he'd honored her insistence and brought her to the Beachcomber bright and early on Christmas Eve morning to help prep the take-out orders. With Connor using his skills to keep an eye on the nearby area and the doors repaired at her house, Will sent his boys off to the shipwreck tour they'd booked before he'd taken on this assignment.

Oddly enough, he wasn't all that sorry to miss out.

Last night had been interesting. The kiss, of course. But dinner too. They'd briefly debated where he'd spend the night and if she'd come to work today and earned one win each. He'd slept on the couch in her suite and she'd been the first one in today.

Despite the short acquaintance, most of it under duress for her, Will had discovered he enjoyed her company. He didn't need her apologies or thanks. The situation would've overwhelmed anyone. Still, he appreciated her integrity and sincerity.

So here he was, happily shadowing her. Staying well out of her way, he monitored the bar where she and her small team prepped and served the holiday take-out meals for pre-orders and walk-ins.

She was independent with a sharp wit, a cool head for business, and admirable leadership skills. She was positively gorgeous, inside and out. Somehow, she knew exactly when

someone needed a break, when a customer needed to chatter, or when a pot was about to boil over.

When his phone chimed with an alarm, he caught her eye, circled his finger in the air, and headed outside for a walk around the bar.

He couldn't get her out of his mind. Not just because it was his job to keep her safe. Hell, she'd monopolized his thoughts all night too, if he was honest. That kiss, delivered out of gratitude or whatever had flipped something. He couldn't read anything into it. And recalling the blush that stained her fair skin, he had to assume the burst of affection had embarrassed her.

Still, something about her lit up something in him. A fresh, sensual awareness he hadn't indulged since Jeannie passed.

What a strange realization. One he'd never bothered to examine before. Back home, things just plodded along. Each day more normal than the previous one. Everyone knew the Frasier story. The tragedy of losing Jeannie way too soon. Not just that, most folks in Brookwell had known Will and his boys for all their lives. Plenty of people on the island that he called friends could tell the story of the day he'd proposed to Jeannie as well as he could.

He'd always found comfort in that familiarity, despite the inherent burden that came with it. The responsibility to protect the healthy community dynamic. As a widower and a police officer in the small town, he didn't really want to just sleep around, although his sex drive was in fine working order.

For years now, he did his best to focus on things other than his empty bed. And when that didn't work, he headed down to Beaufort or up to Myrtle Beach to find a willing partner. Someone eager for simple satisfaction with no strings.

What he missed more than sex was the intangible intimacy he'd shared with his wife. If anyone pressed him to explain, he would bluster and evade. He couldn't articulate the emotional hole in his life. The one he was resigned to carry to his own grave.

But that's what missing her was. An emptiness where once there had been such a strong connection. A connection he had taken for granted way too often. All those quiet conversations that had taken place with just a look. The understanding of a mood or an opinion without having to say all the words. And of course, the affection, the easy touches, and the joy of saying and hearing the words that needed to be said.

The idea of being that open with someone new was daunting. The grief had lasted so much longer than he'd anticipated. It still reared up and bit him in the ass more often than he liked to admit.

In contrast, spending time with Maureen felt as easy as those days with his wife. He would have expected to feel some kind of guilt over that. He didn't.

Did that make him a bad widower? He wasn't sure he wanted an answer.

Here he was, utterly captivated by someone new. It was shocking how suddenly and completely his view had shifted. All he could think of was Maureen. She was the person he wanted to go out with. She was the woman he could see himself with, outside the scope of a security assignment.

Was it healthy to be this attached after such a short acquaintance? Maybe he needed a holiday fling. And just how would he suggest *that* without sounding like a world-class jerk? Sure, she'd kissed him yesterday, but he was here as her protection.

There was a line he shouldn't cross.

But when he walked back in and saw her handing a stack of boxes to a customer, a bright smile on her face and in her eyes, he wanted to cross that line. To obliterate it. To gather her close and set his mouth on hers. Not just because she was convenient or beautiful. She alone had reignited a connection, an anticipation, he'd never expected to find again.

The more time he spent around her, the more he wanted to forget responsibilities and promises. The woman made him want to sail off into the sunset, just the two of them. That

should not excite him. All his life, responsibility and roots had kept him content. Grounded. Happy. Now everything that wasn't her felt like barriers and tethers.

He was being an idiot.

How could all these feelings be so real? It didn't make sense that he was this intrigued by a woman who made him want to be someone else. Made him want to try and do things he'd never entertained before.

She turned, focusing on him, and he felt her gaze like a caress. On his skin. Under it. Desire for her burned deep, flooding his system. Smart or not, he wanted her. Wanted her more with every hour in her presence.

He was here for a reason. Moving to the other end of the bar, he sent a text that everything was clear. So what if he hadn't felt this way since Jeannie? That mattered, but this wasn't the right time. Good or bad, this thrilling new attraction had to wait until the job was done. Anything else wasn't fair to either of them.



MAUREEN CHECKED the clock on the wall in the kitchen. One more hour, some cleanup, and they'd be done with all of this until after Christmas. Though her feet hurt and her back was achy, she wondered if Will would walk with her on the beach for a bit before they headed back to her hideout at the Cove.

Hideout. She laughed at the image that brought to mind. She was hardly roughing it, but it wasn't home. Better with the holiday decorations and she was grateful for his thoughtfulness after she'd accused him of being bossy.

That thought, that hope, gave her a much-needed boost of energy.

Everyone had been amazing both in the kitchen and out front, making the time fly today. And they'd been busy enough that no one asked her all of the questions she couldn't answer.

Because she didn't know how she was doing. And she had zero explanations for Will's constant presence.

Oh, he didn't hover, but he was there and that alone had been a tremendous reassurance. She didn't need to jump at loud noises or second guess who might be coming through the door. She didn't need to worry about a killer hiding in the office or lurking out in the parking lot. If anyone tried something awful, Will would handle it.

She figured the man could handle anything.

Glancing to where he sat at the end of the bar, she managed to keep her swoony sigh to herself. She knew better than to fall for a stranger. And yet her heart kept wanting to dive into his hands. Her life and livelihood were on the line and yet her mind was preoccupied with Will. His shoulders. His warm eyes. That short beard that marked him as a professional man on vacation. Yes, he was handsome as sin, but just now his quiet confidence did wonders for her.

His phone rang and he scowled at the screen before he picked up. She watched, marveling as his gaze swept the room. Anticipation shivered down her spine when those eyes locked onto her.

He was stalking toward her with a ground-eating stride. "The office," he said, his voice low as he touched her elbow.

She didn't even think to argue. Not with that stern expression on his face. She sent a smile to the others in the kitchen as they passed. "I'll be back in a minute." She hoped that proved true.

When he closed the office door with a snap and turned the lock, she had a momentary concern about what the others would think.

"Are they in danger?"

He shook his head. "She's secure," he said to the caller. "I'm putting you on speaker."

Maureen was still wrestling with his statement about her security as a stranger's voice came through the phone.

“Hello, Ms. Lassiter. This is Connor. I was updating Frasier about an incident a few minutes ago.”

Was Harold close? Her skin prickled and she twisted the bar towel in her hands to get rid of the unpleasant sensation. “What happened?” Would she have to move again? Though she was rested enough to want to fight back, she also wanted to hide until this was over. She saw the fierce look in Will’s eyes and reached out to him. “Are the boys okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Connor reported as Will nodded. “They spotted Harold at a marina about an hour ago. Eli gave chase. David called me while Lance reported the sighting to the police. Harold got away, but not before Eli noted the name of the boat he escaped in. The police and Coast Guard have been alerted.”

She sagged back against the desk. Eli chasing a killer only put him in more danger. Worry scraped at her nerves. It was one thing for Will to take her case. She wasn’t comfortable putting his sons in harm’s way, no matter how eager they were to help. “What does this mean?”

“When can we move to the Cove?”

Their questions collided over the phone. For a brief moment, all she could hear was the sound of keystrokes. “I suggest you move back now. I’ll keep you posted about the police pursuit. As for what it means, Ms. Lassiter, that’s harder to define.”

“It means she’s still in danger.”

“True,” Connor allowed. “Every indication is that he’s working alone.”

Will’s scowl deepened. “Officer Jenkins told me he’s a scam artist with ties to drug running.”

“Yes, that’s accurate. And his home base is somewhere down there. Possibly the marina he just escaped from,” Connor said. “I only mean there’s no indication that he has enlisted help to end this situation with Ms. Lassiter.”

She tried to quash her reaction. Fear was a factor, but showing the depth of that fear wouldn’t help anyone. Will

shifted, his arm coming around her shoulders for support. Only then did she realize she was shaking.

“That helps,” Will said.

Maureen had to defer to his expertise.

“Keep us posted. We’ll be on our way to the Cove in five minutes.”

He ended the call and pocketed the phone. “I’m sorry. I know how much you’d rather stay and work.”

She waved that off. “I’m glad your boys are all right.” She walked around the desk to get her purse. “My staff is probably safer with me out of the way.”

“The boys will be here shortly,” he promised. “And Connor is always watching.”

To that, she could only manage a brisk nod. “Then we’d better go.”

So much for that walk on the beach. Angry as she’d been that Harold had invaded her home and attacked Will yesterday, she thought she might actually be more furious with the alleged killer today.

Yes, Will had come into her life to keep her safe, but she wanted to get to know him. She wasn’t ashamed about wanting more kisses. And she didn’t much care if it amounted to a silly romantic fantasy, she had been looking forward to a few minutes with the wind in her hair, the sand under her feet, and her hand tucked into his.

In her mind it would’ve been the best next kiss. And now? Well now her heart was all caught up in the fear of what Harold might do next and what his antics would cost her.

Chapter 7

Will was glad to get Maureen back to the Cove and into her suite without any further incident. She immediately went to clean up and change clothes, leaving Will to pace and wonder about the next move.

He caught a tremor in his hands when he poured himself a glass of water. Once he got eyes on Eli, he'd feel better. Sure, the police had told him his son was fine, that he'd never been in any real danger. Didn't change a thing.

Eli wasn't trained for police work or security. He was still just a big kid at heart, willing to go out and do whatever struck his fancy. Like chasing a suspected murderer.

In Will's mind there was no cause for speculation. It was just a matter of time before the local cops linked DNA from Maureen's house to the body dropped behind her bar. With that solid evidence they should be able to bring Harold in, lock him up, and throw away the key.

The sooner that was accomplished, the better Will would feel. For the case. And for the woman who'd gotten caught up in something unthinkable.

She returned, looking remarkably refreshed, but there was a furrow between her brows. "Eli hasn't called?"

"Not yet." Will tried to play it off. "He's fine. If he wasn't, you could be sure he'd let me know."

She nodded with sympathy. "Tim put me through that kind of thing when he was in college. I'd only hear from him when

he needed cash or an ear to vent to. Didn't your other boys do that?"

"Not like the youngest," Will admitted. "We lost his mom when he was eighteen and I tried my best to stay engaged, but I think something broke inside him."

"His heart for sure." She walked over and rubbed his shoulders. "Just like yours. Grief isn't easy for anyone. But he doesn't look or sound the least bit broken to me."

"When did Tim come around?"

"Well, I think it was easier because we worked so closely together all those years. And once he decided the bar was his future, things smoothed out and we had better balance. He started sharing more of the regular day to day and more high points instead of just the low, whiny moments."

The image of anyone getting away with whining to Maureen made him laugh. "Unless you're different with him, I can't imagine you tolerating much whining."

"Oh, never," she agreed. "Everyone gets five minutes and then we shift the focus and move on."

"Pretty sure my five minutes are up." He patted her hand and slipped away from her touch, missing the contact immediately. But if they kept this up, he'd be wanting to kiss her again. Already wanted that. "So." He rubbed his hands together. "Moving on." He looked at the little tree and walked over to turn on the lights. "What's on the agenda tonight?"

His phone rang before she could reply. "Hold that thought."

"Eli?" Hope gleamed in her lovely eyes.

He nodded and walked out to the balcony. To his credit, he managed a simple "hello" rather than badger his youngest with concerns and questions.

"I'm good, Dad," Eli said. "But no one has eyes on Harold or the boat." He grumbled. "Sorry I lost him."

"You found him," Will said. "Thanks to you, the police and Connor have a fresh starting point. He can't hide forever."

“If you say so.”

“Patience is a big part of this kind of work.”

“Yeah. So I’m learning.”

His son didn’t sound too happy about it. “Why not come to the Cove for dinner?” Will suggested. “We can all hang out and relax.”

“Maybe. There are some things I want to check out first.”

“On Christmas Eve?”

“Crime never rests. Or so you say.”

Will laughed, though he didn’t find this situation all that funny. “True enough. Be careful.” He could tell Eli had something specific in mind and for the first time ever, he hoped it involved a woman instead of this case.

“I’ll text updates, Dad. Merry Christmas Eve.”

“Merry Christmas Eve, son.”

He pocketed his phone and then pulled it out, sending a text message to Connor. He wanted someone watching out for Eli in case Harold showed up again. According to the location tracker, David and Lance were still close to the Beachcomber and Eli was moving in that direction. He had to trust his boys to handle themselves.

“Everything okay?” Maureen asked when he walked back inside.

“Sure.” He noticed her holding a brochure. “What’s that?”

“A caroling party.” Her smile was all things merry and bright as she shared the details. “Hot cocoa and cider, cookies, and a caroling sing-a-long. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

Not exactly his idea of the best time ever, but she was clearly into it. Seeing her excitement made him want to join in. “Sure. It’s something different.”

“It’s not too much trouble?”

He shook his head. The fact that she asked made him want to hug her for being thoughtful and schedule another ten

events so she could enjoy herself more.

“Oh, good,” she said. “It starts in an hour. That will give us some time to eat.” She moved toward the kitchen and the food containers she’d brought back for them. “I could use the fresh air and a dose of holiday cheer.”

He’d rather attend an event where he had more control over the situation, but after Eli’s near miss earlier, odds were good Harold was laying low. Hopefully out in his boat near the international waters line. “Let me call the boys.” If they were doing this public outing, he wanted backup he could count on.

“Thank you.”

He sent the text messages and then called Connor to let him know the Beachcomber would only be protected by the security system. Getting the go-ahead, they went down and met David and Lance at the caroling party.

Eli would usually be into this kind of unpredictable and fun outing, but he turned down the invitation, set on watching Maureen’s house. For whatever reason, the initial break-in had him riled up. Will didn’t bother arguing. If his youngest was determined there wouldn’t be another problem in her home, that was good news.

