



ISLAND

HOMECOMING

BROOKWELL ISLAND  BOOK ONE

REGAN BLACK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Island Homecoming

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About Island Homecoming

Sometimes going home is the only way to heal...

Saving two innocent people from a deadly threat has scarred Jess Keller, heart and soul. So she's leaving paradise for an assignment back home that she hopes will restore her inner peace.

But going home means coordinating with an unfamiliar security team while also facing her biggest regret: Nash Billings.

Nash is passionate about the island town where he was born and raised. Unlike Jess, he never longed to call anywhere else home. Unfortunately, she walked away from both him and their town and the heartache never faded.

Nash sees Jess's return as an opportunity for closure, only to discover their passionate spark is stronger than ever.

Also the same? Jess running headlong into danger to protect others.

With threats mounting around them, Nash is determined to help Jess overcome the issues that brought her home. And he'll do anything necessary to give them a second chance for true love and a future that fulfills their wildest dreams.

**In Regan Black's books you'll meet strong, tough heroes
and the women they'll do anything to protect!**

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Chapter 1

*Y*ou can never go home again.

The old adage echoed in Jessica Keller's mind. It haunted her with every passing mile as she drove north. And she really hoped it wasn't true.

Because she'd left the place that had felt like home for the past eight years. But she couldn't stay. Not in Key West. Not when she broke out in a cold sweat when it was time to dress for work. She *needed* a change of pace.

Needed a safe place to heal.

No point sugar-coating those facts.

It had been thirty-two days since the justified shooting. But who was counting? She'd handled her desk duty, per protocol, and met with the psychologist, per the required schedule. Her friends in Key West treated her as if nothing had changed.

Maybe it was true—for them.

She knew better. Every night, she closed her eyes and saw the face of the man she'd been forced to kill in the line of duty. She'd pulled the trigger to save lives, just as she'd been trained to do. And yet nothing about it felt normal or justified.

Nothing would ever be the same.

Logically she understood how it had unfolded. Understood she'd drawn her service weapon and taken aim at a man intent on killing others. She accepted—gratefully—that she'd been cleared of any professional wrongdoing.

And still she wrestled, hour by hour, with the feelings swirling inside her. Grief and dismay and a pervasive anger that nothing had convinced that man to stand down.

Vic Jenkins, her mentor and partner, had gone out of his way to help her put it in perspective. Helpful and kind, he kept assuring her that she'd level out with time. “You saved at least two people, likely more,” he'd reminded her. “Focus on the wins, on those lives.”

She'd tried. Hell, one of those lives saved had been her friend. The world would certainly be worse off if Jess hadn't taken action. The big win? Her friend was now planning to marry an incredible man.

Jess believed in Vic's experience, trusted his assessment, and she'd still elected to take a leave of absence. The sunlight seemed to dim a little more each day, leaving her feeling as if she was caught in a perpetual fog bank.

Worse, for the first time since her graduation from the police academy, she didn't want to be a cop. She'd lost the drive, the calling.

And if she wasn't a cop, who was she?

She couldn't go back on the job feeling this divided. It wouldn't be safe for her partner or the community.

Driving always calmed her nerves, gave her mind time to wander and process. So here she was. With any luck, this road trip would help her reconcile all the ragged bits of herself. If nothing else, two long days of driving would surely cure her of all this introspection. There had to be a time limit on how long a person could stay in their own head without coming to a progressive conclusion.

Or maybe that was just her.

Jess thrived on taking action. She evaluated and weighed variables, but when she made a decision, she didn't look back. Taking the shot was one example.

Going home was another.

She'd wanted out of the small town where she grew up, so she made a plan. Took the steps to make it happen. And while many people wouldn't consider the Florida Keys a thriving metropolis, it was bigger than where she'd been raised.

And the constant flow of tourists kept things fresh, kept the police sharp.

The tires on the highway started to lull her into a haze. Combined with the warm late-afternoon sun She knew it was

time to pull over and stretch her legs.

She had chosen back roads for this stretch of the journey just to enjoy the scenery as she worked her way up the Eastern seaboard.

After winding her way through Florida's bigger cities, across the expanse of green dotted with blue lakes, the terrain gave way to towering cypress, oak, and pine trees along the swamps and marshes of coastal Georgia.

The sights and smells were so familiar and she hoped to eventually find comfort and rest for her mind and heart.

A billboard advertised a truck stop at the next exit and Jess fidgeted in her seat. Rolling her shoulders, she anticipated a break from the hours behind the wheel.

At the truck stop, she pulled up to an open gas pump and filled the tank. She used the time to rest her eyes, glancing around the area. She checked the ads in the windows, considering what kind of snack she wanted for the next couple of hours on the road. She figured she could get in another hour at least before dark. Maybe all the way home. Although rolling in to her parents' place in the middle of the night would be disruptive.

A night in Charleston wouldn't be too awful and then she could take her time in the morning. She still had to come up with a valid excuse to give her parents.

Leaving her car at the pump since business was light, she walked into the store. She plucked a bag of trail mix from the

rack on her way back to the drink cooler. Taking a bottle of water, she was contemplating the wisdom of a soda when she heard a loud smack behind her.

There was no mistaking that sound of flesh striking flesh. Turning, she saw a woman cowering and holding her cheek. A man with greasy hair, a ragged beard, and a heavy beer gut loomed over her.

Jess didn't think, seeing the fear on the woman's face, she just stepped in. Smiling, she asked, "Hey, you two okay?"

"We're fine," the man barked. "Tell her everything's fine."

The woman's gaze flitted up to Jess and away. "We're fine," she mumbled from behind her hands.

No red flags here. "All right," Jess kept her voice light. "If you need anything, just say the word."

"You deaf?" He aimed his big belly at Jess. "She said she's fine. Get the hell out of here."

"Sure thing." Jess backed up a step. "Thing is, I have first aid training if you want me to check her out."

His fist came up, arm coiled and ready to strike.

Jess held her ground. The man swung. She blocked the blow and countered. No thought, just muscle memory from hours of instruction and practice. He crumpled to the ground, screaming. Rolling to his back, he wrapped his hands around his knee. All that extra weight around his middle had toppled him at the worst possible angle. Too bad. Jess was more concerned about the woman.

“I’m a police officer,” she said. “I can help you.”

Shock on the woman’s face gave way to worry. She knelt at his side, fussing and making soothing noises to the bastard who’d just hit her. Looking up, her eyes wet, tears streaking her face, she cursed at Jess.

“We need an ambulance,” she wailed over the man’s continued screaming and cussing. “Someone help us.”

Jess’s gut knotted. She knew better than to insert herself into domestic disputes. Those situations were dicey enough when someone requested police presence. Instead of helping, she’d just kicked over a hornet’s nest.

“I called 9-1-1!” the clerk called from the end of the aisle.

Jess took a breath and inventoried her surroundings. If asked to give a statement, she could be clear about what she’d heard, what she’d seen after she turned.

A security mirror was mounted in the corner, offering a good view of what had happened back here. Above it was a camera. She spotted another camera in the opposite corner. Assuming the cameras were in good working order, there would be multiple angles of the man striking the woman.

“You realize your temper and abuse were caught on camera?”

He continued groaning while the woman fussed and smoothed back his hair.

It made her sick. “Ma’am, if you need to press charges, I can help you.”

“Leave us alone,” she said, her voice cracking. She stretched across the man, tears rolling down her face and dripping onto his shirt.

Jess managed not to roll her eyes at the absurd and uncomfortable performance. Her stomach twisted in on itself. Watching bullies manipulate their victims drove her up a wall, and yet she’d seen firsthand that forcing a victim to break the pattern usually backfired.

All Jess could do now was wait it out. Leaving didn’t seem like the responsible option at this point.

Flashing lights flared on the other side of the glass windows and a moment later, a sheriff’s deputy walked into the store. Tall and lean, Jess pegged him as late twenties. How much experience did he have? Another vehicle, siren blaring, was closing in fast. Probably the ambulance.

“Where’s the problem?” the deputy asked the clerk.

“This way.” The middle-aged woman pointed down the aisle at Jess and the couple on the floor.

Jess endured the grumpy assessment from the deputy. “I’m Deputy Miller,” he said. Apparently convinced she wasn’t about to cause more trouble, he focused on the couple, a frown creasing his brow. “Paramedics are on the way. Are there any open wounds?”

“N-n-no.” The woman choked on another wave of sobbing.

“Deputy—” Jess began.

He cut her off with a hard look. “You’ll get a chance, ma’am.”

So maybe there was more experience under that youthful exterior after all.

He crouched down, putting himself eye level with the woman Jess considered a victim. “Can you tell me what happened, Linny?” His tone, cool and professional, didn’t hide his familiarity with the couple.

“She attacked us.” The woman flung an arm toward Jess, nearly clipping the deputy’s chin. “We were just buying beer.”

Nerves crept along her skin. Jess wanted to protest, but she held her tongue while the woman—Linny—fabricated an outrageous story that painted her abusive partner in the best possible light and the handprint on her cheek as a result of Jess’s aggression.

Holy cow. Linny sounded as if she believed her tale. If the cameras weren’t working, Jess was in trouble.

The paramedics rushed in and Miller guided Jess and the woman away from the man on the floor, keeping them separated.

“I’m a police officer,” Jess said. “I won’t give you any trouble.”

Miller glared at her and then glanced over his shoulder. “Too late. You’re under arrest.”

Jess felt her mouth drop open. “You’re making a mistake,” she said, her voice low. “Please check the cameras. Talk to the

clerk.”

Linny heard it anyway and launched into another round of absurd accusations.

“I know my job,” he muttered. “Mistake or not, we’ll sort it out at the station,” Miller said. “Turn around, now. Hands behind your back.”

“Is that really necessary?” she asked even as she complied. “I’m a police officer.”

“Are you carrying a weapon?” He started patting her down.

“No, sir.” She didn’t point out that her snug denim shorts and the form-fitting t-shirt would’ve emphasized a concealed weapon rather than hide it. She supposed she should be grateful he left the cuffs a bit loose.

“What about my car?”

“We’ll have it towed,” he replied easily. Did this kind of thing happen often? “Nobody will mess with it,” he assured her.

She wished she could believe him. “When do I get my phone call?”

He took her elbow and marched her out of the store. “At the station,” he said. “Careful now,” he advised, opening the back door for her to slide in.

It was a short trip to the sheriff’s station, a relief for Jess with her hands cuffed and what she considered the mild injustice of riding in the back. The station was modest, the

building dated, but inside was clean and modern. Miller removed her cuffs as soon as they rounded the tall reception counter. He guided her to an empty desk, one of three in the big square room.

Jess was impressed when the first thing he did was verify her leave of absence from the KWPD. And more impressed when he grabbed a notepad and pen. “Tell me your side of that mess,” he directed.

She walked him through what she’d heard, her attempt to intervene, and how she’d defended herself at the convenience store.

When she was done, Miller shook his head. He reviewed the notes and asked a couple more questions to clarify.

“You don’t seem surprised,” Jess said.

“I’m not. Linny won’t leave him and Pritch won’t stop hitting her,” Miller admitted. “I’ve got an email here,” he nodded toward his open laptop. “Paramedics tell me the victim decided to file charges against you.”

Jess kept her mouth shut but she couldn’t stop the eye roll.

“That means I have to put you in a cell while I go talk to him. Likely overnight—”

“I understand what that means,” she said. She was stuck until a judge decided on bail. “When do I get my phone call?”

“Now.” He moved the desk phone closer to her. “Do you need privacy?”

“No.” She stared at the device for a moment, wishing she’d minded her own business. Domestic squabbles were the worst.

“Do you need me to look up a phone number?”

“No.” She swallowed. There really was only one option, and she knew the number by heart. The phone rang twice and then her friend Gabby Ladd-Marino answered at the special security office of the Ellington Cove resort.

“Hey, Gabby. It’s Jess. I need an attorney.”

“Are you safe?”

“Yes.” Gabby’s question was a great reminder that despite the current struggle, Jess had wonderful friends.

“All right. I’m gonna need the whole story,” Gabby said, her voice relaxing. “Where are you?”

“In Georgia.” Jess provided the location and a quick rundown of the situation.

“I’ll get on it.” Gabby promised. “Gamble and Swann will know what to do.” The law partners managed the agency that had teamed up with the Cove for an innovative and effective security partnership.

“Thanks for the assist. Hey, if it looks like I won’t be out of here in time to make it home for Sunday dinner, can you give my parents a heads up, please? They’re expecting me.” Her first dinner at home in nearly two years. She couldn’t dwell on that right here and definitely not in front of the deputy.

“Sure thing,” Gabby promised. “Hang in there.”

Jess replaced the handset and looked to Miller. “What’s next?”

He smiled rather sheepishly. “You can tell me if you want a chicken sandwich or a burger for dinner.”

She did a double take. “Seriously?”

He spread his arms wide. “We’re not a big station. No cafeteria, but prisoners need food. We’re not barbarians.”

Prisoner. Jess couldn’t help laughing at the ludicrous predicament. At least the deputy seemed like a decent sort. “I’ll take the chicken.”

“With sweet tea or a Coke?”

“Sweet tea, no lemon. Please,” she added.

“All right.” The deputy smirked, at her or the situation, she wasn’t sure. “Let’s head back to lockup.”

A few hours behind bars in a clean cell that was obviously rarely used wasn’t the worst thing. Gave her time to think, though she’d rather do just about anything else. Miller dropped off her dinner and got called out again. She’d resigned herself to a night in the cell, thinking about how much crap Jenkins would give her for this, when the deputy returned.

“Time for dessert?” she asked.

“Ha, ha. Your attorney is on the phone.” He unlocked the cell, held the door wide. “Come on out to the desk.”

She appreciated that Miller didn't bother with handcuffs, clearly trusting she wouldn't do something stupid like run or attack him. Being innocent, the situation required patience, that's all. Eventually the security cameras would back up her statement and this could be over.

Miller pointed to a chair and she sat, picking up the phone. "This is Keller."

"Hello, Ms. Keller. I'm Nolan Swann. I wanted to reach out directly and assure you we have this inconvenience under control. The owner of the convenience store is cooperating, gave us access to the security videos. Naturally, the video evidence backs up your version of events."

"Great."

"Miller should get word from the judge to release you shortly without bail. It's not over, but close enough."

She wasn't sure she wanted to know what close enough meant. If the video backed up her account, wouldn't the charges be dropped entirely? Not the point right now. Right now, she just wanted to get back on the road.

"I hope 'close enough to over' means I can afford the bill," she joked.

"Obviously there won't be any charge." Swann said.

"What? Seriously?" That hadn't been so obvious to her.

"You've helped our team in Ellington Cove on numerous occasions and we're happy to show our appreciation."

“You’re welcome?” She posed it as a question. She’d done her job, that was all. She was a cop, committed to the community.

Swann continued, “I do have one favor to ask. Whether or not you agree, nothing changes about the way we handle your situation here.”

“Okay.” Jess glanced toward Miller, wondering how closely he was listening. It would be hard *not* to hear her side of the conversation in a station this small, especially when it was deserted.

“Gabby tells me you’re headed to South Carolina. Back home for a little bit.”

“That’s right.”

“We just picked up a request from the local police department in your hometown. They made a large, unexpected drug seizure and need help with the security on site.”

The island police department had always been small and never a big hub for drug trafficking. Not like Key West. “The state hasn’t taken control?”

“Not yet. The authorities want to keep the contraband where it is. Hoping to draw out the smugglers on the route so they can work their way up the food chain.”

“I see.” Despite her passion for criminal justice and law enforcement, it had never been her goal to be a cop in her hometown. Brookwell Island was too small and there were too many personal ties. Not unlike the small Georgia town she was

stuck in right now. Everyone thought they knew all the details about each other.

Most of the time they did.

And what they didn't know, they were willing to fabricate. She'd fallen into that trap herself, inadvertently bringing trouble down hard on a friend she cared for deeply. She'd considered it an invaluable experience and had learned to do better. Although refusing to jump to conclusions now didn't rectify the damage she'd done. A lingering pain she carried with her.

“What do you need?” She'd agree to just about any request because Swann was getting her out of a sticky situation much faster than she could do it on her own.

“Once you reach Brookwell, please check in with Chief Caldwell. He'll have instructions for you.”

“All right.” She smiled to herself. Reed Caldwell had been the police chief as far back as she could remember. Down-to-earth and soft-spoken, his commitment to the community and his practical insistence on hearing out both parties in every conflict had inspired her love of police work. “Does this make me a Guardian Agency protector?”

“Gamble and I think we'll probably settle on something along the lines of ‘temporary consultant’ if that works for you.”

This conversation made it clear why her friends at the Cove were so proud of their ties to this agency. Gamble and Swann

ran an efficient group, one rooted in compassion and anchored by good leadership. “Yes, that works for me. Thank you, Mr. Swann.”

When she was cut loose from the sheriff station about an hour later, Jess got on the road and didn't stop until she crossed the state line into South Carolina. At the first rest area, she found parking and hunkered down for a good nap. Her parents were expecting her and she wouldn't let them down. As she reclined her seat and confirmed her doors were locked, she promised herself that on her way back to Key West she'd spend at least one night at the renowned Ellington hotel in downtown Charleston.

Chapter 2

Nash Billings drove down the shady, tree-lined street toward the house where he grew up. Sunday dinner was one of those things that wasn't technically required, but highly encouraged in his family.

Beside him, his younger sister Nina chattered about the latest contract she'd secured with the newest bed and breakfast in town. "Hargrave House is the only B&B on the island with a private cove." She bounced in her seat. "The ocean views are stunning. They'll be packed every day of the year."

Nash frowned. "That's a big change." The place had been a summer vacation home for the Hargraves for as long as he could remember. "I've been doing the landscaping over there for years."

"I'm sure they'll keep you on," Nina said. "None of the daughters have the expertise or equipment. Plus, they'll be busy with guests. The oldest, Celeste, she loves flowers and plants and gardening. Come to think of it—"

“Stop right there,” he warned. “If you say anything remotely close to a matchmaking remark I’m going to tell Mom about your last trip to Charleston.”

She gasped. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He smirked. “When have I ever avoided a dare?”

She huffed. “How do you even know about that?” she demanded in a whisper, though they were alone in the truck.

He didn’t, not the details anyway. He knew she’d gone into town for a girls’ weekend but according to the island gossip grapevine, she’d met a guy. Spent some time with him. *On a girls’ weekend*. He’d assumed there was some kind of pinky-swear law against that.

“It’s smart,” he admitted.

“What is?”

He pulled into the driveway and took a critical look at the exterior. Made a mental note to get some of the trees trimmed in the next couple of weeks. Hurricanes and tropical storms were part of life here. And although the island didn’t get severe storms too often, there was no sense testing fate.

“Going into Charleston when you need a hookup.”

“Need a hookup?” She groaned. “Gross. Please, stop. And don’t say anything to Mom and Dad,” she snapped as he parked the car behind their dad’s perfectly restored truck. Once Nico Billings had signed over the landscaping business to Nash, he’d thrown himself into a new hobby. Apparently, their mom, Roxy, had insisted that busywork of some sort was

required in his retirement or she'd toss him out on his ear. Or so the legend went.

Nash adored his parents, and marveled at their enduring mutual affection and commitment to their lifelong partnership. The example Roxy and Nico had set for Nash and his sister had been a true gift.

And possibly a curse.

Because Nash had been raised within the security of their love, he'd taken the strength and power of their enduring relationship for granted. Once he'd been old enough to realize just how lucky he and Nina were, he didn't want to settle for anything less. No games or drama for Nash. He wanted the real deal. Someone he could talk to and rely on. Someone to laugh with through life's highs and lows. He'd been prepared to do the work, because he'd seen his parents make the effort year by year, in good times and bad.

He'd even counted himself blessed to have met the woman worthy of his best effort. Right up to the moment when she'd broken his heart.

Crushed it, really.

Jessica Keller, of the Kellers who lived two blocks over, had been *the one*. He'd known early on that they were meant for more than high school romance. He'd been disappointed when she'd chosen an out-of-state college, but he'd been happy for her success, believing the time apart would make them stronger.

He'd been a fool.

And disappointment was the least of it when she'd suddenly shown a desperation to leave the island behind. To “escape”—her word—the town where he was rooted. The town where he'd been planning a future with her. Then it had all gone straight to hell, no chance of recovery, when she'd accused him of robbery. He'd been floored that she believed he was capable of criminal activity.

The whole sordid incident had forced him to grow up, to drop the rose-colored glasses and see people for who they really were. Starting with his best friend who'd tried to pin the robbery on him and with Jess's heartbreaking doubts about his character.

He couldn't look back at that hellish summer without grief twisting him in knots. So he looked forward. Every damn day he looked forward. Today included.

His parents were unique in their devotion. The high standard they exemplified was an impossible mission. One Nash no longer believed was possible.

It was probably good that Jess had moved away. Left him behind. Whatever. He'd used the time to recover from the emotional upheaval and focus on carrying the legacy of Billings Landscaping forward as a pillar of the small island community.

So what if he was still single? That wasn't the worst thing. He had the respect and love of his parents and his sister. He had dates when he wanted to go out. And he owned that he

had a problem when he compared those pretty and pleasant women to Jess.

“Nash?” Nina’s wary voice brought him out of the unwelcome spiral. “Are you plotting against me or lost in thought?”

He wasn’t that mean. “Lost in thought,” he assured her. With a nod, she reached for the door handle, but he stopped her. “Hey.” She glanced at him. “You know if you ever need me, I’m here.”

“I know.” She blinked rapidly, clearing a sheen of extra moisture from her soft hazel eyes. “I’m good. It’s all good, I promise,” she said in a rush. “Now help me with the flowers.”

As the owner of Island Bloomers, Nina always brought fresh flowers from her shop to Sunday dinner.

Roxy had the front door open before they’d made it to the porch. “Oh, aren’t those pretty?”

“You say that every time, Mom,” Nina teased.

“Well, it’s true every time,” Roxy laughed. Stepping aside, she urged them inside. “Your dad’s out back on the grill today.”

Knowing the routine, Nash set the vase he carried on the kitchen counter near the sink where Nina would top off the water level, then he headed straight out to chat with his dad.

“Smells good out here,” he said. “What’s on the menu?”

“Flank steak with the famous Roxy marinade, shrimp and veggie kabobs, and roasted corn.”

“Your next hobby should be in the kitchen,” Nash said.

Nico let out his deep, rolling barrel laugh. “Enter your mother’s realm? Not a chance.” Turning, he studied the yard. “She wants a fire pit.”

“Seriously?” But Nash could see it already, mentally sketching out a stone path accented with groundcover, lilies, and flowering shrubs that would elevate the yard for his parents who loved to entertain. “We can do that. I want to trim the trees up first.”

“Of course you do. And you won’t let me help.”

“Not much, no,” Nash agreed. “But you could come into the office and source the supplies you’ll want to use back here.”

A timer on his dad’s phone went off and Nico loaded the steaks onto the platter to rest as Roxy appeared, a platter of kabobs in one hand, a bowl of pasta salad in the other. Nina was behind her with the flowers.

The conversation and focus changed. “I decided we’ll eat out here,” Roxy declared. “These gorgeous days should be enjoyed.”

Within minutes, Nina had created a lovely centerpiece with the flowers, a pitcher of sweet tea, and a carafe of sangria. As the food was ready and they were all settled around the picnic table, Nash said, “This is a feast, Mom. Y’all went a little overboard.”

“No such thing for my two best kids,” she protested with a wink for her husband.

Excited, Nina shared the news about her new contract with the B&B while they loaded their plates and poured drinks. “To Nina!” His father raised a glass and they all gave her a well-deserved toast.

“It’s dreadful what those girls have gone through in the last year.” Roxy shook her head.

They all agreed with her. Nash didn’t like to dwell on it, but it was impossible in a town of this size not to know that the sisters had lost their mom to a long battle with cancer.

“Is their dad staying on?” he asked his sister.

Nina shrugged. “Doesn’t seem that way. I’ve only spoken with Celeste. She seems to be in charge and has a clear vision about the mood and hospitality they’ll offer. She wants fresh flowers on arrival days in the rooms and fresh arrangements in the common areas.”

“That’s fantastic,” Nico said. “Do they have specific requests or do you get final say on the design?”

“I have final say.” Nina positively beamed. “There’s a budget of course, but this way I have the flexibility I need to protect the profit margin.” Her business savvy was off the charts. One more thing they’d both learned from their parents. “With a couple more contracts like this I won’t have to worry over month-to-month revenue anymore.”

“Is it really a concern now?” Roxy queried, a flare of concern in her warm gaze.

Nina cut into her steak. “No. Not with the Inn bringing so much more business to the island.”

“Growth is a good thing,” Roxy murmured.

To Nash, it sounded like she was trying to convince herself. He caught his dad’s eye. “Everything okay?”

“Your mom’s trying to stay positive after the whole mess with the drug seizure. I keep telling her there are bad apples in every bushel.”

Roxy snorted. “The person behind it has to be someone who passed through here and thought we were just too dumb and too small-town to notice.”

“I don’t think it’s that way at all, sweetheart,” Nico countered. “Those drugs washed up. Couldn’t have been planned that way. Brookwell wasn’t the real destination.”

Nash rolled his eyes, so only his sister would see it. Their mom liked to stew and worry over keeping Brookwell Island beautiful and peaceful.

But Nina was frowning. “Mom might have a point,” she said.

“Your mother always has a point,” Nico agreed with a patient smile. “And maybe she’s right. But Chief Caldwell has this situation under control.”

Clearly irritated, Roxy sipped her sangria. “He needs to get those drugs out of this town.”

“And he will,” Nico soothed. “We’ve never had reason to doubt him.”

“What exactly happened?” Nash asked. He’d heard the chatter and assumed it had all been exaggerated by the rumor mill.

“You really need to watch the news,” his mother scolded. “There’s no excuse for not being informed.”

“It’s peak season mom. I’m busy.” He rose with the sun and went to sleep early to balance it out. Besides, the news was rarely uplifting. “Would you please inform me?”

“The sass will never grow out of you.” She turned the sangria glass absently. “A few packages washed up near Rusty’s old dock a few days ago. Cubes wrapped in plastic. He called the chief, of course, and hauled them in. The police confirmed the packages contained drugs and took them as evidence.”

“Curious about how they came ashore, Caldwell kept searching,” Nico picked up the story. “He went out with someone from the Coast Guard, is what I heard, and monitored the tide line for more clues. They found more packages floating on the surface. Basically, a watery line of bread crumbs led them to an abandoned boat packed with pot and cocaine, but no people.”

“Evidence of people,” Roxy said, her voice tight. “Evidence of a fight.”

“Well with a little luck,” Nina patted her mother’s hand, “the sharks got the lot of them and no one will bother us.”

“Then why keep that boat and all the drugs under lock and key? They’re expecting trouble,” Roxy grumbled.

“Chief Caldwell knows what he’s doing,” Nash said, echoing his dad’s earlier support. “He works hard to keep the island clean. We need to trust him.”

“Nash is right,” Nina said before steering the conversation in a more upbeat direction. By the time they’d finished with dessert—Nash’s favorite coconut cake—his mother’s normal cheer had returned.

“Are you worried about crime increasing on the island?” Nina asked as he drove her back to her place. She lived in the apartment above her shop on Central.

“Not particularly,” he replied. “We have a good security setup at the nursery.”

“Nothing at your house?”

He shook his head. “You worried about me?”

“A little,” she admitted. “Tourism is on the rise. More visitors are great for the economy but it does mean more potential for trouble.”

“Have there been problems in town?”

“No.” Her fingers laced in her lap. “The Chamber of Commerce suggested we upgrade our security systems. Add a neighborhood watch kind of thing. All voluntary, but...”

“You don’t like change any more than Mom,” he interjected.

“That’s not entirely true,” she protested. “I can adapt. I just really like what the island stands for.”

“It’s a good community,” Nash agreed. “And good security doesn’t take anything away from that.”

Nina sighed. “We’ve just been so sheltered. I like sheltered.”

Nash chuckled. “Not a bad thing. I guess we’re the generation to make sure the island stays that way.”

“Good point. Are you headed straight home?”

“Probably not.” He was feeling restless. Maybe it was the drug seizure or thinking of cops in general. Randy’s dock wasn’t far from the nursery. “I may swing by the nursery and put in some time.”

“Can I join you?”

The comment set off warning bells. “What’s going on, Nina?”

“Nothing,” she insisted. “I’m mulling some ideas for the new contract. It might be smart to incorporate more greenery and a nature-scape approach at the Hargrave place. I want my clients to feel like the florals are unique and on brand for each site.”

“Not a problem for you,” he assured her. She had too much creativity.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Instead of heading toward the town center, he turned toward the nursery. “Let’s go see what inspires you.”

“Thanks, Nash. You’re the best.” She grinned.

“You always say that when you get your way.”

“Maybe,” she allowed. “Want me to say it more often?”

Nash shook his head. He had the best sister on the planet. Besides, if she was hanging close to him, it would be easier for her to open up about whatever was really on her mind.

Chapter 3

Jess walked out of the Brookwell Island police station and across the parking lot, not happy at all with the gun and the lock box she was carrying in addition to a tote with her new uniform shirts. Better than being stuck in a holding cell in Georgia, yet not how she'd wanted to spend her time off.

Focus on the good stuff, she coached herself, admiring the beauty of the cloudless bright blue sky and the invigorating scent of fresh cut grass as the landscaping crew worked around the building.

She'd tried to talk Chief Caldwell out of issuing her the weapon, but he refused to make an exception, citing her safety as well as that of the rest of the team. No room for argument on that point, so she'd accepted the situation. Just because she had the gun didn't mean she had to use it.

She would, obviously, but if the situation wrapped as quickly and quietly as the chief hoped, the nerves she felt wouldn't be tested.

At her car, she fumbled her keys, paying no attention to her surroundings.

“Jessica Keller?”

Looking up, she did a double take as she recognized the man standing in front of her. “Nash?” She fought twin urges to throw herself into his arms and pretend she didn’t see him. Two equally bad options. “*Um*, hi.”

He tipped his hat back and pulled off his gloves. “What are you doing here?”

She couldn’t see his eyes, hidden by dark sunglasses, but his mouth was set in a stern line. For some reason that irritated her. She had as much right to be in Brookwell as he did. Well, almost. “I could ask you the same thing.”

His brows snapped together. “It sure as hell isn’t community service.”

And this was why she should’ve pretended to be deaf and blind. The risk of running into him was why she didn’t come home often. Or at all. Water didn’t exactly flow *under* the bridge for the two of them. It sort of puddled on the top and made for a slippery mess. So many emotions. Too much history. And nothing she could change.

“I own the business now. Took over the contract to maintain these grounds. As we’ve done for decades.”

She hadn’t even paid attention to the logo on the trucks full of landscaping gear or the team wearing matching t-shirts.

“That’s great, Nash,” she gushed. His expression didn’t change. He looked downright unhappy. “Isn’t it great?”

Back in high school, he hadn’t been completely sure about taking over his father’s business. But he loved the outdoors, and he had a green thumb, not to mention an eye for creating beautiful spaces.

“Yeah, it’s great,” he said.

His frown eased away. Removing his sunglasses, he hooked them into his shirt collar. Those green eyes scorched her. Way back when, she’d been certain that gaze held all the wisdom of the world.

“What brings you here, Jess?”

“Aside from my parents?”

He tipped his head toward the building behind her. “You’re not at home, are you?”

With a sigh, she pressed the button and opened her trunk to stow the gun, lockbox, and uniform shirts. “I’m headed that way.” She closed the trunk and leaned against the car. “I’ll be here for a while.”

His gaze narrowed. “You finally joined the island police? Last I heard you were killing it in Key West.”

She winced at his choice of words, a ball of regret tightening between her shoulder blades. “Temporary assignment. Just helping out the chief.” Hopefully helping herself too, but he didn’t need to know those details.

He nodded. “The drug seizure, right?” He raised his hands. “Don’t go pointing the finger at me. I’ve got a rock-solid alibi.”

The familiar pulse of guilt rolled through her. She had pointed the finger at him long ago, over something stupid, although it felt monumental to her at the time. “I am sorry.” Not that she expected him to believe her.

“For?” He tilted his head, studying her.

Somehow, she managed not to squirm. Only one option would ease the guilt that dogged her every time she thought of home. “All of it, Nash. I’m sorry.”

Sorry for every mistake she’d made as an idealistic teenager when she’d thought he’d been taking too many risks with the wrong friends. Risks she’d worried would blow back on her by association, making it impossible to reach the dreams that would get her out of Brookwell.

“I’m sorry for implicating you,” she said. “And for never apologizing properly.”

“Not sure you would’ve ever apologized if I wasn’t right here in your way.”

“I’m not proud of it, but you’re right.” She’d deliberately avoided him on her previous visits and usually asked her parents to come to Key West.

At her admission, his eyebrows shot toward his hairline.

“What?” she challenged, unable to let it go.

He shrugged. "I didn't think you'd admit it."

Again, she wanted to fidget. To leave. She stayed put, owing him her time. "You deserved better from me."

He frowned. "What's going on?"

Of course he saw right through her. But there was too much going on in her head and none of it she could share with Nash, the man she'd once trusted with her deepest thoughts and dreams.

She shouldn't confess to any civilian that she was wary of the gun locked in her car. Soon, she'd have to strap it on to do her job. It helped to realize she wasn't fed up with criminal justice as much as she'd grown weary of the violence.

Not exactly the best mental place for a police officer to be.

All too often, she'd witnessed people being awful to each other. Add money and power to the equation and things escalated quickly. Just like her last incident in Key West. She shoved those dark thoughts aside. She couldn't reveal any of that to Nash. It wasn't his business and she wouldn't make it his burden.

"Nothing really," she replied. "It's been a hard couple of days." She decided it was better to start over on the right foot. "I got arrested."

His lips twitched. "Who pointed the finger at you?"

She shook her head. "I sort of did it to myself. It was a domestic violence incident."

“A call went sideways on you?”

Why had she brought this up? “No. I stopped for gas and intervened. Probably should’ve ignored it.”

“Ignorance has never been your bliss.” He slapped his gloves against his thigh. “I hope it works out.”

“It will. My attorney is basically representing me pro bono since I agreed to give Chief Caldwell a hand.”

Nash scowled. “That’s blackmail.”

She tempered her reply. “Actually, it’s cooperation. My attorney’s one of the good guys.”

“If you say so.” The sound from one of the lawn mowers changed and Nash’s attention shifted. He watched until the young man on the standing mower figured out the adjustment. “Old roots,” Nash said. “We need to dig them out.”

For a second she thought he was talking about the two of them. Then she followed his gaze toward the corner of the building. “What happened to the big oak?” She remembered cops taking breaks in the shade over there. They’d organized community outreach under that tree too. There had been lemonade stands, the trick or treat station, and registration for the annual 5k fun run.

“Came down two summers ago.”

“And you’re still pulling up roots?”

“Nature of the business,” he said, shrugging. “Not like people who leave their roots behind.”

She rolled her eyes. “How long do you plan on standing around and berating me?”

A grin curved his lips, fading slowly as he thought that over. “I was going to say until it felt good. But it doesn’t.” He sighed. “That really makes me unhappy.”

“One thing that’s not on me to apologize for.” She turned for her car. “Take care, Nash.”

“You should make it up to me.”

She couldn’t have heard him correctly. “Beg pardon?”

“Like restitution.” He was nodding, clearly warming to whatever harebrained idea was brewing in his head. “It’s the least you can do. You told everybody I was a thief, and then sailed right on out of town. You left me here to clean up the mess you started. I had to convince the whole damn town I was innocent. Sure would’ve been easier if you’d stood by me.”

“I’ve apologized.” Her temper simmered. “Late, but sincere.”

“Uh-huh.” He scratched his jaw. “You’re officially law enforcement now? Here on the island, I mean.”

She knew what he meant. Was afraid she knew exactly what he was about to ask. “I’m a temporary consultant. But yes, it’s likely folks will see me as one of the cops.”

“The way they saw me as a thief.”

“Nash, it’s been a long couple of days. Please make your point.”

“All right.” He braced his hands on his lean hips. “You should go out with me. We’ll have dinner in public.”

“That’s your idea of restitution?” Right this second it sounded more like her idea of purgatory. Not quite hell—Nash was good company and easy on the eyes. But going out with him was definitely a penance. For those same reasons.

She’d loved him once, long ago, as much as a teenager could love anyone. And she’d hurt him, as only an idealistic, unyielding young woman could. He was right, she should’ve known better. Should’ve stood by him.

Watching him now, she realized he knew exactly where her mind had gone.

“Afraid to be seen in public with me?” he taunted.

“Of course not. We’re in public right now.”

“And based on your body language you might as well be interrogating me.”

A serious exaggeration, but clearly, he wouldn’t let this slide. “Name your terms, Nash.”

“I’ll pick you up and we’ll have dinner at the Inn, take a short walk along the boardwalk, and then I’ll drive you home.”

“Sounds lovely,” she said, her voice flat. It would definitely serve his purpose of being seen with her in a friendly way. She could do without the familiar tingle that occurred when she

thought about riding shotgun with Nash. Memories swamped her. Once he'd been her favorite person. They'd had so much fun together, such an easy time talking about anything and making out when they didn't want to talk anymore.

She remembered his sexy grin and his sly smile when he was about to be ornery. Neither of them were smiling now. "You're staying at your parents place?"

She nodded.

"It's settled. I'll see you at seven."