But the caroling setup made him edgy as soon as they arrived. The whole thing was happening near the beach where anyone passing by could join in. A security nightmare.

Harold had dropped a body on this beach once already. He’d made his intentions against Maureen clear when he’d been lying in wait at her house. This? Well, if he was close and still willing to silence Maureen, this would be a great spot to try.

Once again, Will was grateful not only for his boys, but for Connor’s oversight as well. “Mingle around the crowd,” he instructed the boys. “Keep us in sight. Connor will let you know if he gets a hit on Harold in the area.”

“Lots of area to cover,” Lance observed.

The ominous tone echoed Will’s feelings on the situation. “We’ll all stay alert. If something happens, Maureen will move

toward the stage.” A DJ was there along with other staff.

When they headed off, he turned to Maureen, taking her hands. “Promise me, if something happens, you’ll move toward the stage.”

Her eyes were wide and wary as she looked around. Definitely not matching up with the casual holiday vibe of her bright top and sparkling sandals. “Let’s go back upstairs.”

It was tempting, but she needed a break. “No. We only need to be prepared. The odds of him trying something with all these witnesses are pretty low.”

“But not zero.”

He squeezed her hands lightly. “We’re here. Everything will be fine. Now promise me, so I know you understand.”

“I understand. But I can’t promise.” She shook her head, her gaze roaming through the gathering crowd. “If something happens to me, you won’t leave me.”

His back teeth were locked. “Correct. That’s my job.”

Her lips firmed and when she looked up, he saw the light of battle in her gaze. “Job or not, you’re my friend. I won’t make a promise to leave you if you’re in trouble.”

“Protecting you is my priority. You need to be safe.”

“Well, I feel safest with you. I won’t run, Will. Stop asking.”

Arguing would only draw attention and make her unhappy. Neither of those outcomes were ideal. “Fine. We stick together.” With a nod, David and Lance moved off to their respective places. At least someone was listening to him.

If he’d been nervous before, it was a thousand times worse now. The prickling was so bad, someone might as well be shoving needles under his skin, head to toe. He didn’t let it show, singing along with the Christmas carols and keeping Maureen tucked close to his side. At the first break, they met the boys at the refreshment stand, decorated like a gingerbread house, for a cup of hot cider. As they chatted with the folks nearest to them, Will started to relax.

No one had spotted Harold in the vicinity and it wouldn't be easy to get here without passing by a camera of some kind.

With hot cider in hand, Will and Maureen found seats for the second set of caroling and elves came out to divide the group into teams for a round. The silly and lighthearted guidance, complete with cue cards, gave Will a boost of holiday spirit. Maureen too, judging by the sparkle in her gaze.

During the song itself, Will felt his phone buzzing. The message that flashed on his screen requested a phone call. Catching Lance's attention on the other side of the crowd, Will signaled for them to close in before he got the go-ahead from Maureen. Stepping back, just a few yards away from her, he called Connor.

"Problem?" the tech asked.

And there, a beat too late, Will realized his mistake. The message had been faked to get him out of the way. He shoved the phone into his pocket. On an oath, he charged toward Maureen and the caroling, but he was hauled away from her, away from the light and into the shadows further down the beach.

Will couldn't see the man behind him, but he judged that they were about the same size and the attacker had the initial advantage of surprise.

Not for long.

He twisted into the body of the person holding him and ducked under the outstretched arm. Driving his hand up and into the elbow, he felt the blow connect and heard the satisfying outburst. The light was dim, but Will recognized Harold. He grabbed him by the shirt and propelled the man backward until he stumbled into the sand. "You have the right to remain silent," Will started reading the man's rights automatically.

"Shut up!" Harold managed to land blows on Will's shoulder and ribs.

Though he blocked and fought back, he was losing ground fast. In his peripheral vision, he noticed they were drawing

attention. People had stopped singing and someone shouted for security.

Will tried to move Harold back toward the party, hoping the lights and inevitable cell phone cameras would intimidate the man. Instead, he took a hard blow to the kidneys before Harold yanked him back once more.

“Listen, damn you,” Harold snarled at Will’s ear.

Will heaved himself upright, only to take a knee in the diaphragm. Harold seized the advantage as Will wheezed. “I’m making you an offer, old man.”

Will was so surprised, he stopped fighting.

“With Burrell out, you can name your price.” Harold gave Will a shake. “I’ll be in touch.” Harold bolted, leaving Will with more questions.

What the hell was any of that? What he’d thought was an attempt to get him out of the way, to clear a path to Maureen, was an attempt to bribe him? It didn’t make any sense. Yes, Burrell had been a sergeant in Will’s police department back home. And yes, the man had worked with drug dealers using the island as a waypoint. But how did this guy know anything about that?

It was common knowledge that drug runners had extensive networks, but nothing they’d turned up so far connected Harold with the trouble in South Carolina.

He started to sit up when Maureen skidded to a stop at his side. He looked past her to where David, Lance, and hotel security were holding back the caroling party.

“Will?” Frantic, Maureen patted him down. “Will! Say something. Where’s your phone?” Her hands fluttered against his shoulders, his face. “Are you okay?”

“Wounded pride.” He started to sit up again, but she wouldn’t let him. “Police?”

“On the way,” she said. “Where’s your phone?”

“Why?” At least half the carolers had called the police by now and he guessed more than a dozen videos were already

streaming online. Unpleasant as *that* was, it meant Harold would have a harder time hiding.

“We need to call your assistant,” she explained.

Will nudged her back and finally sat up, not excited about the effort that small move required. “He knows.” Will lifted a hand toward David and groaned at the sharp pain in his shoulder. “I’m sure that’s who David is talking with.”

She glanced over and gave a quick nod. “All right.” She studied his face. “What do you need?”

Her voice slid into a detached, professional tone. Will wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. He decided they could work that out later. “We need to get you out of here,” he said. “Behind a locked door.” He couldn’t give Harold time to use this chaos to target Maureen.

“You need medical attention,” she argued. “What if you have a concussion?”

“Doubtful,” he countered. “I need a first aid kit and some privacy to make a few calls.” Maybe making it about him would get her cooperating and get them out of here faster. “I’ve caused enough of a distraction.”

“You caused nothing. It was Harold, wasn’t it?”

He nodded.

“Will.” Her face crumpled and she sat back on her heels.

“I’m fine.” It was mostly true. “Let’s see if we can get out of here.” Guilt swamped him. All she’d wanted was a fun holiday outing and somehow Harold had gotten close enough to wreck it. He’d managed to bypass all the tech and people searching for his face. And Will had let him escape.

What a mess. Silently, he vowed to make it up to her.

Right now, he didn’t have any ideas about how, but he’d figure it out. She deserved better than this, especially during a holiday season alone. That was one thing he’d been grateful for since losing his wife; his boys hadn’t once let him cope with Christmas alone. Will was sure that was the only reason he’d made it this long without falling to pieces.

The police arrived and he gave them a quick overview of what happened and the concerns about Maureen's safety. With their permission, he and his boys were allowed to take her back upstairs while they settled things at the scene.

He'd just finished washing out the scrapes in the bathroom when Jess called. Checking his reflection one last time, he answered. "I'm fine."

"I'm pulling you," Jess declared. "Your client can stay in the suite on her own. Cove security can station someone outside her door until I get another protector in place. I can push the KWPD to help out."

"No." Will glanced around the suite. His boys had Maureen distracted for now, but it wouldn't last long. Her concern was a double-edged sword. His pride took a beating that she was worried and yet, he couldn't deny it felt good to know she cared. "No," he repeated.

"No?" Jess swore under her breath. "Don't be stubborn, Will. This is your vacation. It's Christmas."

"It will be tomorrow, yes." And he wasn't leaving Maureen's safety to an amateur. She wasn't just a case and she didn't trust easily. She was special. On her own and special to him.

That kiss... Well, he was only a man. That kiss had woken him up and left him with a serious case of curiosity about the sizzling spark between them. He wasn't leaving until they sorted that out.

"The boys are fine." He glanced over at his kids. "Having a blast, actually."

"*You* are injured."

"I'm a bit scuffed up," he admitted grudgingly. "Hardly out of commission."

There was a long pause and Will was shocked that he was ready to beg for her to keep him here.

"Fine," she said at last. "But if anything happens—anything worse—I'm coming down to handle this myself."

Doubtful. Or if she did try it, Nash would be with her. Not what Maureen needed. He started to tell her about the opportunity Harold mentioned when more people walked in. Two cops and a man with a doctor's bag. Great. The Cove had a physician-on-call. David wouldn't be able to stall them for long.

This crowd wasn't what he needed at all. And if he felt that way, Maureen likely felt it as well. Exponentially. Stifling a groan, he told Jess, "Stay where you are and call in whatever help Connor needs to find the bastard. He needs to be locked up. That's what the client needs most."

Chapter 8

Christmas Day dawned sunny and quiet. Maureen had spent a restless night tossing and turning and fighting with the sheets. The nightmares of Will being dragged away from her were interrupted by hours staring up at the dark ceiling while more intimate fantasies of Will danced through her head.

She dropped the blame on him. On his insistence on sleeping on the couch—again—when he should have taken the bed. Her concerns about his health and comfort had fallen on deaf ears. He'd been impossibly stubborn, claiming his solution was safer. Putting himself between her and any access to the suite.

As if she wanted him to take another beating for her.

She felt edgy as conflicting needs rolled through her system, battling for dominance. To care for him, to call in a different bodyguard so *he* would be safe, and, last but not least, to climb him like a tree.

Being pulled out of her normal comfort zone, a place where she felt strong and capable, was the worst. Why did she have to meet Will now, when she was at her lowest?

Everything about this jacked-up holiday was unsettling and left her floundering. And this morning, it seemed he'd had a better night on the couch than she had in the bed.

It was Christmas, so she tried to be gracious, to make small talk, and ignore all the uncomfortable issues that seemed to be hers alone.

Thanks to the Cove's savvy planning and Will's attention to detail, they had a full day of food stocked in the kitchenette.

All they had to do was heat things up or plate a variety of snacks as they got hungry. Plus, there was the cheesecake. It wasn't like they planned to exchange gifts or anything of the kind. She just wanted today to be as relaxing as possible for him.

If that meant staying in the suite, so be it. The room was lovely and the view from the balcony offered plenty of fresh air and rejuvenating scenery.

Honestly, she didn't want to go anywhere. Not with Harold so close.

She managed a real smile, a glimmer of happiness, over the distraction of mimosas while a savory breakfast casserole warmed in the oven.

"Merry Christmas," Will said, tapping his glass to hers.

"Merry Christmas!" She had the ridiculous urge to kiss him and barely managed to refrain. "Here's to a safe and quiet holiday."

"Cheers to that," he agreed.

She walked over to the window, gazing out toward the ocean. "Are your boys expecting you?" she asked.

"I doubt it." He hesitated. "I've already texted them. Two out of three texted back right away."

She glanced back and caught him grinning. The man was so close to his sons. Eli had to be holding out. His youngest was the ornery one. "So what is Eli up to?" She hoped it wasn't that he was tied up protecting her house.

Will gave a short laugh. "How did you know?"

She was a woman with years of experience with people. It hadn't taken her long to sort out the general personality traits of his boys. "He's the one who enjoys giving you grief."

"No truer words," Will agreed. "According to the location app David insists on, Eli is watching your house. Assuming

he's not asleep in the car."

She swallowed, hauled her thoughts away from scenarios that would be worse. It was strange having other people looking out for her like this. "Well, thank him for me when he does check in."

"I will." He watched her as he sipped his drink. "Have you talked to Tim this morning?"

"Not yet. I'm sure they have their hands full with the twins and any surprises Santa managed to deliver. He'll check in as soon as the wrapping paper settles."

"And you haven't told him about anything going on here?"

She shook her head. No way could she burden her son with this. "If we're still dealing with it when he comes home, that's soon enough."

When the timer went off, they dished up breakfast. She kept an eye on Will. He wasn't moving as awkwardly or tenderly as he had last night. The improvement gave her great comfort. But when he suggested they eat outside, everything inside her balked.

"Isn't it too chilly?" she asked. He raised an eyebrow. That's all it took. Just one small facial movement and she felt silly for trying to make up excuses. "We both know it's not too cold out there." Still, she couldn't shake the fear.

"Inside is fine with me." He walked over to the table and took a seat, as if proving his point.

She sat down across from him and tried to take an interest in her food. "Are all victims as out of sorts as I've been?"

"It depends on the crime and the person. You've been through a lot."

Diplomacy wasn't what she was after. She set her mimosa down with a soft click. "I've been through just about *nothing*. I've been shocked by the situation. Harassed and threatened. And that jerk was in my house. Fired a gun. But you. *You*." She had to catch her breath. "You gave up your vacation. Put yourself between that gun and me. *You* took a beating last

night to protect me.” She shook her head, stopping the protest she could see him preparing. “Don’t you dare tell me it was the job.”

Pressing a hand to her racing heart, she fought for control. A rant hadn’t been her intention, but everything was bottled up inside. Nothing made sense. Yes, she’d hired him. Because she’d been scared and asking for help had been the smart thing to do. But then he’d shown up. Him, as a person, and she didn’t like it. The risks he was taking, the risks his sons were taking, to keep her safe.

“The job isn’t a valid reason to me,” she continued. “That’s not how it feels.” She blinked against the sting of tears in her eyes. “It didn’t look like a job to me when he was fighting you.”

“Maureen.”

The gentle rumble in his voice loosened something around her heart. Something she didn’t want to look at too closely. “You... What if—”

“I’m here.” He came around and sat down next to her, his arm draped over the back of her chair, not quite touching her. “I’m here and honestly, I’m fine.”

She forced herself to meet his gaze when she’d rather hide. From her emotions and his ability to see right through her. “If I could go back to that night and just not go outside... You’d be safe. The bar would be safe.” She swiped at the one tear that rolled down her cheek. “I’m just so sorry for dragging you into this.”

“I volunteered,” he reminded her. “And I’m not sure you could’ve stayed inside and avoided this. That’s a compliment, by the way.”

“Is it?” She peeked and found him smiling again.

“One hundred percent.” His fingertips rested lightly on her shoulder. “You’re wired that way. You care about people and you should have help when you need it.”

“There’s no way to make this sound less selfish, but I’m really glad it was you,” she confessed in a rush. She couldn’t

imagine going through this with anyone else. Wasn't that foolish, to be so attached to a man who'd been a stranger two days ago? Something about Will reeled her in, made her want to stay close. Not just for security or fodder for hot dreams. It was him. His character and humor and compassion. She didn't believe she'd have these feelings for just any bodyguard who showed up.

"I'm really glad it was me too." He gave her a quick shoulder squeeze. "The Beachcomber was on our vacation agenda because Jess recommended the food and laid-back atmosphere." He sat back in the chair. "I admit, I've been wondering if you and I would've hit it off if I'd only shown up as a regular customer."

There was nothing regular about Will. And his admission gave her a welcome distraction. Made her wonder how many people she blew off because she was content on her own. Set in her ways. "Well." She straightened. Narrowed her gaze. "I would've appreciated the view," she said. "Not gonna lie."

Taking a chance, she ran a finger over his whiskered jaw. "You must know you're handsome. I'd like to think I would have poured you a drink and enjoyed some good conversation. Assuming you'd been in the mood to chat. What would you have ordered?"

"A Guinness."

She got into the spirit of the game. "A classically handsome man ordering a classic. Smart. I would've countered with a suggestion to try the local porter."

"And I would've let you talk me into it."

"Why?" She caught herself holding her breath, inching closer in anticipation of his answer.

"You're a gorgeous, experienced bartender. I would've trusted your judgment enough to give something new a try."

The flutters were back, but she had to tease. It was that or crawl into his lap. "Experienced? Is that a roundabout way of calling out my age?"

“Hell no.” He reached across the table for his plate. “I’m older than you anyway.”

“But you’ve barely seen me work,” she pressed. “Cashing out take-out orders hardly counts.”

“I’ve seen *you*,” he stated plainly. “It’s not a stretch to picture you tending bar—the bar you own—with a sassy swagger and the confidence of someone who knows her business.” He wiped his mouth and pinned her with a look. “The better question is whether or not you would’ve agreed to go on a date with me.”

Her heart flipped in her chest. Because here and now, she’d say yes in a heartbeat if he were to ask her out. On a random night at the bar, she was far more likely to decline. Politely, with some harmless flirting thrown in, but her answer would’ve been ‘no’.

“You’re thinking awfully hard,” he observed.

She poked at the food on her plate. “I’m uncomfortable.”

“Because we both know you wouldn’t have gone out with me?” He chuckled.

She waved that off. “I would’ve turned you down,” she admitted. “Personal policy at the bar.”

“Understandable.”

Of course, he’d say something like that. And mean it. “The troubling thing is feeling any kind of gratitude to an alleged killer. Or if not the man specifically, the situation.”

“Okay.” He set his fork aside. “I need more of an explanation.”

“If I hadn’t gone out there and seen...” She cleared her throat. “If I hadn’t been scared enough to call for help, who knows? We might’ve met, but we wouldn’t be here if you weren’t protecting me.”

He was quiet and went back to his breakfast. She figured he agreed with her but didn’t want to admit it. She should’ve known better.

“That conclusion makes some big assumptions.” He shifted to face her. “And you might be right. But for the sake of argument, I’d like to suggest an alternative.”

“I’m listening.” Eagerly.

“Why don’t we do ourselves a favor and pretend that I walked in during your shift. We talked, flirted, and I made you laugh. And when I asked you out, you found me too irresistible to deny. You said yes. We had coffee. Walked on the beach. Got to know each other. Maybe without the intrusion of my boys.” She laughed with him. “Maureen, why don’t we pretend, at least for today, that what brought us here was simply our interest in each other?”

And just like that, her heart tumbled right into his hands. She was falling for a man she barely knew, but never wanted to be without.

“That sounds amazing.”



WILL SIPPED HIS COFFEE, staring at the sparkling lights of the Christmas tree in the corner. It had been quite a day. On duty or not, he and Maureen had been able—mostly—to enjoy the day as if they were a regular couple. Two people at the exciting start of a relationship.

Weird, maybe. But the idea seemed to help her relax and that made him happy. Happier than he’d been in a long, long time.

He would look back on this as the strangest Christmas of his life. Not unpleasant. Only different. And a damn sight better than all those Christmases since he’d lost Jeannie. Those years of hoping he wasn’t making a traumatic emotional mistake with his boys.

He’d spent many a holiday working, but never on this kind of assignment. Guarding a beautiful woman in a luxury resort. Down deep, he knew it would still be just a job if the client was anyone other than Maureen.

Where did that leave him when the case was resolved or Jess replaced him? The question had drifted through his mind all day and once again, he shoved it away for later.

The physical aches from last night's scuffle were easy to ignore. A cake walk compared to the emotional pains of holidays past. No, the biggest change was the company.

Maureen had kept a close eye on his every movement and he wished he could say it bothered him. He found it sweet. Found these kindnesses under her tough, independent outer shell endearing.

And extremely appealing.

There it was, the flare of desire, the memory of that singular kiss front and center in his mind. The kiss he should stop thinking about. The one he should forget entirely. A harder task after the day they'd enjoyed. When she'd kissed him, she'd been a distressed combination of fear and relief and exhaustion. He had to put it behind him.

As if.

Though he didn't really have a choice. The fire in his blood was his problem and he had the self-control to deal with it. Besides, that kiss hadn't gone further. Nothing more had happened since. Last night was close, but he'd caught himself. He was here on a job. To protect her, from him if necessary.

"Why don't you ask your boys to join us for a bit?"

Her suggestion caught him off guard. "Am I that moody?"

She chuckled. "Nothing so obvious," she replied. "But you came all this way for a vacation."

And at the first opportunity, he'd ditched the rest and relaxation for work. That had to look bad, though he didn't regret a minute of his time with Maureen.

"The boys and I have had fun. Before Jess called me in to help you."

Help. Right. That's what he was doing. Then his words registered and he rushed to clarify. "And after she called. I mean—"

“I get it.” She nestled herself into the opposite end of the couch. Just out of his reach. And damn if she wasn’t grinning at his discomfort. “Oh, I’m sure puttering around with me and getting jumped on my behalf has been a blast.”

“I’ve been on worse assignments,” he said, shifting to face her rather than the tree. “Aside from the dangerous situation, this is the most fun I’ve had on Christmas in years.” He couldn’t leave it so generic. “Because of you.”

She looked down at her hands, twirling the narrow band of gold on her thumb. Her expression was veiled by the swing of her hair. “If you say so.”

“Who gave you that ring?” he asked, searching for a diversion.

“It was my grandmother’s wedding band.” She lifted her face and tucked her hair behind her ear. “It came to me when she passed. The only remnant from my family tree.”

“Your parents never came around?”

“Couldn’t be bothered with their failure of a daughter. I was a pregnant scandal on top of an adulterous scandal.” Her gaze went sharp. “Don’t you dare pity me, Will.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said quickly. “Just a hard road, that’s all. I can’t imagine cutting off my sons that way. It would be...”

“Like carving out your own heart?” she finished.

“Pretty much.”

“I found a way to forgive and let go. For Tim,” she explained. “For myself. I didn’t want that bitterness hanging over us when we had a good life.”

“A life you carved out.”

She nodded, pride twinkling in her eyes. “That’s right.”

He moved a little closer, stretching his arm across the back of the couch. “I hope Jeannie and I raised those three to have the integrity not to cheat, first of all. And to take responsibility

for their actions, no matter how awkward or difficult the mistake.”

“You have.” She reached out, her fingers gliding over his forearm, kindling that undeniable heat. “It’s so obvious they’re good men.” She licked her lips. “Like their dad.”

“Thanks.” Somehow, he dragged his gaze away from her lush mouth despite the longing beating in his blood. He wanted to lay her back and cover her body with his. To claim her mouth and surrender to her every demand. He shoved himself up and away from the temptation.

“Maybe we should call the boys.” He cleared his throat. “The bar’s closed and the exterior cameras at your house are up and working.”

“Great!” She popped up to her feet as well. “There’s plenty of Black Forest cheesecake to go around.”

“You said that was your family’s tradition.”

She waved that aside. “I can make another one. This feels like the year for improvisation anyway.”

He had to agree with her. After calling the boys, he sent an update to Connor about the shift in plans. The research expert sent holiday wishes, assuring him there were eyes monitoring the area remotely. Will would be warned if they spotted any trouble.

Within the hour, her hotel room was bursting at the seams with Frasier’s as his boys arrived. All three of them were in an ornery mood, all too happy to roast him with stories as they demolished the cheesecake on offer.

The five of them talked and laughed as if they’d been friends for decades rather than days. It was a marvel to Will, one he truly appreciated. No, this wasn’t a traditional Christmas by any definition, but Will was happy. The boys were happy. Most importantly, Maureen seemed to be enjoying herself. That was the real win for Will—giving her a respite from the turmoil.

As much as he wanted this situation put to rest for Maureen, he’d take the quiet holiday as a gift. He didn’t

believe that criminals took holiday breaks, but they'd get back to the hunt tomorrow.

Eventually, he shoed his boys out so he and Maureen could discuss the plan moving forward. The bar was scheduled to reopen tomorrow and he suspected it would take some convincing to keep her away, regardless of the risks. That conversation was best handled privately. He didn't want her to feel pressured by all four of them and he sure didn't want to reject any wild ideas Eli might suggest.

But it was David who surprised him. "Dad," he said, pausing at the door while his brothers headed out. "Are you sure you don't want to take the night off?"

His oldest looked completely serious. If it had been anyone else, Will would've thought he was being pranked. To hell with his obligation and official capacity. He was staying because she needed him. Trusted him. And he didn't want to be anywhere else.

"I'm fine, son."

"Sometimes the day after a fight or accident is worse."

"You're not wrong." He never lied outright to his boys. At least not about anything other than Santa Claus. And no good parent could judge him harshly for trying to preserve that sweet magic through the years. But this was different. "I'm sore, but that's it. You guys keep watch over her house and bar, I'll keep watch here." Where he was backed up by layers of hotel security. "Be safe out there."

"We will." David looked as if he wanted to say more, but Eli and Lance were waiting impatiently in the hallway. "Merry Christmas, Dad."

"Merry Christmas." He pulled David into a hard hug and then practically shoved him into the hallway.

Closing the door, he leaned back against it for a moment. His boys meant well, but fussing over him only made him feel old. Hardly the way he wanted to feel around Maureen.

He blinked as it dawned on him.

He didn't actually feel old around Maureen.
Not even after Harold had caught him off guard.
How refreshing.
Now what was he going to do about it?



WHILE WILL SAID GOOD NIGHT, Maureen carried the dessert plates to the kitchenette and loaded the dishwasher. It was up to her to make the first move tonight. Will had been so careful with her all day. He'd even graciously endured her bouts of clingy concern without any irritation.

If she didn't know better, thanks to all the stories his sons had shared, she'd label him as too perfect. But he wasn't. Not perfect. Not a saint. Only a patient, sexy man, with a serious nature, and a dedication to others. As a cop. As a father. As her protector.

All of that added to this inexplicable longing rising inside her. She wanted him, wanted to feel him. His kiss, his hands on her body. They hadn't known each other long and they'd been in the thick of one crisis after another. Or, more accurately, one ongoing crisis.

Somehow, that made everything more urgent. More necessary.

And yet, her troubles weren't the driving force behind her desire. This wasn't just about feeling alive or seizing an opportunity that could be taken away without notice. She was old enough to recognize a crush. Old enough to appreciate the ramifications.

But he made her feel young enough to hope again. Hope for herself and hope for a bit of romance. What was better than romance and Christmas in one potent combination?

Nothing.

Sure, this had to be temporary. A holiday fling. Although her heart might protest, she could deal with it. She always did.

But she couldn't ignore the heat in his gaze. Couldn't deny the tantalizing rush of response in her body. She felt as if she'd lose a piece of herself if she didn't take the chance.

She wasn't asking him for forever. Even if he turned her down, she could cope with that too. It wouldn't be fun, but it wouldn't destroy her. Decision made, she waited, her stomach swooping in anticipation. She heard him throw the locks at the door and wiped her suddenly clammy hands on her leggings.

Then he was right in front of her, a half-smile on his mouth. She gave in. Gave up any pretense of cool sophistication. She moved in, looping her arms around his neck, and pressed her mouth to his.

And there it was again. Exhilaration and assurance. The heady combination that only came from kissing Will. Her body relaxed as the sense of rightness washed over her, even as her pulse raced ahead, eager for more.

For everything.

His hands, hot and strong, rested at her waist and she let the kiss sweep her away. Into a fantasy where they really were lovers without a care in the world outside of this hotel room.

“Are you sure about this?”

His question came as his lips dragged down her throat, his hands skimming up over her ribs, his thumbs brushing underneath her breasts. She arched into his touch, eager for more. For all the tempting, sensual promises his hands and mouth were making to her body.

The fizzy feeling in her blood had nothing to do with the champagne. She hadn't been so sure about anything in a long time. Never so sure of *anyone*.

“Yes. Will.” Gripping the panels of his shirt, she ripped it open and admired the view. Oh, he was built. Strong and solid and the salt and pepper chest hair added to the appeal. She could almost ignore the bruises along his side.

Almost.

Her heart dropped at the sight. The reminder. He brushed aside the pain of it, but it had to ache. Physically, of course. But emotionally too. Will was a proud man and Harold's sneak attack had embarrassed him more than anything else.

Tonight, she would kiss every single mark he'd earned defending her. She started with the dark purple bruise near his shoulder. It was closest. As her lips touched his hot skin, he made a sound deep in his chest that reverberated through her. Her thighs trembled in response. Anticipation.

"I'm sure." She stared up into his serious brown eyes and melted at the heat in his gaze. Tonight would be one of the best memories of her life. And she wanted him. Already she knew it would be incredible.

Incomparable.

From that first flutter, she'd wanted them to wind up here, like this. Tonight, here in her room, there was no reason to resist the magnetic chemistry between them. When he looked at her, she felt vibrant and strong. Energized enough to climb a mountain.

Or better yet, the sexy man in front of her.

They were alone and secure. No chance of interruptions.

With her problems momentarily shelved, she linked her hands with his and seized the moment, walking backward toward the bedroom. Tonight was for them. Will was the best present on earth and she was going to make the most of this gift. No matter what trouble waited for them tomorrow, she'd keep tonight's memories in her heart forever.