"Not tonight, Nash. I—"

"Reneging already?" He straightened to his full height.

"No." Did he have to be a jerk about this? "I'm on shift tonight. Seven to four."

"Seriously?"

"Police business never ends," she quipped. "New kid on the schedule gets the shift no one else wants."

"Right." His gaze drifted back to his crew. "So. When are you available?"

She wasn't getting out of this. She didn't deserve to. "If you're set on dinner, I can do Wednesday or Thursday."

He narrowed his gaze. She wasn't sure if he was assessing her honesty or considering his personal schedule. "Thursday's best," he said at last. "We've got a job on Wednesday that might go late."

Perfect. She had plenty of time to stress about it. “Thursday it is. See you around.” She hustled over to the driver’s side, rounding the back of the car. It seemed rude to walk on the grass he was there to maintain.

“Jess.”

She paused in the open car door. “Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

A dozen thoughts raced through her mind. She could tell him she wasn’t an active part of the investigation, that she was merely hired muscle. Something in his expression warned her those details were irrelevant. “I will.”

With that promise, she made her escape.

Nash refused to watch her drive away. Instead, he shoved his hands into his gloves and churned all his conflicting thoughts and emotions into the work at hand. Not that the conversation put them behind schedule. His crew was good enough to make up for his few minutes of slack.

All that did was give him time to wonder about what he’d done. It had been so long since he’d seen her that he’d been sure she wouldn’t affect him.

Got that wrong.

Jess was as beautiful as he remembered. More so. She carried herself with confidence, an assurance that she could handle anything life dropped in her path. Even him.

Maybe especially him.

Damn. That grated. Not that he wanted her to be rattled at the mere sight of him. His ego wasn't that fragile. She looked good. Better than good. Key West clearly agreed with her. And thinking about that—about her thriving in some other city—just made him mad.

Unreasonable, but true.

He worked the edger, trimming overgrown grass away from the concrete borders. The vibration and drone of the equipment didn't stop him from replaying the entire scene. Over and over.

Did that apology come too easy? It had. That bugged him. Sure she owed him a big, fat "I'm sorry" but she wasn't the kind of person who caved so fast.

And what was he thinking, asking her to dinner? Forcing her, really.

Something about Jess left him tossing logic and caution to the wind. It had been over ten years since she implicated him in that robbery. Ten years since he'd proven his innocence. Hadn't even been hard to do. Chief Caldwell had been skeptical of his involvement from the start.

One of the perks of being the son of Roxy and Nico. His parents had raised him and his sister to get involved and give back. They helped out at community and church events, and they supported his mother's efforts with the less fortunate folks here on the island and in Charleston.

Of course, parents could do all the right things and their kids could still go off the rails. Like his best friend—the real robber—had done.

He hadn't been exaggerating the gossip. Talk had been horrible and the embarrassment nearly unbearable for a while, even though very few people believed the accusations against Nash.

How was it that everyone else trusted his character except her?

Humbling. That was his relationship with Jessica Keller in a nutshell.

Being seen in public with her was going to start tongues wagging again. Only time would tell whether the grapevine spread good news or rotten rumors.

As the crew finished and loaded up the trailer, Nash's mind wandered. Good thing she couldn't go out tonight. Although that just made him wonder about her safety on this guard duty. He really hoped Chief Caldwell knew what he was doing, keeping the drugs on the island. Nash didn't want to think about Jess in danger. Her training and experience didn't change anything for him. The idea of her keeping watch through the wee hours of the night made him uneasy.

He snorted. Not a chance of changing that. Jess had proven time and again that she could forge her own path through the world.

He should use the time to figure out what to do and what tone to set on their date. He didn't want to humiliate her. Not really.

What did he want?

He wanted to catch up. They'd been friends once and he missed her. She'd always been a great listener. Well, except for that one, final conversation. He had to let that go. They were grown-ups now.

If they'd still been friends, he might've chosen somewhere more casual where they could just relax and catch up. Plenty of places around the island to accomplish that goal. People would still gossip about seeing them together. But something he didn't want to look at too closely was driving him to make a point. More shocking was this unfamiliar urge to do something *special*. With Jess. For her.

The Inn. Like it was their prom or something.

He climbed into the driver's seat of his truck and headed to the next job while his crew conversed, a comforting background for his swirling thoughts.

At the next property, Nash cruised around on the mower, reluctantly accepting that he wanted to treat Jess well. He'd invited her out to make her uncomfortable, but apparently he still cared about her feelings.

Irritated with himself, he set a reminder on his phone to call and make reservations as soon as they finished for the day. With the temptation to procrastinate crushed, he shoved all

thoughts of her to the back of his mind and focused on the work.

Chapter 4

Jess had never given much thought to the island's industrial area, but that was exactly where she found herself. She stared at the front door of a warehouse that had seen better days. The paint had faded long ago and rust had taken hold along the corrugated metal siding. She couldn't remember this warehouse ever being in use. Of course, she'd been a kid with interests elsewhere.

Chief Caldwell had commandeered it as the storage space for the drug seizure. Probably because it was removed from the more active public areas. The nearby dock, rickety as it was, made it possible to monitor the boat they'd also seized without additional guards.

In her earlier briefing, she learned the building was locked at all times and the personnel would rotate through a schedule designed to keep everyone fresh.

She checked in for her shift, introduced herself to the team on duty, and was given a tour of the warehouse. Brookwell Island police lieutenant Will Frasier was leading the team

tonight. Frasier had been an influential mentor to her growing up. A calm, steady, by-the-book kind of cop, his presence gave her a boost of confidence. And despite the dashing gray hair at his temples and deeper lines etched into his face, he looked as hearty and eager as ever.

He reviewed the basic protocols as he handed over a radio. “Guardian Agency, huh?”

“Well, yeah.” She smiled. “Coming home was supposed to be a vacation, but they called in a favor.”

Frasier didn’t look entirely convinced, but he didn’t press for more details.

She shouldn’t be surprised that the Guardian Agency had picked up this assignment. From what she’d learned from Gabby, the agency was diversifying, adding special teams and support jobs to their comprehensive service portfolio. When the small South Carolina town needed more manpower, the Guardian Agency had answered.

The hardest part of all of it was the gun in the holster on her hip. No amount of arguing would change the situation. Guards on this job had to be armed, especially during the night shifts. Understanding the logic didn’t mean she liked it.

“We’ll try not to overwork you,” Frasier joked.

She rolled her eyes.

“You’ll be patrolling with Officer Troy Walden,” Frasier explained. “He’ll be here shortly.”

She vaguely remembered Troy from high school. A nice guy, he'd been a couple years ahead of her and on the basketball team with Nash for a season or two.

Frasier continued, "You'll split the perimeter coverage. We have cameras in place for extra coverage here and down at the dock."

"Monitored here or elsewhere?" The Guardian Agency often handled surveillance remotely.

"Right here." Frasier pointed toward an office on the other side of a wide tinted window that overlooked the main warehouse space. "I'm working monitors tonight."

"Great."

Troy Walden walked in on a gust of wind and Frasier made introductions before they headed out to relieve the others.

An hour later, the wind was blowing hard as darkness blanketed the island, rustling through the palmetto trees. She turned, watching the slender trunks bend. Rain was coming, likely heavy, and she was grateful for the protective gear she'd been issued.

She walked her route, ever alert as the shadows stirred in the blustery night. Scanning in all directions, she hesitated. Two blocks over, the Billings Nursery would be buttoned down for the night. In the past, when foul weather threatened, Mr. Billings would sleep in the office, just to be on hand in case of damage to the greenhouse.

She figured that was part of Nash's job now.

Jess's mom had kept her informed about the Billings family and their various enterprises around town. Nash's younger sister Nina owned the florist shop, and Nash had taken over the day-to-day operations of the landscaping business about a year back. Knowing his energetic dad, Jess was sure Nico still had a hand in the nursery.

She put it out of her mind, listening to the island, her senses tuned to anything out of the ordinary. Sounds from the nearby marina carried to her: rigging ping-pong in the wind and bumpers squeaking and shifting against the moored boats.

Not far from here, the Inn was probably gearing up for tonight's live entertainment. Another change her mother had shared. The Inn was owned by the city and the island residents and managed by a board of directors, thanks to a savvy mayor who came up with a refurbishment plan back in the 1970s. In its heyday, the Inn had been a destination. Now, thanks to that mayor, it was a gem once more, drawing in tourism that benefited everyone.

Year by year, they seemed to grow and expand their offerings without upsetting the easy-going vibe on the island itself. There were seasonal events and the draw of the posh Inn worked in tandem with other island traditions like the summer music festival and sea turtle nest monitoring.

Jess shrugged off a prickle of unease. She'd be seeing it all up close on her date with Nash.

Jess understood her mom's persistent chatter and updates. She wasn't pushing Jess for anything specific, but she was

dedicated to keeping the island economy strong and frequently made references about decisions to empower the next generation and inspire Brookwell kids to stick around and build lives.

This might be the place for Jess right now, but she didn't think it could work long term. Not with the way everything inside her twisted and knotted when she was near Nash. This was his place and she wouldn't intrude. She was only here to recover from the ordeal in Key West. No matter how thrilled her parents were to have her back home, she couldn't make any promises about the future.

Brookwell was as full of her best childhood memories as it was the awkward ones. Part of the charm of small-town life was everyone remembering the blue dress she wore to her first dance, her performance on the volleyball and track teams, and throwing her boyfriend under the bus on a robbery charge.

Her innocent boyfriend.

She cringed. It was an automatic reflex even after all this time.

Still, the slower pace was already helping. She found it easier to relax around so many familiar faces of the folks she'd grown up with. And this job made her feel useful while she debated how to reclaim her confidence on the job.

But staying? Not a chance. Her mistakes would follow her here forever and Jess wanted more than that for her future. As lovely as the island was, she couldn't imagine herself here long term.

Her radio crackled and Frasier's mellow voice broke into her thoughts. He confirmed everything within view of the cameras was clear. Jess listened to each guard check in and when it was her turn, she gave her current status and location.

The hours of her shift ticked away, one blending into the next. So far, no one on tonight's team noticed any signs of trouble.

Great news, although she felt like a sitting duck out here. What kind of response would the BIPD be able to mount if someone did try to reclaim the seized boat and drugs? That was a question for people way above her pay grade. They only needed her to keep moving and stay alert.

Shortly after the midnight check-in, Jess was patrolling near the water-access side of the building when something felt off. She'd learned not to waste time questioning her intuition, so she moved closer.

The steady rhythm of the ocean rocking the boat against the bumpers protecting the hull from the dock shifted. Missed a beat. Could be a natural shift in the tide or a gust of wind, but it felt wrong. The boat settled and she waited, listening intently. Then the pattern broke again.

She swiped the rain from her face and radioed in, "Possible contact near the boat. Moving in."

"Hold," came Frasier's cool reply.

She would've rolled her eyes if she hadn't been concentrating so hard on searching through the rainy darkness

for the source of that sound. Frasier was being cautious. Because of her issues in Key West? Didn't matter. He was the lead here and he probably ranked her lower than the youngest cops on the island team, since she was technically only here as extra manpower.

But she knew she was right about this. Another squeak sounded out on the dock and she inched forward. Couldn't see a thing. Wasn't the light set to come on with motion?

"Lieutenant? I'm closest to the concern."

"Hold," he repeated.

Jess breathed, slow and steady, holding her position. She wasn't here to challenge anyone or stir up trouble. She was here to work off her legal fees. A slap sounded. Had to be a wet shoe on the wooden dock. She rested a hand on the gun she didn't want to be carrying.

"Movement on the dock," she reported.

"Go," Frasier cut her loose. "Walden is covering the door."

Jess advanced, in small rushing steps to stay quiet. The intruder must've come by water. Anyone who had slipped by the guards should have triggered the motion-sensing light and been caught on camera. With her flashlight in one hand, she kept her hand near her holster. She braced for the light overhead to give away her approach, but it stayed off.

She heard another footstep. "Police! Freeze!" she shouted, turning on the flashlight.

The beam of light caught a figure with one foot on the boat's gunwale. In the instant before the person spun away and dove back into the water, she made note of the build, the black wetsuit, the scuba mask pushed to his head, and the dark paint smeared across his face.

What the hell?

She rushed after him, shining her light into the water and seeing nothing at all. The ripples from the diver going under were already dissipating. He hadn't been wearing fins, but somehow he'd made it out of sight, out of reach, way too fast.

She radioed Frasier as she searched the dock and boat for any useful clues. With the rain, it was impossible to tell if the diver had made it onto the boat. Didn't look like it at first glance. Nothing stuck out to her, but the team would conduct a thorough search in the morning light.

Frasier called her in, leaving Walden to monitor the perimeter. Tucking the flashlight away, she jogged back to the warehouse.

At the door, she tipped her face to the camera and waited for the buzzer. From there it was a short walk to the warehouse office. Through the glass window, she watched Frasier tap another button. With the quantity of drugs in this seizure, she appreciated the security, though it was clear the tech was new and most likely a donation from the Guardian Agency or other law enforcement offices assisting on the case.

“Good ears, Keller. I want you to write up the report right away.” He pointed to a work table pushed up against the

opposite wall. “Grab a seat.”

“Thanks.” She took the notepad and pen he offered as well. “How did he get out there? I hope you have something on the camera because the light never came on.”

“I noticed,” Frasier grumbled. “I thought the rain caused a malfunction.” Frasier’s graying eyebrows snapped together. “Wasn’t until you went down to the dock that I realized someone tampered with the feed. I’ve been watching a damn loop.”

Technology was changing all the time and as soon as a new security feature came out, criminals figured out how to break it. “How long until it’s fixed?” she asked.

“That’s up to the tech team. They’ve been notified.” Frasier glared at his monitor array. “We need eyes on the boat, obviously.”

She tapped the pen against the notepad. “Maybe we should set a trap on the boat? Station someone on board,” she suggested. “Could be more effective than setting up another camera they’ll just disable.”

Frasier’s scowl only deepened. “That’ll be up to Caldwell and the state guys.”

“Right.” She heard the unspoken directive to write up the incident. Do her job and stop worrying about decisions that were outside of her control. She sat down on the folding chair, put it all on paper, reviewed it, made some clarifications, and then signed and dated her statement.

“All right.” Her chair scraped against the concrete flooring. “I’m going back out.” She handed him the notepad, her hand trembling.

“Problem?”

She’d been so focused on the report, she hadn’t realized she was chilled after sitting in the air-conditioned office in wet clothing. “Nothing dry clothes won’t fix.” They both knew going outside, even in the rain, would be better than the cool air in here.

“All right.” His gaze dropped to the report he held and she headed for the door.

“Keller!” She turned back. “One last question,” he said, his eyes skimming over the page. “You never drew your weapon.” His brown eyes pinned her.

“There was no reason to do so,” she said.

Frasier rocked back in the chair making it squeak. His gaze roamed over the monitors and then landed back on her. “Girl Scouts didn’t drop those drugs on our beach, Keller. You need to be ready to use deadly force.”

With an effort, she held her ground. Frasier was the chief’s right-hand man. He followed the chief’s example when it came to leading people, which leaned more toward teaching instead of scolding a person without cause.

“I am prepared.” It wasn’t much of a lie. “I’m good,” she added. She could see he wasn’t convinced. “Did the guy get into the boat? No. And no one breached the warehouse either.

I'm going to go back out to finish my shift." She hated how defensive she sounded.

"Ease up. I'm not your enemy," Frasier said.

"Never thought you were." Jess reached for the door, ignoring the low grumbling from Frasier.

"Hang on."

There were times when Jess resented being just another cog in the justice system. She wasn't proud of her occasional urges to rebel against her superiors, but she couldn't ignore it either. Control was important to her. As was recognizing the moments when she could responsibly push the envelope of the essential hierarchy. This wasn't one of those moments. "Yes, sir."

"Come on, Jess. You've known me for the better part of twenty years." He leaned forward, the monitors forgotten. "I heard about the incident in Key West. Are you okay?"

She glanced away, wishing she could get back out there.

"The warehouse is covered," he said quietly.

She relented. She couldn't afford to alienate any more friends than she already had. Frasier, with his constant dedication to the community, had been a big inspiration when she'd been thinking of career paths.

"Everyone says so." She took a breath, desperate to mute her internal frustration. "I passed all the psych evaluations. My sergeant was happy to get me back out on patrol. I'm the one

who stalled out. Took leave.” She forced herself to meet Frasier’s knowing gaze. “I lost my confidence.”

“It happens.” His compassion nearly took her out at the knees.

“How much do you know?”

“The broad strokes were in the background report sent over from the Guardian Agency. The state police required Caldwell to deliver resumes and background checks for everyone on this assignment.”

She appreciated his candor. “Good to know no one is worried about me, specifically.”

“But I am. Worried,” Frasier admitted. “Why did this incident rattle your confidence? The report said the shooting was justified.”

She shrugged. “It was a little too close to home.” Or maybe too close to the heart. “The shooter was targeting a good friend of mine.” She pushed away the memories, the useless cycle of what if. “The takedown, saving her life, was a team effort. Firing my weapon was the right thing to do, but something about it just echoes in my head. People kept reminding me it takes time.”

“That’s right.” He drummed his fingers on the desktop. “Normally, I’d say it’s more worrisome if you weren’t rattled. This island isn’t *your* normal anymore. So here we are.” He spread his hands wide. “Caldwell said you didn’t want to carry the gun.”

“I’m not afraid of it.” She kept still when she wanted to fidget. “Some distance and a change of scenery felt like the right option. It’s already helping,” she insisted. “I wouldn’t have agreed to this assignment if I thought I’d be a risk to myself or anyone else.”

“Spoken like a cop ready to go back on duty.”

She shook her head. She wasn’t. This role didn’t involve the wild card of public interaction. This wasn’t a domestic dispute ready to blow up in her face. It was walking a limited beat, being a deterrent for more trouble or possibly being on hand if one of the drug runners made a move.

“Let’s not go there. I’m content as a temp for now.” Then she blurted out the bigger issue she’d been wrestling with. “I need this time to make sure staying a cop is the right decision.”

Frasier’s eyebrows lifted. “All right. I won’t push. But if you need anything, if you get twitchy in the wrong way, just tell me.”

“You’ll be the first,” she promised.

Relieved when he let her go, Jess finished her shift and made the exchange when her relief arrived. At her car, she locked her gun in the trunk and headed home. She could’ve avoided it, but she drove by the Billings nursery and noticed Nash’s truck already in the lot. Or maybe it was just a random company truck.

Either way, her thoughts were all on Nash and what he might be planning for their upcoming dinner date. *At the Inn*. She needed to find a dress. No way could she show up to the fancy dining room in her normal off-duty attire of graphic tees and shorts. They'd toss her out on her ear.

That would definitely set tongues wagging.