Chapter 9

Will rolled out of bed and showered in record time. While Maureen slept, he left the bedroom to order breakfast. He should've felt strange, waking up next to a woman who wasn't his wife. Especially after sleeping alone for the past eight years. Longer, really. That last year, when Jeannie wasn't in the hospital, she'd been so uncomfortable that he'd moved into the guest room so they could both rest.

Not a perfect solution, but then, what was?

Yesterday was pretty damn close to perfection.

He glanced back toward the bedroom, his mind happily replaying every indulgence they'd shared since opening that bottle of champagne. He'd felt young again. Or at least alive. Holding her, kissing her, unwrapping her like she was the best present he'd ever seen had renewed something deep inside.

Sure, the sex was incredible. There was an undeniable connection between him and Maureen. Certainly more than could be easily explained away by the situation they were in. And that didn't make a lot of sense to him after such a short acquaintance. He wasn't sure if he should pick that apart or just accept things as they were right now.

This couldn't possibly be a problem. Not really. They were two consenting adults seeking a distraction. They'd succeeded. He smoothed a hand over his short beard, grateful no one was around to see the smile he couldn't hide.

The fact was, he liked her. A lot. Maureen was a feisty, smart, and inquisitive ray of sunlight. And when she kissed him, the world fell away. He could forget everything but her.

Not exactly an endorsement for kissing in public, when a murderer might still be trying to silence her. He was here to protect her after all.

That was fine. He wasn't exactly big on public displays of affection anyway. *That* he blamed on small town life where everyone always thought they knew everything about their neighbors.

Still, that all-consuming effect she had was an unexpected and wonderful gift. Especially for a man in his field.

He'd served the entirety of his police career in a low-crime small town, but that didn't mean there weren't scars. Some calls he'd responded to were etched on his soul, too ugly to forget. Jeannie, with her calming presence and perpetual cheer, had eased those burdens and given him a soft landing place for all those hard days.

When she died, he'd been sure that comfort had gone with her.

How strange to find Maureen had a similar effect. They were such different women, not that he wanted to dwell in comparisons. His life with Jeannie had been vibrant and bright and full. And then after... Finding himself alone, he supposed he'd just gone through the motions.

When had he decided that was enough?

He heard the shower turn on and shook off the brooding melancholy. First order of business was fueling up and then he could sort out how to protect her today. He was pretty sure she wouldn't tolerate another day lounging about the Cove. If he knew anything about her, she was dedicated to her business, her staff, and the customers they served.

Will stepped outside, debating the idea of breakfast on the balcony. The day was clear and warming up already. If Harold was out there, watching, it would be a good snub. Assuming

Maureen was comfortable with the idea. Would she find it romantic or be too unsettled to enjoy the meal?

She'd put on a brave face about the entire mess, but he recognized the signs of stress and the small hesitations she still suffered when they were out and about.

Hearing his phone ring, he ducked back inside.

"Connor," he answered. "Tell me they caught him."

"Not yet. I'm sorry." The man sighed. "I lost him and wherever he's hiding, there aren't any cameras. The police are doing what they can, but—"

"They're short on manpower," Will finished the refrain. "I understand." He went back outside and scanned the area. If Connor hadn't found him near the Cove, it would be safe enough out here. "She's resuming her normal schedule at the bar today."

"Seriously?" Connor muttered under his breath. "At least there are cameras available. And your boys."

And his boys. "Eli nearly caught him at the marina," Will said, reminding them both.

"We've been combing through everything in the vicinity," Connor said, clearly irritated. "He hasn't been back to that marina. There are just too many other, less reputable options."

Will thought Eli might find searching those sketchy areas more fun than the average person. As long as he didn't go alone. Either David or Lance could offer backup, and a dose of common sense, if necessary. "Go ahead and send whatever areas you want checked out to the boys. They'd be happy to do some legwork while I'm with Maureen at the bar."

"All right," Connor agreed. "That'll be a big help. I'm still digging into known associates. He's gotta be crashing with someone. No one has intel or eyes on drugs moving right now. At least not that they're admitting."

Will heard fingers drumming over a keyboard and feared Connor was about to go digging around in databases he should leave alone. "I'm sure you're coordinating with Jess, right?"

“Hmm?” Silence fell. “Jess. Right.” More silence. “Yes. I’ll coordinate with her and see where we end up.”

“Good.” Will ended the call and set the phone aside. Turning, he got caught up in the morning-fresh beauty that was Maureen smiling at him. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” She walked over and snuggled up against him. It was an embrace he would miss when this was over. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?” she asked.

“Meaning?”

“You employed the dad tone, but that wasn’t one of your boys.”

He supposed she was right, though he hadn’t picked up on it at the time. “Guess so. Connor is frustrated.”

“And frustration can lead us into murky waters,” she said. “Well done. I don’t want any of my trouble to make things worse for someone else.”

His reminder that they were working on her behalf was interrupted by the arrival of room service. “Dining in or out this morning?” he queried, pouring a cup of coffee for her from the carafe.

“Out,” she replied immediately, then stopped in her tracks. “Unless it’s, ah, too warm?”

The flash of worry in her eyes made him mad. Not at her, but at Harold. Where was the jerk hiding?

“It was perfect a few minutes ago.”

With a firm nod, she carried their coffee mugs and the carafe and he followed with the heavy tray of food. The weather was fine, but her mood was plummeting. She was only pushing the food around her plate and if she really did plan to go and work, she needed to eat.

“He’s not close,” Will assured her. “If he was close, Connor would’ve spotted him on a CCTV camera.”

“How did—” She laughed with a slow shake of her head. “You can see right through me,” she said.

“Part of it is experience,” he agreed. “Just like you recognizing I was a cop right off. Mostly it’s just common sense.” He reached over and covered her hand. “And I wouldn’t knowingly put you in harm’s way.”

“I know that.” Her gaze darted away from him, but he doubted she was enjoying the view. When she faced him again, there was a sparkle in her eyes. “Thank you for last night.”

He resisted the gratitude and regretted it when she pulled free of his touch. “Maureen.” What could he say? “I should be thanking you.” That sounded forced and they both knew it. “What I mean is, well...” He swore. He was making a mess of this. “I haven’t been close to anyone since my wife died. I guess I need a refresher on how not to be awkward. Last night was more. More heat and desire than I’ve felt in nearly a decade.”

Her eyebrows shot up at that admission, but he plowed on.

“I miss my wife. No sense denying the obvious.” It was his turn to scan the horizon. For what, he couldn’t be sure. Then he focused on her once more. “And though I tried dating—Eli’s idea—it felt all wrong. Last night, with you, everything felt right. Feels right. In bed and out of it.”

She slipped her fingers around his and her mouth bloomed into a smile that burned through the embarrassment he was struggling with. “It might be easier if you could take a compliment too.”

“Might be,” he agreed.

“This morning, I rolled over and worried you’d gotten smart and bailed on me.”

“Never.” The denial came out stronger than he’d intended. The truth in that single word floored him. He wasn’t here because of an obligation to her or the Guardian Agency. He was here because of her. All on her own.

“Then I heard you talking with Connor. I presume it was Connor.”

“That’s right.”

“Your dad voice is special,” she said. “You wield it well.” Standing, she came around and sat down on his knee. “I confess it’s a turn on.”

“Really?” What else could he say? He pulled her close, his hand skimming over the curve of her hip.

Her lips were a feather-light touch against his. Tantalizing. Teasing. Heat streaked through his system, flashes of lightning and need.

“Want to know another secret?” She nipped his ear.

Hell yes. He wanted to know every detail she was willing to share.

Her hands stroked down and she unbuttoned his shirt, her palm soft and hot against his skin. He groaned.

“Yes, *that.*” She nuzzled the side of his neck. “I like that sexy rumble even more.”

“Keep it up and we’ll be late to the bar.” The last thing he wanted to think about was work, but he felt obligated to point that out.

She shrugged. “Perks of being the boss.”

Her kiss blanked out everything else. The food, the beautiful morning, the timeline. All forgotten as he sank into this moment between the two of them.

Chapter 10

At the ocean's edge, Maureen breathed in the salty air and watched the sun fall slowly toward the horizon, marveling at what a difference a few days could make. Beside her stood Will, his hand wrapped firmly around hers.

The sweet gesture was another slice of perfection, thanks to him. A gift of romance she hadn't bothered with in ages. If ever. Until Will, she'd thought she was just built differently, impervious to the swoon-factor other women talked about. Oh, she could appreciate a handsome man. But to feel all squishy and soft inside? That was new. Then he'd walked into her life and that's all she wanted to do: fall into his arms.

"It's been another good day," Will observed.

He was right about that. The Beachcomber had been doing swift business since reopening yesterday afternoon. And thankfully, there hadn't been any more trouble. Although no one had found Harold and no other arrests had been made. Things were good, and yet she was antsy, waiting for the next problem to erupt.

She still wasn't over Will being attacked simply because he was her protector. Maybe it was the holiday nostalgia and tenderness blurring her objectivity. She knew Will was committed to doing the job she'd hired him for.

But Harold going quiet didn't make her feel better. She wanted the police to lock him up so he couldn't cause more trouble for her or hurt the people she cared about. "He's still coming, isn't he?" she asked. "Harold, I mean." The police

were confident he was the man she'd seen dropping the body near the patio. They were still gathering evidence to confirm he was also the killer.

Maureen didn't need more evidence. His attack on Will was enough proof for her. That assault should've been enough for an arrest. Probably would've been if they could find the man. He seemed to have disappeared. Will and his boys, the agency tech support, and the police were all searching.

Searching and coming up empty.

"I knew who you meant." Will's gaze tracked away from her, out over the ocean. "I'd love to say no, but—"

"You won't lie to me," she finished for him.

"Won't even stretch the truth." He lifted their joined hands to his lips. "You're safe. Shielded by layers, starting with me and going all the way up to Connor who assures me he can see virtually everything."

"Comforting." All of it, but Will especially. He'd brought a quiet assurance that kept her going, despite the unknowns with Harold. Will brought more than the security expertise. He'd reignited a passionate spark she was sure had gone dormant. Not with him.

She looked up, admiring his strong profile, and unassailable fortitude. Who knew commitment to a task was an aphrodisiac? She was halfway in love with the man assigned to protect her.

Her body felt loose and limber and young. How did he manage it? Spending two nights with him had turned back the clock by at least a decade. That was a pretty incredible after-glow.

Too bad they couldn't bottle it somehow. They'd be millionaires overnight. The idea left her giggling.

"Want to let me in on the joke?" Will asked.

"Not particularly." She did her best not to blush. That would completely give away where her thoughts had gone. Fortunately for her, his ringing phone distracted him.

He stopped short. “I need to take this.”

“Connor?”

He nodded, answering the call as he strolled a few paces away.

She dug her toes into the sand, waiting to feel something other than this happiness blooming in her chest. Shouldn't she feel regret or shame about taking a man she'd barely met to bed?

But she looked at his broad shoulders and her palms tingled with the memory of his warm skin, sculpted muscle and gentle power that radiated through him and empowered her. She couldn't muster up a single doubt in her decisions.

No, there was no regret here. She already knew it would never come. This interlude was too special. She knew it wouldn't last and there was some strange magic in that. Maybe knowing it wasn't forever made all of it more significant.

Or maybe it was just him.

As she waited for him to finish his conversation with the tech expert who was searching for Harold remotely and monitoring the many ways off the island, she wondered if Will's clients fell in love with him frequently. Did he often need to let women down easy when he finished a case?

Now she was being absurd. She knew Will was a career police officer in his normal life. Back in his hometown of South Carolina. This case, his connection to her, was merely a vacation anomaly.

She really should stop wanting more from him. With him.

It wasn't particularly easy to get from Key West to the mainland, not to mention up to South Carolina, but it was doable. So far, she'd resisted looking up details like airports, flights, and drive times. Will hadn't shared much about his life back home. She suspected his reticence was tied to his wife. The life they'd built, the love he'd lost when she passed. Maureen didn't push—wouldn't. But his sons had chattered quite a bit, giving her the sense of a picturesque town she wanted to visit. Yes, preferably with Will's invitation, but she

hadn't ruled out the idea of surprising him. Getting to know him—in his hometown—without any danger plaguing her.

Surely, she'd earned a quiet vacation once Tim was back.

From the few details she'd gathered about Will's past, she understood he was a man of deep integrity. Falling into bed with a client, no matter how tempting or temporary the circumstance, couldn't possibly be the norm for him.

She wanted to take that as evidence that there was more between them than sheer chemistry. Though chemistry was vital in her opinion. She desperately wanted to believe that maybe, after all this time, she'd found a man who could be her partner through whatever life threw at her next.

The alarm went off on her phone and she caught Will's eye, giving him a wave as she started back up the beach. She wanted to make sure Lisa had enough help getting things set for the private party they were expecting.

She was nearly to the weathered walkway that spanned the dunes when she sensed someone coming up behind her. Not Will. She reacted on instinct, turning and jumping back. And then she screamed.

It was Harold. She recognized him from the police photos. He closed in on her, his face set in hateful lines. His deadly intent was clear in his face and the cold expression in his eyes. A knife flashed and she threw her arms up to protect herself.

Instead of the bite of that blade, she felt a heavy grip on her wrist and she was tugged off her feet, the air knocked out of her lungs. Her shoulder was on fire as he hauled her up against his side and propelled her down the beach.

Panic swept through her in a cold rush. She tried to shake him off. To get an inch of leeway so she could run. Or fight.

“Cooperate, damn you.”

Where was he taking her? She couldn't imagine how he planned to get away with this. It was dusk and the light was fading, but there were still plenty of people around. Including her bodyguard, his sons, and another person monitoring the cameras in the area.

Remembering that help was close allowed her to think past the fear. Heartbeat by heartbeat, she was better able to assess. To breathe.

“Stop this!” Not the strong, powerful shout she intended.

He was dragging her toward the water, the sand was changing from warm, soft, and dry to firm and wet. She spotted a Jet Ski bobbing on the water and knew that was his plan. Digging her heels into the sand, she fought him with everything she had. “I’m not going with you.”

His hand gripped the back of her neck, squeezing until her eyes blurred. “You are. Or your boyfriend dies.” He shoved her into the surf.

She tripped over her feet, fell to her knees. He couldn’t do that. Couldn’t kill Will. The idea made her stomach clench and roll.

He caught her under the arm and yanked her up again. She cried out, her body protesting the rough treatment. “You’d rather I start with one of his meddling kids? Fine by me.”

No. “No!”