Best not to give the gossips more ammunition. Although being seen with Nash, knowing talk would follow, didn't bother her as much as it should. He was right about her owing him more than an apology and she would follow through in good faith.

Maybe, with a little compassion and effort, they could find some healthy closure and reclaim a sliver of their old friendship.

Chapter 5

When their date night finally arrived, Nash was on edge all day waiting for Jess to cancel. He'd been practicing his best snarky replies and arguments to force her into keeping her word.

He wasn't exactly proud of that, but he was determined to prove that he was over her.

She'd stomped all over what they'd had and his dream of what they could be. And he was sure the only way forward was to get some closure where Jess was concerned.

Maybe then he'd want to get serious about finding someone new. Someone to build a future with.

It was just past three o'clock when he returned to the nursery and sent the crew home due to more heavy rain rolling in from the ocean. In the office, he moved things around on the big board so they wouldn't miss any clients this week. While he worked, he could almost hear a timer in his head ticking down to the minute when he'd knock on Jess's front door to pick her

up. He felt that same anticipation, the eagerness to see her big smile and bright eyes. Just like it had been when they were kids.

So much for being over her.

He tossed the dry erase marker on his desk and heaved out a sigh.

“Did someone quit?”

He glanced up to see his sister in the doorway. “Didn’t hear you come in.”

“Obviously.” She shoved a hand-tied bouquet at him. “Take these with you tonight.”

He noticed the fresh bandage on her hand. She was always nicking up her hands with various thorns or her knife while she worked. This looked more serious and he wondered what had distracted her. “You okay?”

“Fine.” Her lips pursed and he didn’t believe her.

“What are these for?” He stood the bouquet on his desk.

Nina rolled her eyes. “Don’t play dumb. I know you have a date. With Jess. Take the flowers with you.”

“Uh-huh.” He admired the flowers. His sister had amazing skills and an excellent eye for color. “It’s not a real date. I’m just getting even.”

His sister shook her head, her disappointment clear. “Of course you are.” She glared at him. “Go on and get even then. You’re such a coward. I’m still going to be her friend.”

He overlooked the insult, his mind circling those flowers and how to use them. Would it throw Jess off if he showed up with a bouquet for her? He didn't plan to be outright mean about things tonight, but he wouldn't mind making a point of what she'd missed.

Maybe she'd had to leave to find herself and her calling. Not him. He was proud of the business, of carrying on a legacy right here at home. Year by year, they grew a little bigger, took on new projects and clients, and invested in the community. That kind of effort mattered. To him and to the entire town.

And, yes, a significant part of him wished it had mattered as much to her.

"I wouldn't expect anything less." Not his place to tell her who her friends could be. Nina lingered in the doorway. "You need something else?"

"We both know that's not it."

He dropped into the chair and stacked his feet on the corner of the desk. "I'm going to need more context."

After a look over her shoulder, she came in and closed the door. "Coy doesn't suit you," she stated. "We both know you're not taking her out to get even. That's the dumbest excuse ever. No one on this island still thinks badly of you."

"Really?" he challenged. "She doesn't know that. She hasn't been here. Are you gonna tell her?"

Another eye roll. "Her parents have been here. How do you think I heard about the date?"

“You talk to Jess’s parents?”

She looked away, her nose wrinkling. His sister was so bad at lying. “I knew it!” He polished his sunglasses, striving for his best imitation of their father, “Nina Billings, you are one reason the island grapevine never dies.”

“Uninformed is unarmed.” She crossed her arms, her expression as thunderous as the rain pummeling the metal roof. “Brookwell may not have an information superhighway, but our short rural route is mighty powerful.”

“Stop.” He choked back a laugh. “You’re just nosy by nature.”

She turned her pert nose up in the air, her dark curly hair bouncing with a toss of her head. “Maybe. I’m not sure that’s worse than still pining for the one that got away.”

Fifteen years ago, he would’ve chased her for that sort of comment. It was still tempting. Though giving in would likely prove her point about being immature or holding grudges or whatever. He could still be mean when necessary. “I’ve never liked you.”

She grinned, wicked and sharp. “Right back at you, sweet brother.” She was ridiculously unrepentant. Foolish. “You *will* be nice to her, right?”

His gaze landed on the flowers again. Unbidden, he relived the memory of Jess’s face lighting up the first time he’d handed her a few stems of daisies and lilies. Tied with rough twine, but she hadn’t cared.

“I’m not a monster. Your opinion notwithstanding.”

“Then why do this at all? Why take her out and parade her around at the Inn dining room? Jess is—” Nina stopped short. “Well. She doesn’t need your games.”

What did his sister know that he didn’t? Dumb question. “You’re a good friend.” That truth was unassailable. Nina was loyal and caring. Almost to a fault. “But she doesn’t need your defense either. Especially not from me.”

“Ha! You are so wrong.”

Obviously, she had some important intel on Jess that she wasn’t sharing. And though he could grill her, apply particular leverage and threats to get the whole story, that wasn’t how he wanted to learn about the Jess that had come home. If she needed a friend or someone to confide in, he could be that. Maybe. Probably.

Dinner would be the proving ground.

“Go on,” he said to Nina. She was staring at him as if he might sprout horns any second. “I repeat. Not a monster. Jess is safe with me. And,” he held up a finger when Nina started to interrupt, “if she’s got something to share, she can tell me herself. I’m not listening to any gossip about her from you or anyone else in town.”

“I mean it, Nash. Be nice to her tonight.” She stepped closer and drilled his chest with her finger. “Because if you’re mean, I will hear about it and take action.”

“Yes, Nina.” He turned back to his paperwork, not surprised when Nina sailed out in a huff, leaving the door open. It wasn’t a great feeling that his sister was so damned sure he’d be awful to his ex-girlfriend.

But Jess was more than the average ex. The way she’d accused him and extracted herself from his life had shattered his heart. As much as he tried to ignore the facts, to bury the truth under a mountain of denied feelings, no one else had come close to the intangible connection he’d had with her.

Restless, he prowled the nursery, checking plants and looking for a specific order he had scheduled for installation tomorrow. Weather permitting.

Mrs. Carrington wanted a pollinator garden, a place where her grandchildren could enjoy flowers and bees and hummingbirds. Not the usual job, he’d dug in and done some research about pollinators and migrations and the needs of hummingbirds and bees and butterflies.

The whole thing renewed his commitment to the job. Things like this kept his work interesting.

His cell phone gave off a siren sound from his back pocket and Nash smiled as he answered. “Nash Billings.”

“Hey. It’s Jess.”

He knew that, having given her number that outrageous ringtone. “Why are you whispering? You can use a normal voice to cancel on me.”

“What? No. I gave you my word. I just have a last-minute request.”

“I’m listening.” Closely since she was still whispering.

“Can we please meet at the Inn? *Please*. If you come here my mom will freak out.”

“Your mom always liked me.”

“*I know*.” He took absurd pleasure at her annoyance about it. “Not a bad freak out. You know her. She’ll start seeing engagement rings and orange blossoms.”

Oh, right. Pamela Keller had been all about seeing her daughter happily married and settled. Must be some innate mom thing. Lately his mother mentioned grandbabies with increasing frequency. “Now I’m following.”

“This date was your deal and it’s your call, but I’m up against it here. Would you please consider letting me meet you there?”

He stared down at his scuffed boots. Thought about what his mom would do as soon as word got around that he and Jess had a dinner date. Roxy would have opinions and she wouldn’t keep them to herself any better than his sister. At least he wasn’t living under the same roof as either of them.

Taking pity on her, remembering the best parts of their friendship before things had gone sideways, he said, “Yeah. We can meet there.”

“Thank you,” she whispered fiercely.

“On one condition,” he said.

She groaned softly. “What’s now?”

He smothered a smile. “It’s an easy one. Tell me where you’re calling me from.”

He heard muffled laughter and something in his chest relaxed. “My bedroom closet.” She giggled. “See you at seven.”

The call ended and he stared down at the phone, laughing.

Jess, a trained and experienced officer of the law, thirty years old, had called him from her closet so her mother wouldn’t overhear the conversation. She probably hadn’t done that when they were teenagers.

It was all too damn funny.

Chapter 6

Nash arrived at the Inn a few minutes early and had the hostess seat him. He ordered sparkling water and tried his best to keep his eyes away from the entrance. Couldn't do it. But that was fine, because he spotted her the moment she walked in and any residual guilt he had about how he'd gotten her here dried up and faded away.

She didn't look like a teenager. She barely looked like the woman he remembered.

Standing there in a vibrant plum sundress that emphasized every lovely aspect of her lean figure, he was struck by the thought that he didn't know this woman at all.

The Jess Keller he was gawking at had experienced a life he hadn't been part of. She wasn't a complete stranger, but she wasn't a person he could refer to as a close friend either. Here, in this moment, he felt the full force and distance of the years she'd been absent from his life.

This wasn't revenge at all. It was a first date on a whole new level. The punch of her, with her blond curls tumbling loose over those sun-kissed shoulders, took his breath away.

She paused at the hostess stand, her gaze moving through the room. His heart kicked when she spotted him. Her slow smile felt as wonderful as the first warm day of spring.

He knew he wasn't being subtle, staring at her this way, but he didn't care. It was pure pleasure watching her cross the room. Watching her come to him. She had such a confident stride, her dress floating with her movements. She had to be aware that folks were watching her. Or rather *them*, he realized as heads turned, following her progress.

He couldn't blame a single person. She was remarkable. Gorgeous. And his date.

He stood quickly, remembering at the last second to pick up the flowers. "You look incredible," he said, handing over the bouquet. "Courtesy of Nina," he admitted.

She stared down into the blooms and when she glanced up, she looked almost shy. "This is thoughtful. My thanks to both of you." She settled into the chair opposite his and set the flowers to the side. "Every woman here is jealous," she teased. "Nina should get a few orders tomorrow."

"That will make her happy," he said. "Maybe that was her ulterior motive."

Jess's smile tightened at the corners. "What will make you happy?"

There was a clear challenge in her tone. He could take the bait and launch into a verbal battle. After their reunion at the police station, she probably expected as much. But suddenly he didn't want to fight.

Because of the dress?

Probably. He could be that shallow at times without a single regret. "Dinner," he replied at last. "It's been a long day and I'm starving."

"Well, let's fix that." Her blue eyes twinkled and he was tossed back to the days when they liked each other. He really wanted to reclaim that ease with her. He'd missed her friendship and humor and occasionally quirky world view. He hoped the world, her job, hadn't changed her too much.

They ordered drinks—water for her and a draft beer for him. And she urged him to choose an appetizer to share. "The last thing I need to deal with tonight is a hangry Nash."

"In my defense, no one is good company when they're hungry."

She acknowledged that with a subtle nod.

"The shrimp and grits are a specialty now," Nash told her. "And they have a shrimp pasta diablo that is out of this world."

She studied the menu. "What happened to the fried green tomatoes? They used to be my favorite."

That detail he'd forgotten. How many other things had he shoved to the back of his mind as facts he'd never need again?

“They still serve them, but not as often. Usually as a featured daily side. The chef tries to use local food as much as possible, so the menu is more flexible.”

Another nod, this one friendlier. “They do that down at Ellington Cove, too. Key West,” she clarified. “Chef Turore is all about the farm to table movement. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Ellingtons take that approach at all their properties.”

The waiter came by and took their order for the smoked fish dip appetizer and went over the dinner specials. Fried green tomatoes were not an option this evening. They made their selections and the waiter disappeared.

“Ellington?” Nash sipped his beer. “Is that the same family who owns the Charleston hotel and the resort out on Isle of Palms?”

“The same,” she confirmed. “It was big news down in Key West when they bought up a dilapidated resort. Now the place is a premiere destination. High ratings and excellent reviews from tourists and locals alike. The spa is a thing of beauty.”

An image of her in a spa filled his mind. Fluffy robe, nothing underneath. Whoa. He cleared his throat and yanked his thoughts away from that slippery slope. “And you were one of the locals?”

“Absolutely.” She traced the handle of her fork. “I have good friends on the police force in Key West and the police department has good ties to the Cove. For a while I was the primary liaison when there was trouble.”

He wondered how she defined trouble and if any of those incidents had sparked her return home. Logic said there had to be a connection, but he doubted she wanted to discuss it. Especially not with him during a revenge date. Asking for specifics was likely to make tonight even worse. He didn't want her assuming he was picking a fight or passing judgement over her career choices. Not the case at all. If things went well, they could talk about those details later.

“Should I point out you traded one island for another?”

“No need.” Her mouth tilted into a half-smile. “The Keys are so different,” she said, clearly missing the area. “And Key West gets a lot more tourism than Brookwell.”

“We could use more tourism.” The mayor and city leaders were constantly looking for ways to bring in more people and revenue. “You disagree.”

She shrugged, drawing his attention to her bare shoulders. It dawned on him there weren't any tan lines. Damn. That only made it more work to keep his thoughts on platonic, friendly paths.

“Not exactly. Tourism is an industry here. It's necessary. But more people—especially those passing through—opens the door for more problems.”

“Don't cops thrive on those problems?”

“Good cops should thrive on keeping the peace.” She held up her hands. “Just my opinion. There will always be people who push the envelope of their own ability and those who test

the legal boundaries. Those folks need cops and other first responders they can rely on. That doesn't mean I crave chaos or want people to have bad days.”

Listening to her, he felt caught between the familiar and the new. He'd always loved talking with Jess, listening to her calm voice, but she'd matured. Of course she had. “This is weird.”

“Which part? I get wound up and—”

He held up a hand. “Only the part where I feel like I *don't* know you. I mean your voice is the same and I have fond memories of talking to you all night long. What's important to you has changed.”

She chuckled. “I should hope so. We're not kids anymore.”

The appetizer arrived and they paused to dip rustic crackers into the smoky, aromatic dip.

“Would it help if I, um, admit it?” she asked after a few minutes.

“I'm not following.”

Her cheeks turned pink. “I thought you would stand me up.”

“Good grief.” He paused to assess. He wasn't mad. Not quite offended. But something in between. “Did you never have a good opinion of me?”

“No.” She nipped her full lower lip. “That's not it. I—You were my best friend. But I left badly,” she said. “To put it mildly. And when you asked me out, you yourself admitted it was a form of blackmail.”

“The friendliest form.” He sounded defensive and didn’t much care right now.

“Is there such a thing?”

He gestured toward her. “You’re here.”

“True.” She laughed and the color in her face returned to normal. “Yes, I’m here.”

She turned the topic to family and they chatted over mom-goals and general changes around town while they polished off the appetizer.

“This was a great choice,” he said. “Definitely takes the edge off.”

“Glad to be of service.”

It was his turn to chuckle. “Why are you back, Jess? You haven’t visited in years.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Have you been keeping track?”

No harm in admitting it. “Yes, actually. As you said, you left badly. More specifically, we left things badly.” He blamed the blackmail guilt for choosing to share the burden of that fiasco. “That doesn’t mean I stopped caring about you.”

Though she didn’t seem entirely convinced, she didn’t argue. He’d take the win.

She carefully placed her appetizer plate at the edge of the table. A sign of nerves, he recalled.

“You know.” She smoothed the tablecloth in front of her. “My mom mentioned that you’ve been dating Gwen Nelson.”

“How do I answer that without calling your mom misinformed?” he asked. “Especially since it’s probably my mom who told her.”

“I remember Gwen,” Jess sipped her water. “Short, blonde. Adorably perky cheerleader, right?”

“You’re right. Every guy crushed on her. She was always at the top of the pyramid.” He leaned forward. “Also, I’m *not* her type.”

He watched her face as that sunk in. Her immediate frown gave way to surprise. “Oh! Seriously?”

“Believe it.” He lowered his voice. “Her girlfriend lives in Charleston. And while I have been out with her, it was only about a landscaping job. Here on the island and in town. My mom jumped to conclusions.” He shook his head, resigned. “Got her hopes up. Gwen and I had a good laugh about it. It didn’t help that her girlfriend likes to shag so Gwen practiced with me for a few weeks.”

Jess tilted her head. “I can see where the rumors would be just racing away. You two must’ve been a gorgeous couple on the dance floor.” She sat back in her chair. “And you’re hoping to start new rumors tonight. Locals don’t come to the Inn to be inconspicuous.”

“Rumors don’t faze me much,” he confessed. “And yes, this is where folks celebrate special occasions. And that’s what tonight is.”

“Is it?”

“Come on.” He gave her his best smile. “You can’t tell me that seeing you again after the better part of a decade isn’t a special occasion. You even dressed up.”

“For the venue,” she stated. “And so did you. You look great,” she added with a sparkle in her blue eyes.

“Thanks.” He ignored the effect of that sparkle and the almost-flirty tone. His sister wasn’t wrong that Jess had slipped through his fingers, but there was no guarantee that she’d stay. And if Jess was temporary, he had to protect himself from disappointment, or worse, another heartbreak.

As much as he’d like to deny it, she still held the power to wreck him and he wasn’t sure he could survive that a second time. “The last time I saw you in a dress was our senior prom.”

Her eyebrows dipped low over her nose once more. “That can’t be true. There were formals in college.”

“None that we attended together,” he reminded her. Different schools had been more of a challenge than either of them had expected.

Looking back, he was pretty sure going to the same college wouldn’t have changed anything. They had needed different things and she’d grown away from him with her determination to explore a life away from Brookwell. They’d grown apart, but he couldn’t fault her for it. It was part of growing up.

She looked up, her gaze flitting to the ceiling and around the room before returning to his face. “Good grief. Do I owe you another apology?”

“I think we’ve run that circle enough,” he replied.

“Color me relieved.”

“So what really brought you back?”

Her lips firmed along with her voice. “I needed a change.”

Clearly the topic was closed. He respected the boundary. For now. The painful shadows in her eyes concerned him and he couldn’t shake the feeling that she needed to share whatever was bothering her. Once upon a time, they’d known each other well. Understood each other. They’d been too young to appreciate that special connection. Too young to realize it was rare or that it could break, maybe irreparably.

And apparently he was still too young and foolish to accept that what they’d had was gone. Because he was sitting over here full of hope.

Maybe they could start over. Recapture what mattered and have something new and even more special than before.

If she stayed.

Their food arrived and she made the most of the interruption, admiring the presentation, digging into the meal and eventually directing the conversation to him and his work.

He let her have the diversion, for now. He filled her in on how he and his dad split time at the nursery, how he continued to learn from his father’s vast experience. “He likes to stay involved,” she said.

“That’s it. Can’t take the man completely out of the dirt,” he agreed, with great affection. “Dad is the best when it comes to managing stock and working out deals with our suppliers. But Mom doesn’t want him doing too much, yet she insists he needs a hobby.” Nash rolled his eyes. “He’s throwing himself into restoring cars.”

“Oh, my gosh.” Her grin was infectious. “That’s great.”

“Well one old car so far,” he amended.