She couldn’t let that happen. Wouldn’t. Will had survived enough pain and heartache. Furious, blind with it, she threw herself backward, taking them both down into the water. Landing on top of him, she tried to hold his face in the water while she screamed for help.

He had the reach. He outweighed her. And he had the knife.

She might’ve been more careful of that blade if she’d been thinking clearly. But he’d threatened Will and that enraged her. Scratching at his face and neck, she inflicted all the damage possible with her bare hands until he was hauled out of her reach.

She scrambled after him.

“Get back!” Will shouted as he covered Harold. “Get her away!”

David was at her side, helping her up and away from the fight. “He has a knife.”

“Dad knows. Police are almost here.”

She watched, in awe of how quickly Will took control of the situation. He’d gained the advantage, pressing Harold face down into the wet, sucking sand, ordering him to stand down.

The man thrashed and Maureen lurched toward him. To help.

“Easy. He’s got this.”

She wouldn’t be easy about anything until Will was safely away from that killer and his knife.

The police closed in, shouting orders and taking over. It seemed like an eternity before Will was up and walking toward her. She rushed into his arms, weak with relief.

“Easy. Maureen. It’s done.” She could’ve held him like this forever. He was safe. Whole. “He was going to escape on the Jet Ski—”

“Not a chance.” He guided her away from the chaos of the arrest. His hands were gentle and warm through the drenched fabric of her dress as he turned her around and drew her back against his chest. “Look, honey. Watch.”

Her breath sawed in and out as she watched the police surrounding Harold. “He threatened your boys.” Tears rolled down her face, mixing with the saltwater. “And you.”

“Never again.” He handed her a towel and started blotting her wet face and shoulders. She winced.

“Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “Nothing serious. Did they get the knife?”

David joined them, her sandals in one hand and his cell phone in the other. “Police found it,” he confirmed. “Should I call an ambulance?”

She shook her head, even though he’d been asking his dad.

“Maureen’s fine,” Will confirmed. “The police will do it if they feel the need.”

“You okay?” Eli rushed in. “Is she okay?”

Maureen nodded, wrapping the towel tightly around her shoulders as she started to shiver. Not from cold but from the shock. Another shock and Will right here to help. What would she ever do without this man? She knew it was weak, but she sagged against him. “Thanks to all of you, yes. He-he wanted to escape on that Jet Ski, right?”

“Probably.” Eli shrugged. “Wouldn’t have worked.” His grin was diabolical. “I stole the keys.”

“Where’s Lance?” She looked around, but didn’t see him anywhere.

“He’s up at the restaurant, keeping any and all questionable characters out.”

“Most likely that’s why Harold tried to take you out here,” Will said, scowling as still more police officers flooded the scene. “Desperate and pushed into a less-than-ideal option.” She watched him make contact with two of his three boys. “Y’all did excellent work.”

“Does this mean it’s over?” Eli asked. He sounded disappointed.

Will hesitated. “I guess so. With Harold in police custody, Maureen’s not in danger any longer.”

“Are you leaving?” She hated the way that had come out, clingy and fraught. “I mean. I know I wrecked your vacation.” Of course he was leaving. He had to go home at some point.

“Harold was the problem, not you,” Will assured her.

“We had fun with this, didn’t we, David?” Eli smacked his brother’s shoulder.

David just shook his head. “Read the room.”

“And we’re not leaving right away,” Will said. “The police will need a statement. They’ll want that DNA from under your

nails too. And I'm not going anywhere until Connor gives us the all-clear."

She stared up at him. "They'll throw him in a cell, right? Lock him up and keep him behind bars?"

"There's a process, but yes." Will tipped his head to the folks gawking at the scene. "With all these witnesses and what the boys and I have to say, I expect them to hold him without bail."

"Okay." She reclaimed her sandals from David, not bothering to put them on.

They waited around until someone from the KWPD could collect the evidence and take her initial statement. Lance set up a table and chairs for them outside the kitchen door where they would have a bit more privacy and not disturb anyone at the restaurant. Will found a heavier blanket and Lisa came out with a dry shirt for him, a couple of soft drinks, and a plate piled high with nachos.

"My favorite," Will said, tucking into the hearty snack.

When the police released them, it was dark out and Will steered her toward the car. "Let's get you back to the Cove."

"Okay." As if she'd argue with that.

"Maybe the concierge can call in a favor for you at the spa," he continued. "A massage would likely get ahead of any soreness."

"Okay." Her mind kept dragging her back, replaying the attack over and over again. Harold's nasty face, the punishing grip on her body. The ocean pushing and tugging as she fought and clawed.

"Assuming nothing changes," Will's voice cut into her thoughts. "We should celebrate when you're feeling up to it."

She didn't reply. Her body was trembling again and she couldn't seem to stop as he guided her toward the parking lot. "Wh-what about Lisa and the party? I should be there."

"The boys will pitch in for whatever she needs. You know they take orders."

“Okay.”

He reached around her to open the passenger door. “Dammit, Maureen.”

The curse gave her a jolt and she stopped to look up into that face that meant everything to her. She caught his shoulders and held on tight as she kissed him. “You’re safe.”

“Me?” Will swore again. “He put his hands on you. I wasn’t close enough. You fought like a hellion. You shouldn’t have had to do that. I’m sorry.” He rested his forehead lightly against hers. “So sorry I let you down.”

Let her down? No way. How could he think it? Without him, the killer would’ve won. Would’ve silenced her—permanently.

“Never.” Her mouth brushed across his again and again. “You didn’t. You were right there. Your boys too.” Her voice shook as she forced out the words. “The police were there because of you.” Her hands fluttered over his shoulders. “I’m here. Because of you, Will. All because of you.”

“Maureen.” He claimed her mouth in a strong, fierce kiss. She took it all and gave it right back—all the passion and need and connection surging through her. Only for him.

“He said to cooperate or... Or he’d kill you. Or the boys.”

She thought she’d said that to the policeman who took her statement, but maybe not. She just wasn’t sure of much right now. The only thing that felt real was Will. He was her anchor as the aftershocks of the attack kept battering her. He was where she felt safe and protected. He was simply everything.

Will groaned, wrapping his arms around her. The warmth of his body chased away the bitterly cold fear that had been dragging her under. “It was my job to spare you from all of that.”

“You did. You were here.” She tucked herself closer, her cheek resting over his heart. “I knew you wouldn’t let him get away.” Her body quaked. She wanted to beg him to stay. Tonight. Always. She wanted to plead with him not to let her get away.

They'd only known each other a few days, but she could feel the emptiness looming in her heart, barreling down on her. Once he left, she'd be gutted. Hollowed out. The best she could do was make the most of every minute he stayed.

"Let's go take care of you," he said, gently nudging her into the car seat.

That would be a good start. And once she felt like herself again, she would feel better about talking with him about what their next steps might be.



WILL HAD HELD Maureen while the police hauled away Harold. He'd met and held the man's hateful gaze as he'd been marched to the waiting police car. And here he was, hours later, standing by while a massage therapist tended to Maureen, reliving that moment.

Something didn't feel right.

If this had been his case, he'd be out there looking for the missing piece. Except so far, from every angle, all the pieces in this puzzle were accounted for. Maureen had witnessed a murder and the killer had come after her, only to be caught in his quest for revenge.

Most of the time the simplest explanation was correct.

Bottom line, it wasn't his case. He was here as a protector, not as a cop. And it seemed his charge was safe now. His boys had pitched in at the private event and according to the latest text messages they were staying to clean up. Eli would spend the night at Maureen's place again, just to make sure there wasn't any more trouble.

He had the best kids on the planet.

Will went and grabbed a beer from the fridge, carrying it out to the balcony. He couldn't quite chalk up this restlessness to residual adrenaline.

Seeing Maureen being hauled toward the ocean, watching her fight a killer before he could intervene had nearly stopped his heart. Losing Jeannie by inches had been horrible. And when Maureen was being dragged away from him, he'd felt all that grief and fury dialed up to eleven.

Different and still the same. Worse, knowing what living without her sparkle would be like.

There was a pressure building his chest. If he didn't know better, he'd worry it was a heart attack. That wasn't it. Not at all.

It was Maureen. Specifically leaving her.

The case might be over and, once Connor and Jess signed off on the situation, he would need to head home. But nothing inside him felt done with Maureen.

Ridiculous, but true.

Tonight, he'd stay and make sure she got the rest she needed. Tomorrow they would celebrate. He'd already made reservations for the five of them to toast a job well done.

And after that?

He rubbed the ache behind his sternum.

He had half a mind to propose to her. At the very least, he should let her know that his feelings had grown way past protective measures. He didn't want to walk away with only fond memories of this bizarre working vacation.

Which meant he needed to talk to his boys. Because he wanted her in his life. Needed her irresistible blend of sass and sunshine. Would they welcome Maureen or resist her? His guess was that he'd have their support, but still, better to warn them than to spring it on them after the fact.

Losing Jeannie had left him stranded in an emotional desert. He never thought he'd feel whole again. Maureen had miraculously filled those cracks in his heart with her wisdom, laughter, and passion. He didn't want to let any of that go.

Wasn't sure he would recover if he did.

“Mr. Frasier?”

He turned to see the massage therapist at the door and rushed back inside. “Yes?”

“She’s sound asleep.” The woman gave him a serene smile. “I urged her to get into bed and then I worked on her feet until she was out.”

“She’s fine then?”

“She’ll have a few bruises. I left a bottle of oil to help with that tomorrow. Have a good evening.”

Will tipped the woman and then locked up behind her. Dumping the beer into the sink, he went to the bedroom and curled up beside Maureen. The pressure in his chest lifted away as he held her close and soon they were both fast asleep.

Chapter 11

She was having dinner with Will and his boys. It felt like a big deal. Bigger than a celebration of success. This felt bigger than all that glorious, life-affirming time she'd spent with Will on Christmas day.

And she was probably blowing it all out of proportion. It wasn't as if she didn't know his sons already. She'd spent time with each of them over the past few days. Will's boys had been a huge help to her already, keeping the bar safe. Keeping her safe. They'd protected her, her home, and her business without any expectation of a return on their efforts. Not once had they complained about her wrecking their holiday.

She wouldn't have blamed them if they'd grumbled about pitching in. Sometimes, when she was alone and her thoughts ran off without her permission, she thought it was weird how easily they cooperated with Will's request.

And tonight, they would celebrate Harold's capture. They would sit down to what was sure to be a culinary delight and call it Christmas dinner. Forty-eight hours late, but who was counting?

After... Well, she couldn't let herself travel too far down that path or the evening would be wrecked before it began. This was her last night at the Cove. Tomorrow she would check out. Return home. Do her best to recall the best moments of what had been a strange phase of her life.

Being hunted. Being protected. Being loved.

She glared at her reflection in the mirror. “Stop it.”

Of course Will hadn’t said the words—that was for the best.

Best or not, it was what it was.

Will had given her a gift she’d never expected. He’d made her feel loved. Cherished. Valued for no reason other than being herself.

Yes, tonight was big. A big celebration of a job well done. That had to be her focus or she’d unravel completely.

“Dinner with Will and the boys. *His* boys.” Not a family deal as much as her heart might hope it could be true. She was going to share dinner with four handsome friends.

That felt like such a cop out. A cheap way to define the experience of the last few days. She leaned toward the mirror and carefully applied her lipstick. “You’ll survive. You’ll have memories to hold close while you get over him.”

Would she get over him? Of course. She didn’t have much choice on that. His life was in South Carolina and his responsibilities, his roots, were calling him back. Her home was here.

Tim and the family would be home in a couple of days. She’d have her hands full of grandchildren and all the stories of their adventures. She’d have her arms full of love and work and the familiar routine that kept her grounded.

But she wouldn’t have Will.

Stop.

She had him tonight, along with his sons who offered endless entertainment. It was going to be a fabulous celebration of a job well done.

But no amount of self-coaching could shake the nerves. Tonight felt important. Maybe it was the formality of choosing the Cove’s elite restaurant downstairs. Chef Turore had created a menu and atmosphere that people flocked to for engagements and anniversaries. For memorable milestone dates or to impress big important clients.

None of that applied to this evening. She was going downstairs to meet new friends.

If she could be honest with herself, the venue wouldn't matter. She could be meeting them at a coffee cart and this moment would feel just as significant.

Because everything had changed for her on Christmas. One night sleeping in his arms and she was addicted. She didn't want to sleep anywhere else. She couldn't blame it on the champagne or stress or chalk it up to the physical chemistry they shared. It was him. And that sense that with him was exactly where she fit. Not just a mom or a business owner or a victim, but with Will she could be all those roles and more.

In a few days with Will, she'd dropped walls that had been there for most of her life. It should scare her senseless. Instead, she only wanted more. More sharing, more laughter, more time.

Damn it. She didn't want this to end.

Talk about a departure from the norm. She'd operated her entire life under the belief that she didn't need anyone. Definitely not a partner underfoot every day and not the way she felt she needed Will right now. The way she was more than a little afraid she would need him forever.

Somehow, she'd let him become as essential as oxygen.

Maureen slipped into her shoes and gave herself one last pep talk in the mirror.

"It's dinner," she said to her reflection. "Keep it light. Stay focused. You're going down to celebrate the end of a crisis and enjoy a last blast of holiday spirit."

She smiled and the expression looked as strained as she felt. Getting through this would require some holiday spirit, in the form of wine. Possibly tequila.

Putting an end to the waffling, she dropped her lipstick into her purse and deliberately focused on one of her favorite moments. Their first kiss. Her gaze went to the balcony doors, where they'd been standing when she'd thrown herself at him.

He'd caught her eagerly enough.

She laughed and felt like herself again.

Closer, anyway.

She wondered if his boys realized Will had slept *with* her. In the same bed, not just in her suite. Not that it was their business, exactly, but it added to the pressure she felt about sitting down to dinner with all of them. She wasn't quite part of the family and didn't expect to be. And yet she was more than a casual acquaintance.

The three of them weren't dumb. They must have figured it out.

She wasn't ashamed. No, she was too busy enjoying herself for self-recrimination. Will was smiling more now than when they'd met. That smile was a big reason she'd taken the leap into his arms to begin with. The smile and those deep, serious eyes that seemed to look right into her soul and know exactly what she needed.

She'd miss that and so much more when Will left.

With a sigh, she let the sadness ripple through her and then cast it away. There would be time to be sad, to wallow in it when he left town. She had tonight and she meant to make the most of it.

Shaking the tension out of her clammy hands, she tried to recall the last time her nerves had been this bad. It certainly had never been over a man.

But Will had proven almost immediately that he was head and shoulders above the men she'd ever considered getting involved with.

And she was going downstairs now to enjoy the evening he'd so thoughtfully planned.

Will claimed he'd made the reservation to do something to help her dispel the unexpected stress of the past few days. With Harold in custody, they could all finally relax.

The relief was a tangible weightlessness followed by a surge of delight. She had so much to be thankful for, including

wonderful memories of her time with Will.

She cursed the sting of tears in the back of her nose and throat. Crying could wait. She was being ridiculously sentimental. Yes, she was attached to a sexy widower who fogged up her reading glasses with little more than a thought. That didn't make his imminent departure the end of the world.

The twist in her heart sure felt like it might be though.

Maybe she should just propose. After dinner, she could invite him up to the rooftop bar for a nightcap and present her argument for marriage. They were so good together. Surely he felt it too. There was no way he could make her feel adored and worshiped and *not* care deeply about her. That was impossible.

Maybe he'd rather live together. She could be content with that. The realization dawning on her at this very awkward moment was that she couldn't tolerate never seeing him again. All the living and laughter and passion they'd packed into these past few days wasn't going to be enough for her.

She wanted *him*. And she was pretty sure he wanted her too.

For now or forever?

Her phone chimed with a text from Will that he and his boys were at the restaurant. She replied immediately that she was on her way.

Earlier, he'd suggested coming by and walking her down. She'd turned him down. The idea of showing up together had made her stomach swoop and her skin prickle. It felt like a statement, debuting as a couple, but without any clarity on whether or not it was true.

She didn't need that pressure and neither did Will. Especially not in front of his sons.

No more time to debate it. Tucking her room key into her purse with her phone, she headed downstairs to join them.

She was joining friends for dinner, that was her mantra as she made her way to the restaurant. She had to keep that

mindset front and center in order to enjoy the evening as it was intended. And breathe, she reminded herself as she walked through the archway decorated with boughs of fresh evergreen and holly.

Her heart kicked into high gear as soon as she spotted Will and his boys. The four of them were an impressive group and all of them were gathering admiring gazes from other folks in the restaurant.

Will stood as she approached and she felt heat rising in her cheeks. The smoldering appreciation in his gaze was a fantastic boost to her confidence, if too obvious. Those flutters he'd been setting off since they met were back again in full force.

Had he been having similar thoughts about what might be in store for them after tonight? What else explained the way he openly broadcast the full depth of his interest in front of his sons? Not to mention the whole restaurant.

But his boys were beaming and she caught the looks they exchanged as they watched their dad pull out her chair. Warmth and happiness. Approval too, if she was interpreting things correctly. All of it gave her hope, melted her heart and smoothed those last prickly edges of tension. These four men shared a loving bond rooted in respect. She had seen it in action these past days. And she couldn't know if it was just because she was wearing a new dress or if it was the restaurant atmosphere that made it seem more pronounced, more lovely, right this minute.

When she was seated, he brushed a quick kiss across her cheek. She was sure he meant it to be subtle, but it was quickly evident that his boys caught the move.

All of them were grinning as Will settled back into the seat right next to her. Those grins were barely smothered when they noticed his hand drop below the table to link with hers. Will couldn't possibly believe he was fooling anyone.

The waiter came by and filled her wine glass. After hearing the options and engaging in a brief debate, the five of them selected appetizers and meals.

David raised his glass. “A toast,” he suggested with a smile. “To Dad, for an unforgettable holiday in paradise.”

A chorus of agreement and clinking ensued. And then Will lifted his glass. “To you boys for being a great support team. And to closing the case with gusto.”

“Hear, hear,” Maureen enthused. Feeling safe never felt so good.

After that, the conversation erupted into a bright and lively discussion covering myriad topics. His boys reminded her so much of her own son. Part of her eagerly anticipated the day her son met Will’s boys. Except that wasn’t guaranteed, no matter how much hand-holding and knee-brushing was currently taking place under the tablecloth.

Those thoughts and questions had to wait. She wouldn’t jump the gun and assume Will’s affectionate attention signaled anything specific. Her heart had been through enough of a roller coaster in her room.

Will had a home and career in South Carolina. He had friends and colleagues and people she knew he didn’t really want to leave behind. The same was true for her here in the Keys. And yet something about his life there seemed bigger. The island was smaller, but it was obvious his heart remained there.

She sipped her wine, pushed a tortilla chip through the savory goodness of artichoke dip and reminded herself to enjoy the present.

But in the back of her mind the speculation continued. Listening to him and his boys sharing stories, she felt as if his roots ran deeper. Stronger. He was still active in his career as a police officer in his hometown.

A nasty ribbon of jealousy for a place and community she’d never seen nearly soured her stomach.

Her life here was wonderful. Her roots equally deep and far-reaching. Sure, she was mostly retired, had more free time than an active-duty cop, but the geography that would soon separate them loomed large in her mind and heart.

The twinge of melancholy annoyed her and she deliberately shook it off. Again.

She was here to enjoy Will. They were both here to enjoy his boys and thank them for all the help and support they'd offered these past days. She needed to look at this as a healthy transition back to her normal routine.

Tonight didn't have to be bigger, didn't have to end in a rushed proposal, no matter what her heart wanted.

Eli started talking about a New Year's Eve tradition that was full of shenanigans that weren't exactly polite dinner conversation and David neatly steered him into safer waters until the three boys were chatting about their plans for the new year.

Maureen kept quiet, happy to just listen to the conversation flow around her. Her plans for the new year might include following Will back to his hometown like some lovesick stalker. *That* wasn't something she wanted to share right this second.

So she tuned into the boys. Some parenting factors were universal, she realized. Whether there was one child or three. She caught Will disguising his laughter with a napkin or drink of water more than once. And he bumped her knee instead of allowing his reactions to one plan or another to show on his face.

She really liked his sons. They were so earnest and, in many ways, relatively innocent about the way life might go. Eli was determined to script his path down to the finest detail, including contingency plans. If not for Lance cutting his if-then statements short, Maureen might've been caught not paying attention.

Every once in a while, she caught a flicker of something passing over Will's face and she wasn't sure if it was exasperation or resignation with the three of them and their more unruly moments. In her mind, she imagined Tim would alternate between David's and Eli's tactics. Privilege of the only child she supposed. She asked questions of all of them, enjoying the often-unexpected answers, especially out of Eli.

Thankfully, she had enough experience with her own son and daughter-in-law to navigate those more surprising moments.

“They’re such fascinating people,” she said to Will when the waiter distracted the boys with dessert offerings. “You must be proud.”

He gave her a brisk nod, his eyes misting over. She worried that she’d said the wrong thing as his expression brightened forcibly and he cleared his throat. With a nod, he directed her attention to his youngest.

“Doesn’t anything rattle you?” Eli queried. “Other than the whole murder deal.”

Will started to scold him, but she waved him off.

“The whole murder deal was overwhelming,” she admitted. “Have you been trying to unsettle me this evening?”

“I think he’s forgotten you have a grown son of your own,” Will said. He aimed a warning glare at his youngest. “Glad this isn’t the first time you’re meeting Maureen.”

“Dad’s trying to say you’re being obnoxious without actually using the word,” David interjected.

“Dad doesn’t have to try anything,” Eli countered. “He always says what’s on his mind.”

That sounded like a challenge to Maureen. One she probably was better off not being part of. Will only rolled his eyes.

“Eli’s just showing her what she’s in for with all of us,” Lance blurted out. His eyes went wide when he realized there was no backtracking that comment.

Maureen looked at Will, saw the color rise in his ears and the irritated glint in his gaze. She suspected there would be harsh words the moment the Frasier boys were alone with their dad.

David muttered an oath and Eli knocked Lance on the shoulder. “You idiot,” he hissed.

“What? Come on. We’ve all been thinking it.”

Thinking what, she wondered. Somehow, she managed to not look at Will. “You know I’ve always thought maybe I should’ve had more children. I worried that I’d shortchanged Tim because he was an only child.” She reached across the table and patted Lance’s hand. “You’ve truly affirmed my choices. Things turned out just the way they should. Thank you.”

There was a breathless pause, followed by a burst of raucous laughter all around the table.

Will’s eyes sparkled with delight, crinkling at the corners as he laughed. She found the man irresistible under all circumstances but this light-hearted man was pure temptation.

A living promise of everything she’d ever almost dreamed about. Dreaming up a man like Will would’ve created an impossible standard. It was almost too much to be this close to him now. This close to having a dream she’d never dared to look at too closely.

She sipped her wine before she blurted out something ridiculous.

Something like *marry me*.

Building a life with Will from the start would’ve been wonderful. How incredible would it be to wind back the clock and create one big greeting-card perfect family?

The selfishness of that thought floored her. As if these young men could forget a mother they’d loved and lost. As if Will’s relationship with his first wife should be discarded so easily. She couldn’t overlook the experiences that had molded all four of the men at this table. That wouldn’t be fair at all or honor the love he’d shared with his first wife. The woman who gave him these beautiful boys and helped him raise them into good and honorable men.

Those bonds were important. She might not have had them herself, but she understood the value. Understood what her mistakes had cost her. She’d learned from the harsh judgment and ultimatums her parents had issued that drove her away from the place where she was raised.

She couldn't call it home. Home was what she'd created here, with her son.

Neither the wine nor the chocolate torte the waiter set in front of her dulled the sudden ache around her heart. The place where she wanted the "all of us" Lance had let slip to be true. She wasn't ready to let Will walk out of her life.

What would she do about it?

No, she'd never planned to be in love. At this stage of her life, it sounded crazy even in her head. Yet here she was, staring into Will's eyes knowing these days had changed her forever, right down to her soul.

Somehow, she recognized that Will was exactly what love had always looked like. She felt compelled to reveal everything in her heart to him. To show him how much she had to give. To him. To his boys.

He and his sons had loved and lost, but there was more to claim. To celebrate. To embrace with a vibrant joy. What could she and Will and their combined families have now?

Her heart soared.

The possibilities were endless.

She had to tell him. To keep her love to herself was cowardice. She firmly believed letting go without sharing everything would cheat them all. Even if she was wrong and he didn't feel the same way about her. Even if he wasn't on the same page and he walked away.

She had to tell him.

Chapter 12

When they finally finished dinner, Will held Maureen's hand as they walked out. His boys were striding a few paces ahead, but if they'd been watching he still would've done it.

He couldn't *not* touch her.

After Lance's untimely statement, Will figured there wasn't much sense in catering to appearances any longer. Why deny the truth when his boys were apparently all-in for his interest in Maureen? He'd been holding a piece of himself back—hiding really—braced for a negative reaction from one or all of them.

But they were adults. They'd each had relationships, though none of them had claimed to find “the one” like he had with Jeannie. Of course, they didn't discuss emotions or romance with him. That had been their mother's area of expertise.

Still, he knew his boys. He recognized the signs of trouble brewing. Right now, all three of them were relaxed and unconcerned. Putting on a bit of swagger over their part in the Harold situation.

His boys liked Maureen.

Good thing too, because he wasn't ready to say goodbye. Nothing between them felt finished. In his mind they were just getting started. He could almost hear Jeannie laughing at his claims that once she was gone he'd be done with women and romance and softer feelings.

“Be happy again,” she’d told him. “You’ve got decades of living to do. Find someone who brings joy with them.”

Maureen had brought joy, apart from the danger she’d been in. He could see both sides of that coin clearly. And while he couldn’t be thankful for her suffering, he’d always be grateful the situation brought them together.

Nothing would please him more than to lead her outside for another walk on the beach, just the two of them. Unless it was to head straight back to her suite and take her to bed.

“Your sons are wonderful men,” she said, interrupting his wayward thoughts.

Right. His sons. The people he’d brought all this way for a holiday vacation. And yet, the woman beside him had become equally important. Somehow—against his better judgment and all of his expectations—he’d fallen in love with her.

In love with Maureen. It was unthinkable and yet absolutely right that she was the woman he didn’t want to let go. He looked down into her lovely face and barely resisted the urge to kiss her. To stake a claim right here and now. He was in love with Maureen: irrepensible woman, savvy business owner, and keeper of his heart.

I love you. He’d never expected those words to apply to another woman after Jeannie. And yet he wanted to shout it from the rooftop. Maybe they should skip the walk through the sand in favor of going upstairs so he could do just that.

Probably not the best idea. It wouldn’t be subtle and if she didn’t feel the same for him, it would be humiliating.

His heart sank as logic kicked in. Before he made any declarations, he should be certain about what he could offer her. He wanted to go home, to go back to the career he loved. Was it thoughtless or selfish to want her to join him?

Could he call it love if he wasn’t willing to stay here, where she had family and a business?

Well, sure. But it wouldn’t be a love of any substance.

His entire body rejected that notion. He loved her. It was different than it had felt with Jeannie but not less than. And he didn't have to come up with all the answers on his own. If she loved him too, they could figure things out. Together.

She paused at the edge of the lobby and gave his hand a squeeze before pulling away.

“Maureen—”

“I guess I'll see you tomorrow.” Her gaze slid away from his and she clutched her purse strap with both hands. “Will I see you?”

Yes. He wanted to see her, to talk and laugh with her every day. “Of course.”

“All right.” She'd never been shy with him, but it seemed their dinner left her a little uncertain.

When she looked at him, her blue eyes swimming with unspoken emotion, he barely kept his mouth away from hers. “Call me if you have any trouble tonight.”

He really regretted that he wouldn't be spending the night in her suite. But with Harold in custody, he didn't have an excuse to hover. Although, it seemed like his boys were expecting him to leave them to their own devices again tonight.

“Does trouble sleeping count?”

He liked that sparkle in her eye. “It does. Absolutely.” Her soft scent surrounded him, making his head spin. “If you send up a flare, I will answer. Always,” he promised.

Her lips touched his cheek, there and gone too quickly. “Good night, Will.”

Why the hell was he fighting this? He caught her chin lightly and laid claim to her mouth. He didn't care who saw them, be it his boys or strangers. She was his and he wanted the world to know. “Should I come to your suite?” he whispered in her ear.

She nodded.

He eased back. “Good.” His heart thundered. “Good night, Maureen.”

There it was again, the ‘I love you’ sitting on the tip of his tongue. He was so ready to give her the words. And he would. Just as soon as he clarified the situation with his sons. He wasn’t sure if that made him a coward or a good parent. Either way, it was the route he was committed to tonight.