They talked about more quirky family things, completely neutral topics, until she turned down dessert and suggested they call it a night.

“As blackmail goes, this was a lot more fun than I expected,” she confessed as they walked out into the night air.

The rain had stopped, but the dark streets were still wet. Out over the ocean, the moon and a few scattered stars peeked in and out of the fraying cloud cover.

“The evening doesn’t have to end,” he said. “We could take a walk down to the beach.”

“I don’t know, Nash.” She glanced around. Nerves or cop habits? “I should get home.”

He convinced himself it was reluctance he heard in her voice. “All right. Let me walk you to your car, at least.”

She gave him a stiff nod and started walking away. He tucked his hands in his pockets and matched her pace. “I’ve had fun, Jess.”

“That’s two of us,” she agreed.

Where was the ease they’d enjoyed over dinner? “Are you okay?”

“Of course.”

He didn’t believe her.

“Don’t you have to be up early tomorrow?” she asked.

“Sure,” he admitted. “This time of year the afternoon weather can be unpredictable, so we definitely aim for an early start.”

“You were the one guy who was willing to obey curfew.”

He chuckled. Did she remember the other things? Like how much fun they had when he was cut loose on those rainy days? He suddenly recalled the grief lurking in her eyes when she’d first spotted him at the police station. She’d always been prone to keeping her feelings locked down tight, deep inside. Good or bad, Jess didn’t wear her emotions on her sleeve.

And it always struck him as odd. Her parents were two of the most forward-thinking people when it came to mental health. Her mom was open about everything and everyone. Hell, her dad was a psychologist, always advising folks to face their feelings and advocating for positive communication.

When he thought about it, that was probably why Jess was so intensely private. How was it, in all their time together, they’d never discussed *that*? He chalked it up to hormones and other concerns monopolizing the real estate in their teenage brains.

“This is me,” she said when they reached her car.

“Go out with me again. Just friends,” he added quickly. “Not for any other reason or agenda. Just friendship.”

The clouds parted and moonlight spilled over her face. He was lying. He knew it as he stared at her lips, thinking of how much he missed her kisses.

She cocked an eyebrow. Could she read him as well as she used to? He hoped not. Because she’d see him fighting a losing battle against his attraction. She might even see just how worried he was about her and her reasons for coming back.

“I don’t know, Nash. We’re both busy.”

He called her on the bull. “Everyone’s busy. Make time for what matters,” he challenged.

Those golden eyebrows, colorless in the dim light shot upward. “Are you saying you should matter to me?”

“Damn straight. We have history, Jess.”

And she had secrets she needed to unload. He was sure of it. Secrets or worries that had brought her back home. To him.

No. That was a false assumption. Given a choice, she probably would’ve avoided him for as long as possible. He’d thank fate later for tossing them together. Whatever had gone before, he was absolutely certain she needed him now. *As a friend.*

He shouldn't feel this overwhelming need to watch over her. She was a grown woman. A good cop. The epitome of capable. The only solace for his frustration with this possessive and protective surge he felt for her was knowing she'd be equally irritated by his reaction. He had to compromise if he wanted to regain their friendship.

For her, he could do that. Hell, for her, he would do anything.

"Let's do ice cream tomorrow?" She hesitated and he gave her a winning smile. "I'll call when things wrap up for me. Or I can text if you don't want to take my call in your closet."

"You're ridiculous."

"Says the woman who called me from *her closet*." Her burst of laughter delighted him. It felt vital that he could still give her that. "We'll meet over at Island Freeze."

She fished her keys out of her purse. "They're still in business?"

"Thriving," he confirmed. "They even have a cart in Charleston during peak tourist season."

"Wow."

"Does that mean you're in?"

"Sure. Ice cream for dinner sounds good to me."

Her smile fanned the torch he still carried for her.

"I just need to report for my shift by six forty-five tomorrow night."

“No problem.” Nash struggled with the sudden urge to kiss her. With the moonlight highlighting her features and the breeze teasing her long curling hair, she was pure temptation.

Not what tonight was about. A romantic reunion wasn't what he was after. Not when his heart would gleefully drop itself at her feet. Sure, he'd guilt-tripped her into the date, but he wasn't looking to harass her or string her along either. He only wanted her to feel a bit of the awkwardness and speculation he'd endured in the months following her baseless accusation.

Trouble was, she was as likable now as she'd been back then. They were both different people and yet, they still seemed to fit. Yes, she was as gorgeous as ever, but that didn't mean they could—or should—slide right back into a physical relationship.

Too bad his body hadn't read the memo. Desire scorched his system. He wanted her more than ever.

Well, he'd figure out how to ignore it. He wasn't about to renege on a friendship. If his instincts were on target, she needed a friend more than anything else right now.

Chapter 7

Working nights always meant getting creative about the routine and keeping herself sharp. It was all too easy to get her internal clock turned around. During her years as a cop, she'd trained herself to fall asleep when it was time, no matter the schedule. Last night's restlessness was an anomaly and completely tied to her date. She hadn't been able to shut down the questions racing through her head after having dinner with Nash.

She'd had fun. Actual real-world, real-people fun. Her fears of social retaliation never came to pass. In fact, being out with him, talking over the meal, hadn't felt awkward at all. She hadn't had a date go that well in ages. Considering that surely wasn't his initial intention somehow made it even more satisfying.

And weird.

So it shouldn't have been a surprise when her first waking thought was of Nash.

That was dangerous territory, and in a move that made her feel like a teenager again, she wished for a girlfriend to help her hash out her silly fascination with her ex. Back in the Keys, she would've vented to her partner or given one of her friends at the Cove a call.

Then again, maybe not. She didn't typically get this flustered over anything. Especially not anything as personal as a pseudo-date.

By the time she finished off a challenging workout with a calming yoga breathing sequence, she was ready for a decent breakfast. She opted for a veggie omelet since she'd be loading up on ice cream in a few hours.

With her laptop open on the breakfast table, she ate as she skimmed the report Frasier updated at the end of each shift. Last night had been another quiet night of no disturbances at the warehouse. Good news all around.

The last paragraph of the report was an update on the boat. The diver she'd chased off on her first night had prompted another search of the seized vessel, conducted by Chief Caldwell. He and the investigators from the state had found over a million dollars in cash layered behind false panels in the galley cabinets.

That was interesting. No wonder the diver had risked boarding the boat. That kind of cash could mean life or death in the drug trade. Probably death for the crew who'd lost control of it, assuming they were still alive.

Clicking over to the next report in the file, she reviewed the progress on the rest of the case.

State authorities were working in tandem with the DEA and the Coast Guard, doing everything possible to drop a net over the people behind the shipment that had gone awry.

What if Brookwell was the intended destination after all?

There wasn't a ton of evidence to answer that question. Any number of problems could've caused the boat crew to try and come ashore here. Failed navigation, illness, a deadly conflict. Anything.

If the shipment was supposed to land here for distribution, her hometown was in for a rude awakening. Surely the chief shared her concerns. Caldwell was being cautious and smart about the whole situation. Jess appreciated the tactic and hoped it proved effective for the case and the community.

She wasn't entirely comfortable with her reasons for coming home. Definitely not comfortable with carrying a gun yet. But she didn't want to see this special island crumble under the pressure of criminal outsiders trying to take advantage of small-town hospitality.

As she cleaned up her breakfast, she spotted a note from her mom, urging her to pack leftovers for her overnight shift. She smiled. Not having to cook was a great perk of running away.

She wrote a quick thank you note in reply, and once she was packed up, she headed out to do some exploring before she expected Nash to call. Or text.

The man was incorrigible, but she loved his sense of humor.

She parked a couple blocks away from Island Freeze, backing into a space on Central Avenue so she could easily get out again. With her uniform shirt, belt, holster, and gun secure in the trunk, Jess walked along, noticing the changes along what passed as the main thoroughfare on the island.

Nothing was quite like she remembered it.

The candy shop was in the same location, but the sign over the door advertised a new name and logo. The bank on the corner had changed names. Probably more than once. The library seemed smaller, though it was surely the same, and there was an eye-catching mural on the wall that tourists would see as they drove into town. There were electric scooters for rent now in addition to the classic neon-pink bicycles. It was a relief to see the Bread Basket bakery hadn't changed anything except their new window display and lighting.

She should stop in and see Ms. Connie soon. Along with a range of breads, the older woman made the best strudel Jess had ever tasted.

Her phone hummed and it was indeed a text from Nash. By the time she made her way to the ice cream shop, Nash was waiting out front. His smile when he saw her stirred up a flutter of butterflies in her belly. They were friends. *New* friends. Keeping that in mind was in her best interest of surviving this visit with her heart intact.

“You’re not in uniform.”

She glanced at her reflection in the glass. She didn't look much like a local or a tourist with her white tank top over dark tactical pants and running shoes instead of the boots she would need later. It hadn't seemed like a good idea to go strutting through town on personal business while decked out for her protective detail.

"Same goes." He wasn't wearing anything with his business logo on it.

He shrugged. "Seemed best to trade in the grass-stained gear for something clean."

"More room for ice-cream stains," she teased. He looked good. Better than good, though she wouldn't say *that* out loud. They were trying to have a friendship here. He wore a colorful short sleeve cotton shirt untucked over trim khaki shorts that hit just above his knees, revealing his strong masculine legs and feet, since he wore island-standard flip flops.

She'd expected to see tan lines from his work, but apparently he got out enough that the skin she could see was a mellow sun-kissed bronze all over.

"You're frowning," he observed.

"More like lost in thought."

"Well, we're walking into an ice cream shop. Frowning goes against the rules."

She made a deliberate effort to change her expression.

"Better," he said, opening the door for her.

“Gee, thanks.”

On a low chuckle, he nudged her gently toward the line to place their orders. It wasn't a long wait at this hour—most people were smart enough to get dinner before dessert and tourist season wasn't in full swing.

Nash, bucking the just-friends idea, paid for them both. She didn't protest, if only to spare the kid working the register from their weird dynamic.

“I can't remember the last time I did something like this,” she admitted as they walked out of the shop. They'd both chosen upside down cones, which were served in dishes. Easier to enjoy the treat with less fear of making a mess.

“They don't have ice cream in Key West?”

She rolled her eyes and bumped his shoulder. “Of course they do. I meant the rest of it.” At his confused glance, she elaborated. “I think I've forgotten how to relax. Especially here. It's been one case after another at work. And then...” Well, she didn't want to sour the happy moment with that story.

Beside her, Nash made a humming sound, carefully breaking off a piece of the waffle cone.

“It's like the whole town got a facelift. The signs are brighter and the colors adjusted. It's more than fresh paint.”

He hummed again. “Like going from black and white to color.”

“Accurate. I mean it was beautiful before, but something about the town center feels more coordinated now.”

“Because it is,” he said. “Specifically, these few blocks. The mayor’s office, tourism board, and chamber of commerce have really leaned into the whole small town revitalization movement.”

“With awesome results.” She smiled and lifted her chin toward Nina’s shop. The door was propped open with a green five-gallon bucket filled with fresh cut carnations and daisy stems. The message printed on the chalkboard sign in the bucket with the flowers read: “Help yourself to a smile.”

“Smart.”

“That’s Nina.” He scooped up another bite of ice cream. “Brookwell has a lot to offer,” he said. “For the residents and visitors. If we can keep the core community solid, we all benefit from tourism. Despite the inevitable problems.”

Her mind slipped right back to the drug bust and the reports she’d read earlier.

He elbowed her, guiding her to take a left and cross the street toward the park that filled one corner of the town center at the intersection of Central Ave and Bay Street.

“What’s your plan to resolve the sudden rise in crime around here?” he asked, obviously teasing.

“Me personally? Not a single thing.” She took a big bite of her ice cream, then nearly regretted the flash of a brain freeze.

He laughed at her. "I'm here to guard a warehouse and figure out my next move," she managed when she recovered.

"How did that happen?" he queried as they made their way to a bench under the shade of a big sprawling oak tree.

"I made a deal with my attorney to take this job in exchange for them helping me with the unexpected legal problem."

His eyes gleamed with amusement. "So everyone's blackmailing you?"

"Funny." She shook her head, taking a seat beside him. "You're a funny, funny guy today."

A breeze moved through the trees and she suspected they would have rain again tonight. Good thing she kept her rain gear in the trunk.

"We're not supposed to have rain until sometime after midnight."

As if he'd read her mind. "Trust the landscaper to know."

"Hey, I get my information from the same weather app as everyone else."

She waved her spoon in the direction of the shops across the street. "How involved were you in all of this revitalization?"

She'd rather talk about anything but the issues that brought her back home. Some distance was needed. From Key West as well as the strange effort they were making to forge a new friendship.

Although, distance and friendship didn't really match up. She was being ridiculous and overthinking everything. Talking with Nash had always been easy. She should be happy it still was. But being comfortable with him also left her off balance. Tempting as it might be, she couldn't dump her problems in his lap after what amounted to twelve years of silence.

She was pleased to hear about his efforts to keep Brookwell strong. And she laughed with him over the persistence of his parents, and how Roxy patiently convinced those who were skeptical about the whole endeavor.

"She was relentlessly persistent and friendly."

"Your mom can make friends with anyone who's breathing."

"True story," he agreed. "She's gifted and tenacious."

"I'm surprised she hasn't found you a wife." She immediately regretted blurting that out, but Nash didn't seem fazed.

"It's not for lack of trying." He balanced his empty ice cream cup on his leg. "If I recall, your mom was intent on making the perfect match for you."

Jess groaned over the memories. "She saw happy-ever-afters and adorable grandbabies whenever a guy looked at me twice." Which hadn't been that often really. "She means well and I love her. There's a friend of mine in Key West who reminds me of her, always looking for the romance in every sunbeam, but she's far more pragmatic than my mom."

"And not focused solely on you?"

“Also helps.” She licked her spoon, savoring every last taste of the treat. “Thanks for this.”

“You’re welcome.”

Her phone started chiming her alarm, reminding her she had to get moving to be on time for her shift. Standing, she carried their trash to the bin and then walked over to the water fountain, rinsing her hands and lips.

Nash did the same. As he dried his hands on his shorts he asked, “Is there any progress on the whole drug seizure thing?”

“Not that I can discuss. Caldwell has things under control.”

“Right.” He toyed with his sunglasses but didn’t put them on. The trees filtered the sunlight. “And you’ll stay until it’s done?”

“That’s the plan.” After that, she had no idea what would happen. What she might be able to handle. She just didn’t know when she’d start to feel like the cop she’d been before.

“Jess.”

She looked up into his face and felt something shift. It wasn’t new, but somehow the familiarity was as much a part of the appeal as his more mature frame and blazing gaze. She’d barely been an adult the last time she’d kissed him and suddenly she wanted to know if she’d feel the same thrill, or if it had faded. Or if it would be an entirely new experience.

She was captivated by his mouth, by the curiosity surging through her. She leaned closer, close enough to catch the hint

of chocolate on his breath.

Then he turned abruptly, guiding her along with the movement as he stretched out a hand toward someone. She hadn't even heard anyone approach, she'd been so absorbed in Nash. Clearly the man was someone he knew well, and though she couldn't put a name to the face, it would surely be someone who would wonder about the woman trying to kiss him.

"Reed," Nash said. "Great to see you." He glanced down at Jess. "Do you remember Jess Keller?"

"Donna and Clark's girl?" Reed beamed at her and shook her hand. "Of course. Heard you went off to fight crime in Key West."

"I did, yes." She didn't feel the need to elaborate, still racking her brain for where this man fit into her past.

"Your parents must be thrilled you're back."

She nodded. No sense correcting the assumption that she was staying for more than a visit.

"You two should come down to the pub," Reed said. "It's been a while since I've pulled a pint for you, Nash. Kirsten has insisted we start a Tuesday trivia game."

Then it clicked for Jess. Kirsten Davis was Reed's daughter. And he owned the Pelican Pub, a spot the locals favored since it was set away from the more common tourist spots on the island.

“We’ve got live music now on Fridays and Saturdays,” Reed explained to her. “Helps us winnow the entry list for the music festival.”

She’d forgotten all about the annual music festival Brookwell hosted. Historically, the event was all the best parts of a big beach party combined with a pig roast and an incredible, eclectic list of live performers.

“That sounds like a great time, right Jess?”

Jess nodded along. He was all but telling Mr. Davis they were a couple. But protesting would be impolite and she didn’t want *that* getting back to her mother. She had plenty of practice deflecting Donna’s matchmaking efforts where Nash was concerned.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Jess said. “It was great to see you again, Mr. Davis, but I need to get on to work.” She smiled at both men. “Thanks for the ice cream, Nash.”

She hustled off before he could offer to walk her to her car. On the way, she reflected on those days when she’d thought she would end up with Nash. Not for a formal dance, but forever.

They’d been good together. Until she’d blown it, losing her perspective about him due to fear of fallout. She’d known better and still managed to sabotage their relationship.

Telling herself it was for the best hadn’t eased any of the heartache. Because she couldn’t know for sure that they would’ve imploded. The only truth she understood right now

was that the boy she'd been in love with back then was a man she wanted to fall in love with now.

Did she even have the right to want that? After the way she'd treated him, probably not.

He deserved someone who valued his integrity. Who trusted his word without needing proof.

Besides, the timing was all wrong. Maybe she was just allowing all the personal stuff to serve as a great distraction from her professional crisis, but she had to be careful. She still didn't know who she was if she wasn't a cop.

It sure wasn't Nash's job to answer that core question.

She made it to the warehouse with plenty of time to change into her full uniform. Including the gun holster at her waist. For a long moment she stared at the gun. Then Caldwell's voice floated through her head: *Carrying is not negotiable.*

With deliberate, heavy motions, she slid the gun into place and snapped the loop.

If the drug runners tried to recover the product or the boat, she would need to defend herself. The rest of the protection team was counting on her to not only carry, but to use her weapon if necessary.

For them, she could manage this.

But after? Well, that was a bridge she'd cross when she got there.

Chapter 8

Jess's phone had buzzed in her pocket a time or two, but she managed not to pull it out and check the messages until her first break. And she told herself she wasn't disappointed that the messages weren't from Nash. They weren't actually a couple anymore. And he'd known she was working, so why would he message her?

Besides, once she replied to her mother's normal check-in, she spotted a text from Gabby. She texted back to confirm it was okay to call. A few seconds later, her phone was ringing.

"Hey," Jess answered.

"Hey, girl!" Gabby replied "How's life back home?"

Jess wasn't sure how to answer. On the one hand, she wanted to tell her friend everything about Nash and all the weirdness circling that entire situation. But how was she supposed to start that conversation? She couldn't possibly take a chance and discuss it when someone might overhear her.

Especially not Frasier. He'd known her back when she'd been all about living happily ever after with her high school boyfriend. He'd watched her falter at the first sign of doubt and focus on what moved her closer to her career goals.

And now she was back, her career effectively on pause and her heart doing a happy dance whenever she thought of Nash.