He wasn’t seeking their permission, but he suddenly wanted to talk over a few things with the people who knew him best. Maybe they’d have some clever insight into how he was going to make a relationship work splitting time between his island and hers. Or, even better, they’d help come up with a plan to move the Beachcomber to Brookwell Island.

He didn’t expect that idea to fly. Not with her son running the business now. He forced himself to stop before he got so far ahead of himself he screwed everything up.

Although he would’ve preferred walking Maureen all the way back to her door, he stuck with the plan. His steps dragged and he braced for a barrage of opinions.

As expected, the door had barely closed when they started in on him.

“Wow, Dad. You really like her.” David stuffed his hands in his pockets, his gaze as serious as ever.

“That’s true.” He liked her and so much more. Were his boys ready for the full scope of his feelings? It seemed like a big chance to take, especially during the holidays when memories of Jeannie were fresh in all their minds.

The fact was, they’d all grown closer through the shared tragedy of losing her. He didn’t want to trample anything or rush them into something new. Yes, it had been eight years, though that was mostly irrelevant. If keeping track relieved grief automatically, everyone in this room, in the world, would be just fine. Eventually.

How could he explain that he’d never planned to find love again? No matter what he’d told his dying wife, it wasn’t on his radar. Then again, he had no way of anticipating Maureen.

She'd turned his plans upside down, turned his heart inside out, in the best ways.

She made him happy.

"It's a strange sensation to be this happy again," he confessed. "I didn't realize how long I've been plodding through life with a 'happy enough' attitude." He'd somehow muted all his emotions. Specifically, the good ones. "It's like I've been caught in a fog bank not quite able to see or feel clearly."

The words felt like razor blades in his throat, but this was one of those times when he had to lead by example. "Maureen kind of cut through that fog. She—"

"Dad, please." Eli interrupted, rolling his eyes. "Stop right there. I do *not* need the visual stuck in my head." He cringed for dramatic effect.

Will could always count on his youngest for comic relief. He'd been that way all his life and by some tacit agreement, everyone in the family did their best not to encourage him. It had yet to make a difference.

Lance leaned against the back of the couch, his arms folded and his face somber. "What are you saying? Are you planning to get remarried?"

"That would be crazy-fast right?" Will pushed a hand through his hair. "It would work for me, though. If Maureen wants that," he admitted. "She's never been married. I'm not even sure that's what she wants."

"I'm more concerned with what you want," Lance pressed. "Maureen is interesting and funny. I like her," he said. "But you're my dad. What do you need?"

Well, hell. He knew his boys cared, but this was starting to feel too real. He wasn't sure his heart could take it. "Like I said, she cut through the fog. At some point I think I got stuck after... Well, after everything Mom went through."

"We all went through it," David said. "Cancer sucks and her battle affected all of us. Would've left scars even if she'd lived."

“Son—”

David held up a hand. “We all agree,” he glanced at his brothers, “you look good, Dad. Better than when we came down. And it’s not just the sun or the Jimmy Buffett soundtrack everywhere we go. It’s not even the challenge of the unexpected case. It’s her.” His brothers nodded. “She’s good for you.”

Eli winked. “Especially since you kept her safe.”

He ignored that. “You’d all be okay with it?” They were nodding, encouraging him. “It’s been days and it’s crazy, but I think I’m ready. If Maureen’s interested.”

“She’s interested,” Eli stated.

“Not to replace Mom,” Will continued. “Never that. She’ll always be in my heart. And I know what I’m about to say is more woo-woo than I would normally share, but y’all need to know I think your mom approves.”

“Of course she does,” David said. “She wants you to be happy.”

Will gawked at his oldest.

“We’ve been a little worried about you,” Lance added.

“It was hard on all of us when we lost Mom,” David said. “The two of you were so good together. So close. You have a similar vibe with Maureen. Not the same, but different in a good way. It’s kind of a relief.”

“We like it when you’re happy,” Eli declared.

“You’ve been more yourself these past several days than we’ve seen in years,” Lance agreed.

Will wasn’t sure what to do with his hands so he stuffed him in his pockets. “It’s good to know. I mean, I hope I’ve been there for you more than I’ve been absent.”

“Duh.” Eli’s incomparable eloquence.

“Good.” Will gave in to a short laugh. “I want Maureen to be part of my life. And there’s a sense of peace that comes along with it.”

“That sounds like Mom,” David said.

“Assuming Maureen’s on board, I think she’d like to be part of your lives too. When and if it feels right for each of you. She’s not the sort to push. She knows you don’t need another mother.”

“But maybe we do,” Eli said.

“Or brother,” Will continued. Emotions, high and low, swamped him. “Good grief, I haven’t even met her son yet. How can I be thinking of marriage before I talk to him?”

Lance laughed. “Because she’s incredible. And she’s so obviously right for you.”

“We did make sure she’s not a gold digger,” Eli confessed.

“Because cops make the big bucks?” Will sputtered. His youngest was a riot. Except it must be true because David and Lance groaned and then launched an attack on him. “I do not want to know what you did.”

David stopped attacking his brother long enough to stare Will down. “Have you even bothered to look at the investment account we set up with your portion of the life insurance? The returns have been impressive.”

He hadn’t. Not at all. He kept an eye on his primary retirement account, and his month-to-month spending. After he’d paid off the house, now that he was living alone in that house, his interest in the future of his finances didn’t matter as much. He had his end-of-life details sorted, he had even arranged for long-term health care just to save his boys the headache in case of a catastrophic illness or accident.

But while he was still healthy enough to work, that was his focus. The accounts would be there for him when he was ready to part ways with police work. “Wow. Okay. That’s good to know. If I can convince her to marry me or at least shack up with me,” he joked, “I can tell her she’ll be doing so with a wealthy man.”

“I’ve heard it’s just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor one,” Eli grumbled. “So you should have it made.”

Will studied his son's face. Eli wasn't embellishing with his usual antics. He seemed genuinely frustrated over something. Someone.

He glanced at Lance and David in turn, but they only shrugged. Will wasn't as quick on the uptake with the emotional stuff as his wife had been, but clearly, this situation required some monitoring.

His phone hummed in his pocket and he pulled it out, smiling to see a text message from Maureen. But reading it, panic sliced through him like a blade.

"What's wrong?" David asked, suddenly standing right in front of Will.

"They..." He had to clear his throat. "They have Maureen." It still was barely more than a ragged whisper.

This couldn't be happening. Harold was in custody. No one else had any reason to go after her.

Surrounding him, his boys were talking over each other, all three of them demanding to know who he was talking about, asking about his plan, where he needed them.

He didn't have a plan. His plan had been to go tell her he loved her, that he wanted more time with her. Because he thought the danger was over and done. But he'd let down his guard. He'd left her alone and she'd been taken. His fault. He had to do something.

He fired off a text message to Connor, then sent a copy to his boys. "Coordinate with Connor. He'll keep you up to speed. I need to go."

"Hell no." David blocked the door. "You're not rushing into this alone."

"Move," he warned. "I'm getting her back."

"With our help." Lance sided with David. "Tell us what you need."

Will swore.

“She’s important to you, that makes her important to us,” Eli said, joining his brothers.

Three against one. This was the worst time for them to take a stand. “Move,” he growled. “I don’t have time for this.”

Eli folded his arms over his chest. “Make the time.”

Will blinked. He’d never heard such a serious tone out of his youngest.

“What haven’t you told us?” Lance demanded.

Will’s hands flexed. He needed to go, but he wasn’t getting past them without some answers. “Okay. Fast and dirty rundown. Jess tapped me because I was close and available when Maureen needed protection.” Geographically and, he suspected, close in age. “From the start it’s bothered me that Harold dropped that body on Maureen’s doorstep.”

“Because it’s awful.” Eli nodded.

“Yes, but why there? Specifically. What message was he trying to send?”

“Not a coincidence?” Lance scowled. “You’re sure it wasn’t simply the closest place?”

Will shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think Harold has been staking out the Beachcomber, looking for an angle or a way in.”

David’s eyebrows lifted. “You think he knew she’d call the Guardian Agency?”

“Yes.” Will snapped his fingers. “Yes, I do. The Cove special security team are frequent customers over there. The local cops too. Jess was a popular, visible, and involved cop down here.”

“And she was the focus of some serious publicity on her last case here,” David said.

“That’s right.” Will could see his oldest connecting the dots. “Cartel thugs lost a serious shipment back home on Brookwell. Jess was there. They had Burrell in their pocket and they still lost the money and product.”

“And the boat,” Eli added. “Although that’s the least of it, probably.”

“Burrell knew about the Guardian Agency,” Lance said.

“That’s right,” Will confirmed. “Jenkins said the man will run any scam. Whatever he’s up to, aside from murder and recruiting new boat drivers...” He stopped short on a violent curse. “He’s been watching. Either for the cartel or looking for valuable intel on his own.” He’d meant to keep the attempted bribe to himself. At the time, he’d dismissed it out of hand. A desperate ploy. But what if that had been Harold’s goal once Will intervened as Maureen’s protector?

Good grief, it was far-fetched at best. And yet, for a scam artist who was light on his feet, it fit.

Lance glared at him. “Spit it out, Dad.”

“We can see you thinking,” David added.

“Harold tried to bribe me. When he jumped me on Christmas Eve.” He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “He must’ve promised someone he could get Brookwell back in play.”

“And you didn’t bite,” David said.

“So he’s trying to use her as leverage,” Eli finished.

“No chance,” Lance declared.

The boys swore. He gave them points for creativity even as he imagined his wife’s displeasure.

“You guys stay here.” He wouldn’t put them in the line of fire. They might be upset but they weren’t prepared for the storm he was expecting. None of them had been there when the warehouse had been attacked. They didn’t know how violent and creative people like Harold could be.

“No way, Dad.” Lance shook his head. “Don’t ask us to stand down.”

Will held up his phone. “He only gave me ten minutes to show up. And he said to come alone.”

“Since when do you listen to criminals?” Eli wondered.

Will growled. "Since he took Maureen."

He loved her. He was not about to lose her before they had a chance to enjoy each other. The universe couldn't be that cruel. A few years back, stuck in that fog, he would've walked away on his own. Refused to take a chance on more pain and heartache. Somehow, deep down, he knew any amount of time with Maureen would be worth the pain that might follow. Normal living-life pain. Not this torment Harold was trying to create. Will would do anything possible to rescue her and give them a real chance. He didn't know how he managed to find two incredible women in one lifetime, but he wasn't about to turn away that kind of gift.

"I'm going." He held up his hands. "This jerk has too much of a head start already. If you want to help, check with Connor. By now he'll have more intel, including how Harold escaped custody." He shouldered his way to the door. "One last thing. Y'all need to be clear with Connor about your capabilities."

With that last directive, he rushed out of the suite and jogged to the elevator.

Harold had given him ten minutes to get to the parking lot and he only had four minutes left. Impatient, Will turned away from the elevator and bolted into the stairwell. He started down, not giving a damn about the noise he was making until he heard a shout for help.

A shout cut short by the unmistakable sound of a heavy slap. Flesh against flesh. His blood went cold as he started calculating.

What were the odds that two people were being kidnapped from or assaulted in the Cove tonight? Slim to none, in his opinion.

He continued down to the next floor and shoved open the door, letting it slam shut. Then he waited, listening.

Holding his breath, he prayed he wasn't making a mistake. As if on cue, he caught the low rumble of one voice followed

by a whimper and the sounds of more than one person moving down the stairs.

They couldn't be too far ahead of him, based on the volume. He warred with the need to lean out over the railing and peek, but he couldn't risk being spotted. He started to move and then remembered his phone and his sons. He owed it to them to do this the right way. First, he silenced the device and then he sent another text to Connor, giving his location and relaying his suspicions.

Finally, he pulled the revolver he'd tucked into his ankle holster and followed, careful not to make a sound on the stairs.

There was a pause and another brief scuffle. "Cooperate!" A man's voice. Too low to be sure if it was Harold or a hired thug.

"Let me breathe." Maureen's voice.

No doubt in his mind about the situation now. Will's heart was caught in a vise, tight and painful, as he listened to her do everything possible to slow her kidnapper. Maybe it was basic survival instinct, or maybe she sensed he was coming for her.

He liked that last idea, that somehow the connection between them was already strong enough that she knew, beyond any doubt, that he'd never let this stand. He moved as the sounds resumed, shadowing them to hide the noise of him closing in.

Suddenly there was a yelp and a grunt followed by a flurry of softer footsteps. Maureen must be running. A gasping string of rough curses bounced off the walls. Clear enough now that Will recognized Harold's voice.

Who had he paid off to escape lockup? He wanted Connor and the agency to find that answer. Just as soon as Maureen was out of harm's way.

Hearing a shriek, Will leaned over the railing. Caught a glimpse of Maureen as she tried to fight off Harold's attempt to control her. Will used the noisy fight to hide his approach. He was almost there when another stairwell door below opened with a squeak and a hard slam as it hit the stopper.

Will shook his head as the voices filtered up to him. Despite the slurred words and nonsensical talk about elevator operation and physical coordination, his boys had entered the rescue mission. All three of them sounded as if they were falling-down drunk.

He smothered the warning on the tip of his tongue. Had to believe they'd followed orders and come up with a plan based on Connor's advice. Otherwise, they were walking into serious trouble.

His boys were eager and determined, but they weren't foolish. And they wouldn't do anything that would put Maureen in harm's way.

A gunshot exploded in the stairwell and Will leaped into action. Voices ricocheted off every surface. He picked out scattered words from his boys, Maureen, and Harold as he raced into the fray.

His knees weren't what they used to be but he ignored the pops and discomfort, propelling himself down the stairs as fast as possible. He rushed past what looked like a smear of blood on the wall, and more on the railing.

If Maureen was wounded, he'd kill the bastard.

He came around the next bend and there they were. Harold was using Maureen as a shield, pressing a gun into her ribs. David, Lance, and Eli held his attention as they shouted demands and he tossed back threats.

Will saw that the boys weren't armed, which meant Harold's gun had just been fired. That barrel had to be hot. Probably scorching her dress. Possibly hurting her skin.

Furious, fed up with all of this and completely over it, Will jumped the railing and dropped down right behind Harold.

"You're done." He pressed his revolver to the back of the man's head before he had a chance to move. "Let her go."

Harold turned, just enough to make eye contact. "Sure. Just as soon as I pump two bullets into her lungs."

Maureen gasped, the fear in that sound shredding Will's composure.