"Things are good," Jess finally replied. "My old bedroom feels pretty dang small."

Gabby laughed. "I cannot imagine. Supposedly that's what happens when we turn into adults. Everything we thought was bigger than life is just normal."

"I can confirm the theory." Jess chuckled. Gabby was in her forties and as far as Jess knew she'd never gone back to the house where she'd grown up. Work in Key West had brought them close, and shared experiences along with a strong friendship had narrowed the age gap.

"Tell me your mother didn't turn it into a shrine to your youth," Gabby sounded horrified by the idea.

"No. Mom's too practical when it comes to the house." With her daughter, she was all flights of romantic fancy. "It's a pleasant guest room these days. She does have a couple of shelves devoted to my greatest childhood accomplishments, but it's very tasteful," she joked.

Gabby cackled. "Send pictures. It's not real until I see that."

"Not happening."

“Damn.” Gabby feigned serious disappointment. “Any trouble on the special assignment?”

Jess’s hand touched her gun. “No. It’s all good.”

“Would I believe you if you said that to my face?”

“I’m confident you’d politely accept it as truth,” Jess said. She could picture Gabby shaking her head. “How are things in the Keys? And the Cove?”

“We’re all happy and content here,” Gabby reported. “Things are relatively quiet lately. Haven’t had much more than the usual trouble around the resort.”

“That’s good.” Jess tried not to be jealous. Things were relatively quiet here as well—when it came to the crime rate. Inside, on a personal level, she felt more scattered and unsettled. All thanks to Nash and his efforts to rekindle their friendship.

“Do you miss us yet?”

“Yeah, I actually do,” Jess admitted.

“So come back,” Gabby said. As if it would be that easy. “Want me to find a replacement for you on the warehouse detail?”

“No.”

“Ah.”

Jess didn’t care for all the sympathy and understanding in that one sound. “Gabby. I made a commitment.”

“And you’re nothing if not responsible. We love that about you,” she added. “How are you feeling about police work in general?”

Her hand slid over the rough texture of the nylon holster. “I’m still not convinced it’s the right thing for me anymore.”

“Well, take your time. You have plenty of options,” Gabby reminded her. “Police work isn’t the only career route for a person with your experience.”

Jess almost laughed. She’d gone to college for a criminal justice degree and then straight into the police academy. Being a cop was literally the primary end-goal of her choices.

Regardless, Gabby’s pep-talk lifted her mood. “Thank you,” Jess said. “You always know just what I need to hear.”

“So tell me something I need to hear,” Gabby said. “Do hot hunky guys run around without shirts on your island like they do here in the Keys?”

“In droves,” Jess deadpanned. “You can’t look anywhere without steaming up your eyeballs.”

“No wonder you’re not ready to come back.” Gabby laughed.

They talked for another few minutes and Jess’s heart felt lighter as she caught up on all the recent news of her friends in Key West. “I should get going.” She didn’t want to irritate anyone on the team by being slow to return from her breaks.

“Call me again when you can talk freely about your new boyfriend. Billings, right? He definitely causes a stir, in a shirt

or not.”

“What?” Jess sputtered. Gabby had serious talent when it came to accessing video surveillance and she considered the legalities of tapping into those systems more of a suggestion than a rule, especially when helping friends.

But Jess didn’t need help. And she didn’t need to pass by every security camera wondering if her friend was spying on her. “I don’t even want to know what you think you’re talking about.” Laughing it off, Jess swiftly ended the call.

Turning back to the warehouse, she nearly plowed into Sergeant Burrell. He was monitoring the cameras tonight. According to Frasier, Burrell had joined the island police force three years ago during the mayor’s recent recruiting effort. He’d come from Milwaukee or Chicago. Maybe Detroit. Jess couldn’t recall right now.

“Whoops!” She stepped back. “Pardon me.”

“No worries.” His smile was friendly enough. “Everything okay?”

“Oh yeah.” Jess shoved held up her phone and then tucked it away in a side pocket of her pants. “I was catching up with a friend back—” She nearly said home. But that didn’t feel quite right either. Because of Nash or her parents, or the stroll through the town square? Probably a combination of all those factors and countless more. “Back in Key West.”

Burrell whistled. “Bet all the folks coming and going down there keep law enforcement hopping.”

He was right about that. “I enjoyed being part of a busy precinct. Rarely a dull moment.”

“And you came back here because?”

An innocent question. One she should’ve answered easily. Casually. She was confident that neither the chief nor Lt. Frasier would’ve shared her issues, but she hesitated to open up with Burrell. She didn’t really know him.

Of course, like her, he’d been vetted and cleared. Caldwell took background checks seriously. Yet something about sharing what happened felt a little too close to exposing her weaknesses. “Everyone needs a change of pace,” she finally replied. “I’m sure the island is a complete one-eighty compared to Detroit.”

“Chicago,” he clarified with a tight smile. His gaze roamed for a moment. “This slice of the Atlantic is much more appealing than the shore of Lake Michigan.”

Jess reached back and tightened her ponytail. “Cold weather.” She gave an exaggerated shiver. “That was one thing I knew for sure I didn’t want to deal with when I moved away.”

“Beach girl to the core?” Burrell asked as they walked back toward their designated stations.

“That’s right.” She smiled. There was no point pretending to be someone she wasn’t. “And proud of it.”

It dawned on her that she *was* proud of where she’d grown up. She wasn’t exactly proud of how abruptly she’d left or

how broken things had been between her and Nash at the time, but she did love everything about coastal life. Despite the typical crimes and weather events that went along with life near the ocean.

The awareness settled her, as if her heart had been waiting for her to recognize the obvious and start behaving accordingly. She also, deeply and completely, believed in protecting these towns, big and small, from the people who wanted to use the coastline for criminal purposes.

Near the door she spotted Bobbie Adams, her patrol partner tonight. The other woman was in her mid-twenties and, from what Jess had heard and seen, she was a great young cop.

“We’d better get back out there and make sure nobody tries anything stupid.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more,” Burrell said. “I’ve got your backs.” He exchanged a friendly nod with Adams. “Be safe.”

“Every day,” Jess called back over her shoulder.

Outside, Adams raised her eyebrows and lowered her voice. “You sure caught his eye.”

“Burrell?” Jess must have misheard the younger officer. “What are you talking about?”

Adams grinned and elbowed her lightly. “I think he has a thing for you.”

Jess shook her head. That wasn’t the vibe she’d felt. Not at all. And she didn’t want to get involved in any kind of department rumor or drama. “No way.” She waved it off.

“He’s being friendly, that’s all. We all know what it’s like to be the new kid in town.”

“Except *you* are a Brookwell resident,” Adams pointed out.

“Hardly.” Jess shook her head. “I’ve been gone for more than a decade. Let’s get moving. We need to focus on the work.”

“Be safe.” Adams mimicked Burrell’s deeper voice before turning away to walk her designated route.

Jess ignored the teasing and moved along the prescribed path. She didn’t expect trouble tonight. The weather was clear and the moon glowed brightly overhead. Tonight would prove challenging for anyone attempting to sneak up on them.

That didn’t mean she could relax. Not entirely. If someone was watching in an effort to gather intel on numbers and attentiveness, she wanted to make it clear this warehouse was guarded by professionals. Any attempt to break in and reclaim the drugs or boat would be met with serious, determined resistance.

It was the only way she knew to do her job. The only way she knew to fulfill her commitment to her lawyers, her community, and herself.

Chapter 9

Nash discovered he had to be strategic and creative to make the most of the time he could squeeze in with Jess. It was worth the effort, as they reconnected and established a new friendship one conversation or outing at a time.

He thought about her constantly, especially on days like today when their schedules kept them apart. He could only be thankful it wasn't payroll day. All the crew had on the agenda was this major installation.

He wouldn't see her tonight, which seemed to make it harder to focus on anything else. She was as funny and irreverent as he remembered. And watching her interact with people she'd known as well as the new faces around town only convinced him this was where she belonged.

He just wasn't sure if she recognized it or not.

They had started texting frequently every day, shared a meal whenever he could get the time, and they made it over to the

Pelican for drinks. He'd even convinced her to dance with him. That had been a sweet torture that left him longing for more.

That particular evening changed everything for him. Her smile, the sway of her body against his, the conversation on the drive back to her place... it had all felt right. Simultaneously peaceful and thrilling. Since then he'd been filled with an unshakable certainty that he and Jess were meant for each other. They just needed time to build something real. Something that would last.

Every moment with her was the best. Including their first kiss. He frowned as he dropped azaleas into the holes his crew were digging. Was it a first kiss? Or was it the first kiss of the second round for them?

Hell, the terminology didn't matter.

They'd gone out for ice cream before her shift and wandered down the boardwalk at sunset. She'd been telling him about butterflies and flamingos in Key West. He'd been hard pressed to make sense of it, utterly enamored with her. With the feelings for her that wouldn't stop.

He'd slid his arms around her while the soft twilight drifted around them and given up the fight. Her eyes, wide and aware, dropped to his mouth and he was lost. Found. And finally his lips touched hers. No distractions, no friendly interruptions. And when she'd sighed against him, no doubts at all. Her hands, slipping under his shirt and over his skin like heaven.

The rush of her touch lit a fiery desire that nearly consumed him.

Practically consumed him now just thinking about it.

That kiss had been incredible. All the embraces that followed were even better. Fresh and familiar and incomparable. He was more than halfway in love with her again.

“Hey, boss?”

Nash jerked back to the job at hand. Roy, the youngest guy on his crew, had shown up after school, working every available hour to sock away money for college. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“Design says that azalea should be purple, not white.”

Nash shook his head, realizing the kid was right. “Good catch.”

He carefully pulled up the plant and exchanged it for the right color. This job was a big one, and the project manager had an exacting vision. One Nash knew better than to argue over. He’d promised he could deliver and he would.

And yet, no sooner had he made the switch than his mind went right back to Jess on that boardwalk.

She’d been pliant and warm in his embrace, her soft throaty moans setting him on fire for her. For anything she’d give. Was it normal that he could still feel her tongue dueling with his? Probably not. That probably edged toward obsession. But that wouldn’t become a problem unless he told someone.

He was a mess over Jessica Keller. He suspected it would always be that way. A smart man might be upset about it. Not Nash. He was done pretending that he could live without her. He wouldn't get pushy about it, but he made a decision as he dropped yet another azalea into place. He was going to show her exactly how good life with him could be.

She'd come back to the island for an extended visit. A working visit, as it turned out. But she fit in as if she'd never left. People here still sincerely cared about her. And, in his opinion, this town was good for her. Day by day, she seemed more relaxed, her natural spunk and vibrance shining through.

Although she hadn't shared the details of what brought her back. Considering her profession, he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Except he could still see the trouble in her eyes when things got too quiet. Something haunted her. Whatever it was, he was willing to listen, to let her vent.

He was willing to do anything to prove he was the man for her.

Nash and his crew finished the job, took after-pictures, and he sent the others back to the nursery while he chatted with a satisfied client.

Tonight, he was on his own again, and rather than worry over how Jess was faring, he called his sister. Nina agreed to bring over a pizza so they could review the nursery inventory in anticipation of her upcoming wedding orders and their semi-annual sale.

After a couple of hours of good food, smart work, and sibling bonding, he headed home, praising himself for *not* driving by the warehouse on his way out. Jess could handle herself and she had plenty of other cops around if there was trouble.

A few hours later, an alarm on his phone jerked him awake. It took him a moment to realize it wasn't his normal alarm, but an alert from the security system at the nursery. Tossing back the sheet, he flipped on the bedside lamp. He pulled on pants, socks and running shoes, all the while berating the delayed load time for the camera feed on his security system app.

Finally, the video clip loaded, but it didn't show him much beyond blurry shadows. He hustled down the stairs and shoved his feet into his shoes. The security lights should've come on. Frustrated, he dragged a shirt over his head and snagged the truck keys on his way out the door.

He was in the truck when the monitoring service call came in. Nash verified his identity and confirmed the alarm hadn't been tripped by anyone with authorization to be in the nursery at this hour. What the hell time was it anyway?

“Two-thirty-five, sir.”

He hadn't realized he'd asked the question aloud. “Thanks.”

The rep on the other end of the line asked him to stay away from the area, promising to call back when there was more information. As if. The guy would've had better luck asking him to stop breathing. The nursery was the hub of his business, his family legacy.

Nash would check out the situation himself, and serve as a witness. And he'd definitely press charges if necessary.

Fear painted cold and clammy streaks across his skin. Jess was on duty. Would she respond to this call or was she fending off an attempt to recover the drugs? He forced himself to slow down and breathe. Jess was a good cop. Capable of guarding the warehouse with her team. She didn't need him falling into an anxious tailspin over any situation.

He veered away from the scary thoughts and leaned into the anger. Caldwell would hear about this. The warehouse was no place for a drug seizure of this size. The chief needed to get those drugs off the island.

Mindful that the alarms were silent at the nursery itself, Nash cut the headlights and put his truck into neutral, coasting to a stop half a block away. He had a good view of the front entrance and the path leading around to the side entrance he and his employees used most often. There was no visible police presence yet.

Why not?

Maybe it was something as simple as a possum or an owl. Animals had never set off the alarms before, but that didn't make it impossible.

Moving quietly, he left his truck and walked closer. Hearing muffled voices near the side entrance, he paused, using the hedge at the property line for cover. He wasn't armed. Not trained. Angry or not, he couldn't jump out and confront whoever might be attempting to break in.

His phone vibrated in his hand and he scurried back to his truck to answer the call. “Billings,” he murmured.

“Police are on the scene, sir. We’ll have more information for you shortly.”

“No, they aren’t,” Nash protested, but the call dropped. He swore.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket, debating his options. Smarter to stay put. Except someone had tripped the alarm. And unless those voices belonged to the cops, more than one someone was still nosing around his business.

Jess would be furious if he intervened. He could already imagine her reading him the riot act. But he couldn’t let whoever was over there get away.

He’d give the cops two more minutes. Then he heard someone barking out orders. That commanding tone belonged to Jess.

His business. His girl. He would not hide in the shadows.

Following his instincts, he ran. Staying low, crossing the street and following the shadows of the hedge all the way to the side door.

“Freeze! Police!” A deep voice boomed from behind the sudden glare of a flashlight.

Too late, Nash remembered that there were folks on the security team that weren’t from the island. People who didn’t know locals on sight. He stopped short, raising his hands and

squinting against the bright light. “Nash Billings. I own this business and property.”

“Nash?” The light dropped away from Nash’s face. “Do you have a death wish? Put your arms down. It’s Lieutenant Frasier.”

Nash’s body sagged with relief. “Hey, Will. I tried to wait.”

“Uh-huh.” Frasier snorted. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

Nash refused to apologize for taking action to protect his property. “What’s going on?”

“Two officers are in pursuit,” Frasier said. “Come on inside. You can tell me if anything’s missing.”

Nash shoved through the hedge to join Frasier at the door. “My security lights should be on.” He pointed to the corner of the building. “Dad installed highly sensitive motion detector lights.”

Frasier’s flashlight illuminated the fixture at the corner of the building. “Yeah. I helped your dad make the upgrade.”

“That’s right.” Nash remembered. “After we caught those kids trying to grow mushrooms in the greenhouse.” He would’ve laughed if he wasn’t on a razor’s edge. “As if we wouldn’t notice that sketchy pan of dirt shoved under the back counter.”

“You’d be surprised what people overlook.”

Frasier would know. The lieutenant had decades of police work under his belt. He'd probably heard it all. Nash understood how easy it was to fall into a rut and miss the details. There were days when his body went through the maintenance clients on autopilot, especially at properties they'd serviced for a long time.

Unfortunately for those kids with mushroom ambitions, the Billings family and crew had been alert.

Frasier peered closer at the mounting bracket for the light. "Looks like they cut the wires."

"How'd they manage that without tripping the sensor?"

"Daylight," Frasier deadpanned. "Y'all aren't here all the time."

The lieutenant made a good point. "True."

"We'll take a closer look," Frasier promised. "Easier to sort out in the morning." Frasier cast the light down over the busted lock and nudged open the door. "Gene opens at eight."

With a nod, Nash made a mental note to call the locksmith—in roughly five more hours. Man, he was headed for a long day. The police would probably want to dust for prints or search for evidence between now and then anyway.

Grumbling about the malfunctioning lights, he reached in and flipped the switch. The lights overhead illuminated the space. Rows of tables and storage shelves stretched back from the service counter. The office was dark, as was the

greenhouse. He saw lights sweeping across the area behind the greenhouse. He pointed in that direction. "Your team, I hope?"

Frasier glanced over. "That's right. They'll let us know if they find anything."

"Good." Nash walked up toward the front counter, Frasier trailing after him. "They didn't mess with the till."

The cop walked around and confirmed the front door was secure. "That's some good news."

Nash agreed. Nothing was out of place in the office either. Frasier pointed out a fresh shoe print near the doorway and they left it for the evidence collection. Searching the greenhouse was a different story.

"Over here!" Nash followed a trail of wet footprints, already evaporating, through the plastic strip curtain toward the row of metal cabinets under the work counter that ran along one side of the greenhouse.

"Guess they didn't expect us to be on the scene so fast," Nash said.

"Guess not." Frasier took a couple of pictures of the prints with his cell phone, then gave Nash the go-ahead to open the cabinet closest to the last print. Things were messy, but nothing was missing. "Pull out everything, make sure they didn't hide anything."

"Sure." Better to be useful than idle, but Nash stewed in his temper. "Wasn't Jess out here?"

Frasier nodded. “She and Sergeant Burrell were chasing a suspect.”

“The owner of these boot prints?”

“Likely,” the cop allowed. “I don’t need your opinion, young man,” he cautioned. “They’ll report when they have something.” He studied Nash with the experience of a man who’d raised three sons. “Stand down. She’s fine.”

Nash wanted to fidget or protest. Maybe both. Despite the other man’s confidence, Nash wouldn’t relax until he saw her in one piece.

Frasier’s radio crackled and Jess’s voice flowed out. “Back fence is cut,” she said. “I’m going in.”

Nash smothered a groan. This was getting worse by the second. The nursery backed up onto an undeveloped portion of the island crowded with scrubby trees and undergrowth. No real beach access, just a strip of rough terrain protecting the island from the ocean.

“Is there access between here and there?” Frasier asked, his voice low.

Nash nodded, his blood going cold. “What are you thinking? Why make it obvious at the door if they could get in through the fence?”

“I think the situation is fluid,” Frasier replied. “Let’s take a look.”

Nash led the way, wondering what it meant that there weren’t any visible boot prints along the way. At the sliding

doors that separated the greenhouse from the yard, he swore again. The chain keeping the doors secure had been cut. “Guess that’s why they came in the side door.”

Frasier grunted, stepping in front of him. “You wait right here.”

Nash must’ve made a noise, because the cop turned back and glared at him. “I mean it, Nash. Do not follow me.”

His jaw set, he held up his hands. “Got it.”

Frasier disappeared into the yard. Nash paced, stopping when his movements made it harder to hear what was going on out back. They kept things organized back there: rows and plots of various plants separated by oyster shell paths. Had someone been hiding back there earlier, waiting for Nash and Nina to finish the inventory? The thought lifted the hair at the back of his neck.

He laced his fingers over his nape and tried to keep himself from rushing out there to see what was taking so long.

“Nash!” Frasier shouted. “You got lights out here?”

Nash went over and flipped the switch, then went out to join him. “What happened?”

His heart skipped at the sight of Jess. She looked just fine. No. She looked strong, a woman in her element. Standing there, hip cocked, her hand rested on the butt of her gun. She might not be in an official police uniform, but she had the posture down, exuding badass attitude.

Should he find that sexy?

Should or not, he did. Oh, yes, he did. But he wasn't fool enough to mention it. What he'd thought was love when they were kids paled in comparison to what he felt for her now. Somehow he'd blown right past halfway in love. And this was *not* the time to dwell on that.

Jess looked to Frasier and got the go-ahead nod. "Burrell and I responded when the break-in alarm came in," Jess explained. "We found the door busted. During the search, Burrell spotted the suspect in the yard. He pursued, but we've lost him."

"Where?" Frasier asked.

"Through the trees to the water. Burrell said a boat was waiting."

"That's a hard place to come ashore," Frasier observed.

Just about impossible in Nash's opinion.

"Couldn't agree more." Jess's lips were firm, her jaw set. "Hopefully we'll get useful evidence off the door or fence or cutters."

Nash planted his hands on his hips. "Where is Burrell now?"

"He's updating Caldwell," she replied. She studied him. Licked her lips. "Are you good?"

Aside from his racing heart? Sure. Why did she worry about him when she was the one who'd been out there chasing someone through the dark? He shook it off—they could discuss it later. "What do you think they want with the nursery?" he asked Frasier, his gaze sliding unerringly to Jess.

“Best guess?” Jess shook her head. “Probably an attempt to set up an exchange dead drop location. I found a burner phone and an envelope full of cash near the hole in the fence.”

“What?” Nash couldn’t reconcile that.

“How often do you have customers back here?” Frasier asked. “Employees?”

“We don’t bring customers back here. Even for the sales, we move things out front.” Nash looked around the yard. “Nina and I were here a few hours ago and didn’t see anything out of place.” He held Jess’s gaze. This couldn’t be happening again. Although he didn’t want history to repeat itself, he couldn’t keep the steel out of his voice. “Employees are in and out daily. I’ll vouch for every single one of them.”

Jess lifted her hands in surrender, her gaze earnest. “I’m sure your employees aren’t behind this. But we will have to talk to them. As a formality.”

Frasier nodded. “This feels like a crime of opportunity and proximity.” His gaze raked the trees behind the yard.

Jess pointed toward the damaged security lights. “Take out those motion detectors while everyone’s out. You’d never notice because you’re not here at night. And then anyone could come and go as they please.”

“You’ll catch them,” Nash said with absolute confidence.

She met his gaze. “Believe it.”

The team came to process the scene and Nash saw something pass unspoken between her and Frasier. They had a

theory, but even Nash could see this wasn't the time to ask about it.

Maybe next time they were alone he'd ask what she could share. Then again, he was pretty sure he didn't want to waste a minute of his time with Jess talking about work.

Chapter 10

On her next night off, Jess stared at her reflection, trying to decide just how much to dress up. Nash was taking her back to the Pelican tonight. Nina wanted them to come out and support a new band she'd first heard in Charleston. She'd been all about giving the group a warm welcome for their first live performance in Brookwell.

Maybe it was that simple, Jess thought as she chose a short wrap skirt and a flowy scoop necked top that made her feel pretty.

Jess suspected that Nina was crushing on someone in the band. Her friend had been turning down local dates lately and heading to Charleston as frequently as possible. Not that Jess would say a word to Nash. Especially not when she wanted to enjoy the evening without upsetting either sibling.

"Nina says this group is on the rise," Nash said as he parked the truck.

“Looks like a good crowd,” Jess observed. “Your sister must’ve invited the whole town.”

“Maybe so,” Nash agreed. “She’s determined that they get an invite to the music festival next summer.”

“We’d better go see what the hype is about.”

Jess had no idea where she would be next summer, but she refused to let those questions derail the evening. She respected Nina’s taste in music and the vibe in the Pelican was always relaxed and fun. And after the trouble at the nursery the other night Jess was eagerly seeking a fun distraction.

She and Frasier had met privately with Caldwell the day after the incident. And the lieutenant agreed with her that everything about it screamed inside job. No one believed Nash was involved and she was willing to give his employees the benefit of the doubt. Caldwell and Frasier chose to handle the interviews themselves and Jess was grateful for it. She specifically hadn’t discussed the situation with Nash, mainly because she was sure the culprit was not part of his staff, no matter how the scene had been staged.

Frasier had reminded her that despite the lingering questions, the evening was a personal win because she’d pulled her gun and handled herself. But was it that simple? She wasn’t sure one well-trained response was the sign to return to work. Although it was possible she was getting too attached to Nash and the comfortable pace here in her hometown.

“Hey, you’re thinking too hard again,” Nash murmured in her ear as he opened the pub door. “You okay?”

She squeezed his hand. “Sorry. I’m turning it off, I promise. Do you want to tell me about your day?”

“Not even a little bit.” His lips tilted into a teasing grin and he slid his arm around her waist. They found Nina, sitting in a booth close to the band stage, with a woman Jess didn’t know. “Hey!” Nina popped to her feet. “This is Celeste Hargrave. Celeste, meet Jess Keller. You know my brother, Nash.”

They exchanged hellos and sat down. Nash pressed his thigh close to Jess, as if reminding her she was here to relax rather than get lost in thought.

“Celeste and her sisters just redesigned their family vacation home and opened it as a bed and breakfast.”

“And we hired Nina and Nash to keep us in flowers inside and out,” Celeste explained. “They both do great work.”

The name finally clicked for Jess. She’d heard the sisters had lost their mother to cancer not too long ago. “Hargrave,” she said carefully. “I heard about your loss and I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.” Celeste’s gaze dropped to her hands for a moment and then she seemed to pull herself up. “Grief is a weird thing. We’re just working through it a day at a time.”

“That’s all you can do,” Jess agreed.

“They have their own private beach on that end of the island,” Nash said. “We just finished up a new path for them.”

“It’s beautiful.” Celeste beamed and her pride chased some of the sadness from her eyes. “We intend to make the most of

it.”

“So what are we drinking?” Nash asked as the band came out to warm up.

They gave him their preferences and he went to get drinks. The pub was surely over capacity when the lead singer got things started. The man knew how to work the crowd and he had a voice that could blow the roof off or croon a ballad.

Nina couldn't be the only person crushing on him.

“They're amazing!” Jess exclaimed after the first set.

“I know! I'm really excited for them.” Nina bounced in her seat. “Too bad they don't need a floral contract.”

“I don't know,” Celeste said. “That group might be in the market for regular morning-after bouquet deliveries.”

“There's a business model I hadn't considered.”

The women chuckled and the band started up again with a song perfect for shag dancing. She and Nash couldn't resist, despite the crowd. As they moved in and out with the steps of the dance, grinning like they'd done as kids, Jess spotted trouble brewing near the bar. She caught Nash's gaze and tipped her chin in that direction. Deftly, he adjusted and they moved with the music until they were close to the situation.

One of the things she enjoyed most about her new relationship with Nash was this rediscovered ability to communicate without saying much at all. That connection was special, though she hadn't understood it back then. Maybe

going away allowed her to see it better, to appreciate it more. To appreciate *him* more.

Every time they were together, she felt that rough antsy edge she'd been carrying smooth out. He was good for her, she couldn't deny that.

The packed pub had her watching the room like a cop and unless her instincts were completely warped, two men were about to brawl over a woman. If she could head off a fight or prevent it from rolling through the bar, she would. Having a badge didn't matter to her. She had the skills to make a difference.

In the back of her mind, she recognized this was the same kind of thing that created her legal mess in Georgia. But she just couldn't turn her back and let people get hurt. Not when she could help.

Behind the bar, she saw Reed signaling his bouncers, anticipating the same problem she did. Good. She could count on him to back her up if she did intervene.

The song ended and Nash reeled her in close to his body, then dipped her back with a flourish. In that beat of silence as the applause faded, Jess saw one man, wearing a t-shirt given out by a local fishing charter to celebrate a big catch, drive his fist into his rival's face.

She was in the best position to interfere before things got out of hand. And she did. To his credit, Nash jumped in too. They wedged themselves between the men and roughly pushed them into the arms of the responding bouncers.

But the fisherman slipped an arm free and, in his fury to get loose, he managed to knock Jess off her feet. Annoyed, she was determined to cool things down. Standing, she laughed it off, dusting her hands on her denim skirt.

Nash was at her side in an instant, his temper locked and loaded as he shoved the man back. The bouncers regained control and hauled the men out of the crowd and down the hall. Unless Reed had changed his methods, they'd be held out back for the police to sort things out.

Nash nudged her onto a vacated bar stool. "Reed! Call the police. She'll be pressing charges."

"For what?" Jess demanded. "It was a scuffle. I'm fine."

"Assault." His voice was flat and low. He tipped her head back. "You're bleeding."

Oh crap. She grabbed a couple napkins from the stack on the bar top and pressed them to her forehead. The spot was tender, but head wounds usually looked far worse than they were. "It's fine. I'm fine."

Nash didn't look convinced. "We'll let a doctor decide. Come on."

She felt fine. Not the least bit wobbly, queasy, or faint. Which was good since it took several minutes to convince Nash, Nina, and Celeste that she didn't need a visit to the ER.

"We're calling it a night," Nash declared. He handed his sister some cash. "I'll get her cleaned up." He didn't give Jess

any room to argue. “You were right about the band, they’re great.”

Well, that was the right thing to say. Nina practically glowed. “I’ll pass along your comments to the committee.” She waved at Jess and then returned her attention to the stage.

Jess chuckled as Nash led her out to his truck. “You can relax. This doesn’t require any treatment. I’ll clean it up when I get home.”

“Why wait? I keep first aid in the truck,” he said. “In my line of work, we never know when we’re going to get a spider bite or cut off a thumb.”

“That isn’t funny.”

He shrugged and gave her a lopsided smile. “Every job has its hazards.”

“Okay. You have a point.”

Again, with that disarming smile. “I also have two thumbs.” He unlocked his truck and boosted her up into the seat. “And you might have a concussion.”

“I do not.”

He snorted and kept his eyes on his work while he cleaned the cut over her eye. “Not too deep.” The antiseptic solution stung just a little, fading when he smeared an ointment over the wound. He pulled the skin close as he put the bandage on. “All done.”

She flipped down the visor and opened the mirror to take a look. “Nicely done,” she praised him. “The dinosaurs aren’t exactly my go-to wound cover.”

“You can pull it off,” he assured her. “Feel like a walk on the beach before we go home?”

“Sounds perfect.” Leaning forward, she brushed her lips across his. “Thank you, Dr. Billings.”

He moved closer and kissed her again, taking it deeper. She got lost in the moment, the man, until someone walking by told him to get a room.

“We could do that.” His eyebrows bobbed up and down. “I know a place.”

She wanted to give in to her desire for him, but so far, she’d managed to hold back. She couldn’t explain the decision. Maybe it was fear of leading him on. Maybe it was a simple case of nerves. She’d changed, inside and out, since they’d been in high school. But why? Her passion for him was still there, burning like a sparkler that never faded or fizzled out. She wanted him. Clearly, it was mutual. And yet...

“Beach first,” she said. “A walk sounds like a great idea.”

“Well, whenever you’re ready, my room’s always open to you.”

He tucked her legs into the cab and closed the door before she could figure out how to respond. It wasn’t fair to lead him on and he was definitely safe enough that she could confide in him.

She spent nearly all her free time with Nash. A significant portion of that time had involved hot kisses, tantalizing touches, and a longing for much more. Was it fair to jump into bed with him? She didn't want anyone else. But no matter how incredible she knew it would be, she couldn't convince herself it was the right move. She might not be here after the current assignment wrapped up.

And she wasn't sure if she could handle walking away from him again if they took that leap. Wasn't sure she could think clearly or objectively about anything other than him if she gave in to her physical desire. And that was too much pressure to put on whatever they were doing right now.

"You're awfully quiet," he said when they parked a few minutes later.

Through the windshield, the ocean stretched out. Dark water blending into a darker sky. Stars winked overhead and white foam glowed in the low light, marking the rollers washing onto shore. The wind and water offered a low, soothing rumble for her racing thoughts.

"I know." She should apologize or say something, but so many thoughts were twisting and tangling in her mind. "Let's walk."

She left her shoes in the truck and padded across the path through the dunes. Under her feet, the sand was cooler, just a hint of warmth lingering from the sunny day. "I've missed this," she said, mostly to herself.

They walked toward the tide line, side by side, but not touching. “Key West doesn’t have this kind of quiet,” she said. “At least not often. There’s always a hum of energy just waiting to break loose and get crazy.”

“You know you can talk to me,” Nash said.

She stopped, her gaze drifting out over the waves. “I know.” Maybe that’s what she needed more than a bout of hot, intense sex. Except she’d talked to people and was still stuck.

“Look, Jess.” He stroked his fingers over her arm, shoulder to wrist. “It’s been a minute since we’ve seen each other.”

His touch left a tingling warmth under her skin. Distracting. Delicious.

“As much as it surprised me at first, I still care about you. A great deal.”

“That sounds like a backhanded compliment,” she teased.

“Just a fact. I didn’t expect all the things you make me feel,” he confessed. “We didn’t part on good terms, but being with you now has shown me all the good stuff between us. We were friends, Jess. And I’m not some pathetic loner pining for the one who got away. I didn’t collapse or withdraw when you left.”

She wasn’t sure about the point he was trying to make, but she laughed. Nash would never be a loner. He drew people to him and he reveled in those friendships whether they were close ties or acquaintances.

“I have other friends,” he continued. “I’m sure you can say the same thing. But for me, no one else is you. You used to tell me everything. You would just blurt out whatever crossed your mind.”

“You’re not wrong.” Something about Nash had always made her feel safe. She’d happily told him more than she’d ever told anyone else, even her parents. Inexplicable, but true. And definitely a gift. “You want to know why I’m back.”

She started walking again, her toes squishing in the wet sand. Could she tell him? Did she want to burden him with that?

“I think you want to tell me,” he countered, matching her pace.

“Some things don’t improve with conversation.”

“I think that only applies to the things that aren’t weighing on your shoulders.” His hand curled around hers. “It’s obvious—to me—that you need to dump something.”

Resisting, wanting to protect him, she pulled away. “You never would have pushed when we were kids.”

“Was there anything that happened when we were kids that made you feel the way you feel now?”

His gentleness was annoying. She crossed her arms. “You don’t even know how I feel.”

“Do you?”

She turned away from all his inherent kindness, wishing she could sink into the water and float away. His logic battered against her resistance. Feelings had never been her strong suit. They could feel too messy or sticky. Too volatile. As a cop, her detachment helped her do the job. She had compassion and exercised it effectively to manage a crisis without getting bogged down in the emotions. Until her last day on duty.

“I feel lost,” she heard herself confess. “Ever since...” She couldn’t just blurt out that she shot her friend’s cousin. “I feel caught. Outside myself. Everything I wanted is sort of fogged over and I’m not sure why.”

“What happened?” he asked. “Jess, please. The truth can’t be worse than sitting here wondering what put that haunted look in your eyes.”

It was the way he said it that broke the barrier. Telling him was better than making an issue of the whole thing. It wasn’t classified information and she didn’t have to give him all the gory details. “I answered a call, with plenty of backup. A woman was being threatened with deadly force. Before we could get control of the situation, the suspect tried to shoot. I shot and killed him.”

“You saved her life.”

She nodded. “I had the best angle.” She trembled, the coldness in her heart seeping through her entire body. She moved up the beach and sat down hard in the dry sand.

He joined her. “They call it justified, right? When you use deadly force the right way.”

She nodded, swiping a tear from her cheek. “Yes. I was cleared of any wrongdoing. Everyone on the scene, even the intended victim, agreed the man wanted to be shot.”

“I believe you,” he said. “But how does anyone know that?”

“Call it cop instinct. He had an option to cooperate and then he made a deliberate move of aggression. If I hadn’t fired my gun, he would have killed an innocent woman.”

“And yet you’re still struggling.”

“I am.” She peeked up at him and realized he wasn’t quaking under the weight of her admission. She leaned back on her elbows and tipped her face to the night sky. “There are protocols for these events. More now than ever. Psych evals and mandatory counseling. Weapons refresher courses and qualifications. Desk duty through it all.” She sighed. “I was cleared to return to duty and I thought it was great. I put on my uniform and felt better. But the gun... I did fine on a controlled range. But just walking into the station with the weapon in the holster... I couldn’t make myself do it.”

This was too much. She should stop now. She shouldn’t inundate him with the minutiae.

“You’re carrying a gun now.”

“I am. I tried to avoid it, but Caldwell insisted the gun went with the task. And he’s right. I even pulled it the other night at the nursery.”

“For me?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe I was rushing myself after all.”

He hummed, his knee touching hers. “Who did you shoot?”

A sob caught in her throat. “My friend’s cousin.” *There.* She’d said it out loud. To Nash. Tears blurred her view of the clear night. “He hated her. She’s one of the best people in the world and he hated her.”

“You saved her.”

She nodded, words beyond her for the moment.

He pulled her into his arms and let her cry it out.

When she subsided, he waited, letting the ocean’s lullaby soothe her.

“Do you still want to be a cop?”

“I really don’t know,” she admitted. The words felt terrible but she had never been able to lie to Nash. “I guess that’s the problem. Who am I without that?”

“One of the finest people I know,” he said. Here, she believed it. Believed him. And though she knew her eyes were puffy and her throat was sore, she felt like herself. Her best self. Light and free. As if happiness could be real for her again.

Resting her head on his shoulder, hope rippled through her. She could find her footing, be strong and proactive about her future, wherever it might lead. All because Nash listened.

“Thank you, Nash.”

He snuggled her close, pressed a kiss to her hair. “You’re welcome.”

Chapter 11

The next morning, the bandage over her eyebrow came off in the shower. Jess smiled as she threw it away and carefully blotted the area around the small wound. It probably wouldn't even bruise, but her heart felt soft, thinking of Nash's careful touch.

Dressed in cut-off shorts and a tank top for her day off, she resisted the urge to call it a beach day and dug into some chores around the house. The beach would be there when she was done. Maybe she'd bike down to the nursery and say hello to Mr. Billings. She hadn't talked to Nash's parents in ages.