"You won't pull that trigger more than once," Will vowed. "And it'll be the last thing you do." He cocked the hammer, felt Harold flinch. "Ready to meet your maker?"

Will wished he could see Maureen. He wanted to assure her it was nearly over, that this would be the end of the ordeal. Absolutely the end. No more evasions or half measures. Whatever Harold did next, he'd be facing justice of one sort or another.

Instead, he saw his sons murmuring and gesturing for her to hold on.

She would. The woman had a spine of steel. It had kept her alive so far and her determination to fight had given them time to catch up. To help.

He wouldn't let her down. "Let her go. I won't ask again."

"You won't shoot me. You're a cop. Off duty—"

Whatever else he might've said was cut short. Maureen struck him with her elbow, knocking the wind out of him and forcing him off balance. The gun blasted—one time, then a second, as Harold toppled down the stairs toward his boys.

Will caught Maureen, twisting so his body sheltered hers as he tucked her into the corner of the stairwell. "Are you hurt?"

He felt her quaking with shock, but her head moved back and forth against his chest. "No."

"We've got him!" David shouted.

Will looked back over his shoulder. His sons had swarmed Harold, now face down on the landing, his hands behind his head. Lance had a knee in his low back and Eli was holding the gun. Make that a gun and a knife.

"Good work," Will said around the lump in his throat.

His boys were men. Had been for some time, but this particular tableau drove the point home for him. They'd faced

danger. Together. For him and for the woman he loved. And they'd done a fine job of doing it by the book.

“Couldn't have done it without you.”

And he meant it. He and Jeannie had raised the boys to value teamwork. It was as essential for good police work as it was to a healthy family.

Lance met his gaze. “Connor has police on the way and he is monitoring the parking lot for any accomplices.”

“There's only one accomplice,” Maureen said, still tucked against his chest. “He's in my room, incapacitated.”

Will eased back and gazed into her amazing blue eyes. There was a spark of the fire he adored. “I bet he is.” With one hand holding her close, he used the other to send a voice text to Connor with the update. “Can't wait to hear the whole story.”

Her arms slipped around his waist and she hugged him close. “It's relatively short. He knocked on the door. I opened it because he was in a police uniform. When he shoved his way inside, I fought back. I was headed for you, but Harold was waiting for me in the hallway.”

His boys, hearing the tale, cheered for her. In his arms, she blushed. The woman was irresistible.

Another cop on the take would explain how Harold had escaped. It would be an interesting time while the locals unraveled all of *that*.

“You're sure he didn't hurt you?” His fingers cruised gently over and around the area where the gun had pressed against her.

“I'm sure there will be a few bruises,” she admitted. “Mostly I'm pissed off.” She leaned back a little and rocked her foot side to side, wincing a little. “I turned my ankle trying to slow him down.” Then she got her first look at Harold, subdued at last. Her smile was sharp and satisfied and Will started to breathe better. “Looks like he got the worst of it.”

He agreed. “You have an excellent elbow strike.”

“Thank you.” She beamed up at him.

“Good enough for a kiss.”

“Absolutely.” He touched his lips to hers and everything clicked into place. She was right where she belonged. His heart settled back into a normal rhythm and any aches he’d been battling were long forgotten.

If not for a sudden commotion near the bottom of the stairs, he might’ve stayed right there, kissing her for hours.

He recognized the sound of a police response and set his gun on the floor, kicking it aside before they climbed to the level where they were waiting.

Officer Jenkins led the way. “Jess called me,” he explained. “You good, Mo?”

“I am.” She leaned into Will, her hand resting over his heart.

Will intended to keep it that way for as long as she’d let him. “There’s another man in her room.” He gave Jenkins the room number. “He’ll probably have some valuable answers,” he added, aiming a hard look at the officer. “You’ll keep him locked up this time, right? Both of them?”

Jenkins’s jaw set and he nodded. “Damn straight.”

Will ruthlessly buried the rest of his fury. This wasn’t the time or place to let loose over something no one saw coming. After the recent trouble back home, Will understood firsthand the blend of insult and frustration when corruption came to light. Understood the helplessness when colleagues broke the trust.

“She needs someone to check out her ankle,” Will said.

“Paramedics just pulled up outside,” another officer reported.

Will bent and scooped her into his arms. “Then that’s where we’ll be,” he said, daring anyone to argue. The officers and his sons cleared a path for him.

“Will.” Maureen’s cheeks turned pink. “I can walk.”

That made no difference to him. He wasn't ready to let her out of his sight. Hell, he didn't want to take a breath that wasn't scented with the soft fragrance of her skin. "Of course you can. But I've got this. Not even the tough girls need to walk all the time."

Her laughter did more than anything else to smooth out his frazzled nerves. Outside, she snuggled into his embrace and he reveled in the miracle of the past few days. "You're safe now."

"For how long?"

The lingering fear in the query made him want to make more promises and give her guarantees that just didn't exist. "Forever, if I have anything to say about it."

The paramedics rushed over with a gurney and he got her settled. At her ear, he whispered, "I love you."

Stepping back, he saw her eyes go as wide as saucers and she stuttered, momentarily unable to answer the basic questions from the woman assessing her injury.

He probably shouldn't find so much satisfaction in that, but it was a big stroke to his ego. More importantly, it gave his heart a boost of hope that they'd figure out the next steps together.

Chapter 13

Relaxing in a booth on the back patio, Maureen kept her ankle elevated while watching the ocean and the folks enjoying the beach. Inside, Tim and the staff were making final preparations for the New Year's Eve bash tonight.

She didn't plan to stay for that. Instead, she and Will intended to quietly ring in the new year at her place, in accordance with the doctor's orders to stay off her feet for a few more days. That was an entirely different countdown. And maybe the champagne at midnight would bolster her courage enough to suggest something more permanent between them.

Not that she needed to push it. She and Will had been inseparable since he'd told her he loved her. She'd given him hell for his poor timing, but once she was able to say the words back to him, she felt better. About all of it.

Although the busted sliding glass door had been repaired immediately following Harold's break in, Will had arranged for the locks to be changed at her place before they checked out of the Cove. The suites were incredible, but he'd known how ready she was to get back to her life.

A life that now included Will.

Happiness bubbled through her system.

He hadn't left with his boys. He'd basically moved in with her and she was loving it. She'd dealt with some jitters and concerns, having never shared a home with anyone other than

her son. But after these last few days, she couldn't imagine the house without Will in it.

Couldn't imagine her life without his presence filling every day with sunshine and love.

"What's on your mind?" he asked from his seat across the table. "You're wearing quite a smile."

"That's your fault." She blew him a kiss. "I love you." She said those life-altering words as often as possible. And meant them with more of her heart every single time. She didn't care if it was logical to feel so much for him so soon. Tim and his wife were surprised, but happily so, when she'd given them the bare minimum details about everything Will had helped her survive.

"I love you, too."

His rumbling voice sent a welcome tingle along her skin and his grin was positively infectious. Seeing him happy, knowing she had a hand in creating that happiness, made her heart float.

The holiday getaway over, his boys had gone home, but Will had cleared it with his boss to stay. He insisted on being here for her while her ankle healed. Apparently, crime in Brookwell hadn't been nearly as busy as the mess they'd dealt with here.

One more reason she was eager to visit his hometown.

"How are my two VIP customers?" Tim balanced a loaded tray on one hand. "Everything good out here?"

She smiled as her son served her another glass of sangria and put a plate of Will's favorite nachos on the table between them.

"Wow." Will gave a low whistle. "You really don't need to keep this up."

Tim disagreed with a shake of his head. "Can't stop. Won't. As long as you're in front of me, I'm going to feed you. It might take me a few decades, but eventually I'll stop saying thank you every time I see you. Maybe." He shrugged.

“Probably not. I’ll never stop being grateful for all you did for Mom.” He gripped the tray in both hands, his knuckles going white. “All you did for us as a family. I would’ve... would’ve fallen apart if...”

Maureen caught his hand and gave him a squeeze. “I’m safe, honey.”

“Thank goodness.” He swallowed. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if we’d come home to find you hurt or the restaurant compromised.”

“You’re welcome,” Will said.

She wasn’t the least bit surprised that Will and Tim had hit it off as soon as they were introduced. And she suspected, after hearing some selective details about her ordeal, he had a case of hero-worship brewing.

“Is there any news? On Harold, I mean,” Tim said quickly.

Will rolled his shoulders and tipped his chin toward Maureen. She knew he wanted her to share the news so she’d believe it for herself. “Officer Jenkins tells us Harold won’t be a problem ever again,” she explained. “He and the corrupt cop were willing to name names and make deals. They’ve been moved out of Key West and, due to a host of legal factors I don’t want to understand, they’re being held now in a federal facility.”

“Good. Good.” Tim continued to hover, a new trend she hoped wouldn’t turn into a bad habit.

“I’m fine,” she said. “It’s over now.”

“Yeah, well. I’m playing catch up,” he said, sounding edgy.

“Understandable,” Will said with such compassion. “I’m glad I was here to help.” He reached over and took her hand. “Falling in love with your mother was the real gift.”

“That’s your cue,” Maureen said. “Better get back to the bar before we get mushy,” she warned her son.

He only smiled at her. “You won’t run me off.” He pulled up a chair and straddled it, his arms braced over the top. “Can

I call you Dad?" he asked Will.

The question shocked her. She stared at Will, utterly helpless. They hadn't talked about the future in long-term plans and this was not how she wanted to start the conversation. The I love yous and constant togetherness were groundbreaking enough for her.

And for Will too. Or so she thought. Why weren't his ears turning red? She'd expect a question like that to make him uneasy, if not run him off. As much as she had wanted to propose a few days ago, now she didn't want to rush either of them into anything.

It was clear to her, without the need for an outright discussion, that they were committed to one another. That could be enough for her. It *was*. In fact, it was more than enough. Having him in her life day by day made her entire world a better place. She'd long ago given up on having a partner, and though it had taken her a lifetime to find him, Will was worth the wait.

He was worth the risk of not having parameters or formal definitions.

If only she could haul Tim out by his ear and tell him to back off. Will didn't react with any of the shock she was feeling. He didn't seem the least bit fazed. Of course, he'd raised Eli after all and that boy was constantly tossing out curveballs, so maybe he'd put this chat with Tim in that same box.

Regardless, she would clear the air as soon as they were alone. The relationship they had right now and the confidence she felt loving him and being loved didn't necessitate a wedding. Especially not at their age.

What was Tim thinking?

Will smirked. "Are you asking me to adopt you?"

Tim rolled his eyes. "Heck no. The domino effect of name changes alone is daunting." But his expression turned serious. "It probably sounds silly, but it'd be an honor for me. Besides,

if you're with Mom that pretty much makes you my dad, right?"

"By default?" Will chuckled. "All right. You can call me Dad. I've got the experience to cope with one more son." He pointed at Tim. "You also move straight to the top of the favorites list, because you're bringing a daughter with you. And grandkids. I've waited a long time for those milestones." Then he frowned. "I suppose you're going to want your own bedroom."

Tim laughed. "We'll figure that out. Although, I'm sure the twins will make some demands as soon as they hear they've got a grandpa."

Will beamed. "I look forward to that."

Maureen finally found her voice. "What in the world is going on here?"

She stared at Tim, then Will. When she saw the square cut emerald ring he was holding out toward her, tears blurred her vision. "That's Tim's birthstone." It was the most thoughtful interpretation of an engagement ring she'd ever seen.

"He told me when I asked his permission to marry you," Will explained. "His only caveat was that he got to watch me propose."

"No way was I missing this," Tim confirmed.

Words failed her once more.

"Marry me, Maureen," Will began. "Please? It would make me unbelievably happy to spend the rest of my days showing you just how much I love you."

"But it's so fast."

"True," he allowed. "We have enough experience to recognize a good thing when it comes along. Besides, we're not getting any younger."

She laughed. Blinking away tears she admitted, "When I'm with you I don't feel old at all."

“Same goes, my love.” Between them, the ring sparkled and glowed. “Come grow young with me.”

She looked at her son who was grinning like a fool. And then she saw Will’s boys walking up from the beach. “When did they get back?”

“Did she say yes?” Eli shouted through the screen.

“Dad and I are still waiting for the final verdict,” Tim replied. “Come on, Mom. Say yes. The man makes you happier than I’ve ever seen you.”

“Yes,” she whispered at first. “A thousand times, yes. For the rest of my life, yes!”

All four of the boys cheered as Will slipped the ring over her finger. Her heart was full, her soul content, and her joy complete. It was perfect. All because Will had walked into her life.

She leaned across the table and kissed him. “The proposal I had planned was so lame compared to this. Thank you for making reality even better than my flimsy fantasy.”

“Wait.” He stared at her. “You planned to propose to *me*?”

She nodded and swiped at the happy tears rolling down her cheeks. “Ages ago,” she teased. “Before this stupid ankle sprain.”

She watched as the timing clicked for him. “That’s right. I’d just called room service for champagne when everything went sideways. Thank you for catching me.”

“Always and forever.”

Always and forever.

She was already looking forward to the wedding. She couldn’t wait to be Mrs. Will Frasier, mother of four with two grandkids. More than anything else, she was delighted beyond measure that she would be sharing every day ahead with her personal hero.

•••



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About the Author (Regan Black)

Regan Black, a USA Today and internationally bestselling author, writes award-winning, action-packed romances featuring kick-butt heroines and the sexy heroes who fall in love with them. Raised in the Midwest and California, she and her husband enjoy an empty-nest life in the South Carolina Lowcountry where the rich blend of legend, romance, and history fuels her imagination.

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About the Author (Janie Crouch)

“Passion that leaps right off the page.” - Romantic Times Book Reviews

USA Today and Publishers Weekly bestselling author Janie Crouch writes what she loves to read: passionate romantic suspense featuring protective heroes. Her books have won multiple awards, including the Romance Writers of America’s coveted Vivian® Award, the National Readers Choice Award, and the Booksellers’ Best.

After a lifetime on the East Coast, and a six-year stint in Germany due to her husband’s job as support for the U.S. Military, Janie has settled into her dream home in Front Range of the Colorado Rockies.

When she’s not listening to the voices in her head—and even when she is—she enjoys engaging in all sorts of crazy adventures (200-mile relay races; Ironman Triathlons, treks to Mt. Everest Base Camp...), traveling, and hanging out with her four kids.

Her favorite quote: “Life is a daring adventure or nothing.” ~ Helen Keller.



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