She probably owed them an apology too, though they'd never expressed any anger toward her about her foolish doubts about their son. How hard could it be?

Her cell phone chimed and she checked the text message. Gamble and Swann wanted to video conference with her as soon as possible.

Great. That couldn't possibly be good news. If things were going well, wouldn't they just call? Speculating about it wouldn't give her any answers, so she reviewed the time slots. She was about to make her choice when she hesitated.

This wasn't a conversation she wanted to have at home where her mom could overhear and misinterpret something. Donna was no snoop, but she wasn't an idiot either. Jess had been doing her best to fend off her mother's natural concerns about why she'd come home and why she'd immediately joined the protection detail at the warehouse.

Although Donna was an expert listener, known for her compassion, Jess couldn't justify dumping out all the things going on in her head. Police work hadn't been her mother's favorite career path for her only child. If Jess admitted all her qualms about carrying a weapon, she'd have to share the catalyst as well.

Bad enough she'd dumped her emotional baggage on Nash. She wasn't doing that to her mom.

Yes, sharing the burden was a healthy decision. She'd learned that through several talks with the KWPD psychiatrist before and after the shooting. Jess couldn't point to a specific moment during her mandatory time off when things had shifted. She'd only been able to articulate that something deep inside kept blocking her and derailing her plan to return to the KWPD.

Unfortunately, being home hadn't brought the results and improvements she'd hoped for. Although she might blame it

on carrying a weapon for the protection detail, she was self-aware enough to understand it was more about this persistent resistance and hesitation inside herself.

The inability to share all of this with her parents was more than a little unnerving. Dating Nash and dodging the normal questions from both of their families had been a helpful distraction. Not to mention loads of fun. Her time with Nash felt more significant than a simple, fun distraction but she wasn't ready to cope with that change either.

She looked over the meeting times once more. No way she was taking this meeting in her closet. Dialing Nash's cell, she hoped he'd hear the call over whatever equipment he was working with today.

Lucky for her, he picked up immediately.

"Hey, beautiful. What's up?"

Her heart fluttered in her chest, though his endearment couldn't possibly be taken seriously.

"Hey. I need a favor. My lawyers want to set up a meeting with me for tomorrow."

He chuckled. "And you don't want to take it in your closet?"

"That's right. Could I borrow your office at the nursery?" She named two of the times that suited her best. "Would either of those times be okay? I don't want to interfere with your schedule."

"I don't consider you an interference. Ever."

His quietly serious tone sent a shiver of awareness through her system. One she wasn't ready to examine too closely. She wasn't sure how to respond.

“You really should come out of your closet,” he said before the silence turned awkward. “Especially with your lawyers.”

She caught herself smiling. He'd never let her live that down. “Nash, come on.”

“Either time works for me,” he said. “Once you decide, send me a text and I'll make sure you won't be disturbed.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Anything to aid and abet my favorite criminal,” he joked.

“You're the worst.”

“Uh-huh. I know you like it.” He made a big smooching kissy sound and then ended the call.

Using the form provided in the message, she selected the earliest option for tomorrow morning. At least she wouldn't be coming right off a shift. It was a safe bet that Gamble and Swann knew her schedule. Which made her wonder why they didn't just meet with her today.

Well, they were a big firm. Had to be a lot to juggle the legal side with the private security side of their business interests.

Her phone chimed, confirming the time. Now all she had to do was find something else to focus on until tomorrow.

She pattered around town, stopping in to chat with Nina while she prepped flower arrangements headed for the

Hargrave House. Walking through the marina, just listening to the boats and people helped melt away the last nerves about the upcoming meeting. When Chief Caldwell called, asking her to come by the station for a quick schedule adjustment, she headed that way, stopping first at the Bread Basket bakery to get him a slice of lemon pie.

He was thrilled with the pie and the conversation was as quick as he promised. He wanted her to know that things were heating up and an all-hands meeting was coming soon. He didn't say it, but she guessed that the upper echelon of the state law enforcement agencies were mulling over plans to wrap up this operation. Probably because Caldwell was pressing them to get the drugs off his island.

That evening, she had dinner with her parents and afterward, slipped out to Nash's place to watch a movie. The ease of the day was lovely and the conversations enough to keep her mind off the potential pitfalls of her appointment in the morning.

Of course, she didn't sleep too well, but when it was time, she pulled her hair back in a ponytail, dressed in jeans and a polo shirt and headed over to the Billings nursery with her laptop.

Just as he promised, Nash was the only person there. He helped her get settled, connected to the internet, and checked her camera. Then he poured her a cup of coffee, kissed her cheek, and walked out.

If she hadn't already been crushing on him again, this morning would've done the trick. The man ran a significant

business venture. Yet he behaved as if anything she needed trumped all his responsibilities. He could also dance, make her laugh, and listen when she needed him.

Would they have stayed together if she hadn't panicked? Would it have worked out or had the years apart and individual growth made them stronger?

Strong enough for something permanent?

She jerked her mind away from that dangerous thought and took a sip of her coffee. Right on time, her lawyers opened the video conference. Taking a deep breath, she clicked the button to join in.

On screen, both men were smiling, so she figured the news couldn't be bad. The knot of dread between her shoulder blades relaxed.

“Good morning, Jess!” Swann began. “The charges have been dropped. We wanted to get that out of the way first thing.”

“That's amazing, thank you.”

“And yes,” Gamble chimed in, “we could've sent that in the text message, but we really wanted to have this discussion in person.”

“Okay.” The knot started tightening again. “Any details I need to be aware of?” Like possibly being banned from returning to that specific Georgia county. Stranger things happened during legal negotiations.

“No,” Gamble said. “It was pretty straightforward. We made sure all parties understood that you intervened as a concerned citizen when tempers flared. Your record and experience as a police officer helped. And your statement was supported by the couple’s reputation for previous calls about domestic violence.”

She was concerned about the wife’s safety, but she wouldn’t repeat her mistake by asking more questions.

“Thank you again.” She’d expected the situation to fade away, but without these two lawyers it could’ve dragged on for months. Now she was free—once things wrapped up at the warehouse—to go on with the rest of her life.

Not a daunting prospect at all.

Her sarcastic thoughts aside, she would need to buckle down and make some tough decisions. If she didn’t go back to police work, she needed to find something else.

“We do have one more item on our agenda,” Swann said, drawing her attention. “We appreciate you supporting the local law enforcement in Brookwell.”

“It was a barter that served me more than you, I’m afraid,” she replied, carefully muting the wariness she felt.

“Chief Caldwell keeps us updated on the case,” Gamble said.

She wondered if they knew more than the folks here on the ground. The possibility didn’t trouble her. This group was that good.

“Everyone is pleased with your contribution to the situation,” Swann added. “The chief sings your praises and has mentioned he’d like you to join the island police department.”

No. Her initial, gut response was so fast she worried she’d said it aloud. Gabby claimed Jess had options, but she wasn’t so sure. If she had to go back to police work, she’d find a way to cope with carrying a sidearm. She’d managed it so far.

“I’m glad he’s pleased,” Jess said. Also glad this was a video call since her palms were suddenly sweating.

Gamble smiled. “You might’ve heard that, as an agency, we’ve been branching out and exploring new options. We’ve offered training to empower new protection agencies and investigators. One of our first groups to complete the program is located a few hours from you, in Haleswood, South Carolina.”

“Haleswood isn’t much bigger than Brookwell Island,” Jess said without thinking.

“So we’ve heard, but they’re central and officials in the area demonstrated a need for extra support.”

Jess understood the logic. Brookwell was a great community, but no one would accuse the town of easy access. Were they wanting her to move upstate? She discovered she didn’t necessarily want that either. Weird or not, the island was feeling more like home. Even if she wasn’t sure about job options.

“We’d like you to consider another option,” Swann said. “We’ve identified another opportunity for our agency model and we’d like you to help us test things out. We’d like you to be our first regional coordinator.”

Jess wondered if this was the kind of option Gabby had been referencing when they’d last talked. “What would that entail?” she asked.

“We need someone to manage security queries, monitor available personnel and resources, and make assignments,” Gamble explained. “You wouldn’t be doing much of the field work, but you would be making sure that the right people, from our stable of qualified protectors and investigators, were posted to the right places, either supporting law enforcement or taking on specific investigations.”

Swann picked up the thread. “We’d basically assign you a territory,” he paused, “maybe North and South Carolina to start, and you’d be the primary contact. We’d rely on your knowledge of the area as well.” His lips compressed into a resigned frown. “We learned early on that our protectors were far more effective when they had a comprehensive awareness of the area they were working.”

“I—” She closed her mouth before she could start babbling.

Knowing the Guardian Agency, this role would be far more interesting than a typical desk job. Plus, she’d be on the leading edge of an exciting new endeavor with an industry-leading company. For the first time since she’d left the KWPD, Jess felt a spark of her old self.

She gave a tight nod. “If what you’re describing lines up with the image in my head, I think you’re right about this being a good fit,” she said. “Tell me more, please.”

She listened as Gamble and Swann continued their pitch, entertained her questions, and assured her she could work from any location within the region they outlined for her. They assured her she would have training, continuing education, and all the office space and equipment and staff she might need.

She smothered a laugh when an image of her working out of her bedroom closet popped into her mind.

“We know you’re well-acquainted with Chief Caldwell,” Swann said.

“That’s right. He was a big inspiration on my career path.”

Swann grinned. “One of our new protectors served with Caldwell’s son, Devon. We’re told he’s looking for a new venture, something closer to home since Mrs. Caldwell is making noise about the chief retiring in the next year or so.”

“I’ve heard those rumors,” Jess confirmed. “There’s nothing quite like the mother news network here on the island. And, growing up, I was acquainted with the Caldwell brothers. They’re good people.”

Swann and Gamble exchanged a glance. “Then we’ll reach out and see if he’s interested in joining our team.”

Jess nodded along. Hiring was above her paygrade.

“There’s another rumor that you’re on the short list to replace Caldwell,” Gamble stated.

Once more, Jess couldn't help wondering *how* they got their intel. "Huh. Guess there's a first time for everything," she mused.

"As in a female police chief?" Gamble wondered.

"No." She shook her head. "As in rumors that haven't made it around to me," she clarified. "The chief of police isn't a role that interests me," she replied. "If we come to terms on the regional director position, I'll stick with it."

Swann gave her a nod. "Thanks for clarifying." He leaned back in his chair, clearly considering something else. "The two of us have tossed around the idea of creating a new remote research team. We might consider the oldest Caldwell brother for that, based on his skill set."

Gamble spoke up, "Whoever forms that team, in Brookwell or elsewhere, wouldn't officially be part of your staff. Just a valuable resource. Looking ahead, if that team is local to you, it might be easiest to combine office space, unless you'd rather work from home. That would be your decision."

Jess had no issue with anyone in the Caldwell clan. "All right." She cleared her throat, a little uncomfortable with her next admission, "Right this minute, an office would be preferable to working out of my childhood bedroom."

The men laughed, not unkindly. "You weren't expecting to stay in your hometown, were you?"

"Not even a little bit." No reason to deny it. Her mind went to Nash and all the good things happening between them. "The

entire experience has gone better than I'd hoped."

"We'll let you think it over," Gamble said. "If you have more questions, just call or text."

"And look for an offer letter coming by email," Swann added.

When the call ended, Jess sat there, trying to make sense of the feelings swirling around. Relief, curiosity, hope. And on top of all of that, she was happy. Happier than she'd been in a long time. She did a few silly spins in Nash's chair.

She hadn't seen the offer letter yet, but she knew from her friends at the Ellington that Gamble and Swann believed in rewarding their personnel. She was sure they could come to terms. It was pretty much a guarantee that any private sector salary would be more than she made as a police officer.

She could work anywhere in the area. Anywhere. She could move to Charleston and stay close, or up to Asheville. She'd never lived in the mountains, but four seasons could be nice. And a white Christmas? Practically a given.

She closed her laptop and ran her fingers over the smooth surface. She could stay right here.

She couldn't wait to tell Nash about her legal drama being over. He'd be thrilled for her.

Would he be equally thrilled if she told him she planned to stay in town? Doing that meant more time for dancing, quiet talks, and kisses that made her melt. More time to figure out where this unexpected relationship was going.

Was it a relationship?

It was entirely possible things were good between them because he didn't consider it to be a long-term deal. Did she?

Crap. Her mood plummeted, then rebounded almost as quickly. That was a problem for future-Jess. Better to focus on today—especially on the wins, while she mulled over the offer.

Her mother might be disappointed, but this was why Jess didn't talk about every feeling as it happened. Emotions were unpredictable, a never-ending roller coaster. And since the shooting, she had to work doubly hard to trust herself.

Whether or not she and Nash were temporary, he was the person she wanted to celebrate with. He was her closest friend, even if half the time she was thinking about sleeping with him.

She called his number before that roller coaster took another dip and she chickened out.

Chapter 12

Nash loaded the mower onto the trailer and climbed into the truck. He started the engine, cranking the air conditioning for his guys while they handled the final details of the current job. Today's schedule was all residential maintenance and after this, they only had two stops left. At this pace, they'd get to call it a day early.

His mind immediately went to Jess. She was off today. Maybe they could take another walk on the beach, or head over to the Pelican. Or stay in. He could get behind the idea of staying in and having Jess all to himself.

With the car door open, he perched on the edge of the driver's seat and checked his phone, smiling to see a message from Jess. "Great minds think alike," he mused as he cued up the message.

Her voice was a pop of joyful excitement as she explained the charges against her had been dropped. "The case is over, dismissed." She laughed. "No more worry that you're dating a criminal."

Dating. Was that what they were doing? He didn't mind the definition. He figured that's what their mothers would call it.

"Anyway," her message continued, "I just wanted to invite you out. Give me a call if you have time to help me celebrate tonight." The message ended.

Hell yes, he did. He'd always have time for Jess.

Checking on his crew, he replayed the message, just enjoying the happy sound of her voice.

To Nash it felt less like dating and more like he was staking a claim, giving her a glimpse of what life could be like if she came home to stay. Every time he thought about her moving back to Brookwell, he felt a sweet ache in his chest. Having her around every day would be incredible. He wanted that outcome so badly, he had to pull back for fear of pressuring her.

Because what mattered most to him was her happiness. That gleam of confidence in her eyes was back and getting stronger day by day.

That was the Jess he knew. The girl he remembered and the woman he wanted in his life more than any other.

He wasn't sure what this news meant for her future in Brookwell, but that was a hurdle for another day. Tonight, he'd focus on the positive and they would celebrate.

As the crew guzzled water and loaded up, jostling for the space in front of the vents blowing cold air, he sent Jess a text back.

Celebration at my place around seven, if that works. I'll cook.

Her immediate reply was exactly what he expected.

You don't have to do that. I'll take you out.

Hoping to change her mind since he wanted to stay in, he offered a compromise.

How about you bring champagne and I'll take care of the rest?

You're sure?

He'd never been so sure of anything.

Count on it. See you at seven.

He pocketed his phone and settled behind the wheel, eager to get through the last two jobs in record time. He had a party for two to plan.

After stopping for flowers at Nina's, he buzzed through the grocery store for the items he needed for dinner. At home, he whipped up the marinade for the flank steak and set it in the fridge and then hit the shower.

She'd said they were celebrating, so he opted for khaki shorts and a blue cotton button-up shirt with a subtle surfer pattern on it. She seemed to like him in blue.

Once he was dressed, he looked at the bed. Then the clock. He didn't want to assume that she'd stay over, but he had time to change the sheets. Just in case.

With the bedroom set and the flowers on the table, he got to work on the appetizer. He finished the platter of fried green tomatoes just as the doorbell rang. Nash gave himself points for good timing as he walked to the door.

But opening it and seeing her, food was the last thing on his mind. She wore a dress that seemed to float around her, the evening sunlight glowing through the fabric. He hadn't expected this. Not at all. Not the dress or the resulting surge of desire. He took it all in, as fast as he could. Her smile was brilliant, her hair loose and cascading in sexy waves around her face, spilling over her shoulders.

"Hey." She offered the bottle of champagne.

His mind was locked on the idea of untying those thin straps at her shoulders and getting his hands underneath that flowy skirt. "Hey." He took the bottle as she stepped inside. "You look amazing."

"Same goes." Her eyes sparkled. "Something smells good."

Closing the door, he caught her around the waist and drew her up against him. "That would be you." He breathed in her tantalizing scent and then lowered his lips to hers for a deep kiss.

"Wow," she whispered, winding one arm around his neck. "That's a welcome a girl could get used to."

He'd gladly make it a daily ritual if she'd let him. Telling himself to play it cool, he said, "Same goes."

Her fast grin set his heart racing. He lifted her hair, checking the wound above her eyebrow. “All good?”

“Like it never happened.” She patted his chest. “Must’ve been your first aid magic.”

He grunted. “Congratulations are in order?” He nuzzled her neck, not quite ready to let her go. For the evening. Or ever. He released her, knowing better than to cling too much, too soon.

“Yes!” She bounced a little on her toes. “My lawyers got those bogus charges in Georgia dropped.” She swiped her palms together. “All done. Apparently, the abusive husband came to his senses.” She sighed softly. “Or, more likely, someone convinced him he couldn’t blame his wife’s frequent injuries on accidents.”

“Maybe she was willing to open up about his abuse in front of a judge,” he suggested.

Her smile returned. “For her sake, let’s hope that’s exactly it.”

“Come on.” He led her back to the kitchen. “I have a surprise for you.” He presented her with the platter of fried green tomatoes.

“Nash!” Her delight thrilled him. “You didn’t!”

“I did.” He felt like a superhero. “Go on, help yourself. Do you want to start with champagne?”

She pressed a hand to her stomach. “Water first. Please.”

“Sure thing.” He filled a glass and added a slice of lemon. While she nibbled on the appetizer, he turned on the oven and prepared the cast iron skillet to sear the steak and veggies.

He caught a whiff of the sunshine in her hair as walked over and peeked at the pan. “Supervising, Jess?”

“Flattered mostly. If that’s your famous flank steak”

“I don’t know how famous it is, but yeah, that’s what’s for dinner.”

He was caught then, mesmerized by her smile, as soft and warm as a summer sunrise. One second things were easy and the next—now—every beat of his heart felt more significant than the last. He wanted to tell her, but this couldn’t be the right time. Somehow, he kept all those ricocheting emotions out of his voice. “Don’t tell me you became a vegetarian somewhere between your phone call and now.”

“Hmm?” Her distraction gave him a respite, renewing his curiosity about that call. “Oh. Of course not.” She wrinkled her nose. “Although I might be able to live on these.” She nipped another fried green tomato from the tray. “Nina can’t stand that you’re so good in the kitchen. She thinks you’re better than she is.”

His sister trumped him at a lot of other things. Like remembering romantic touches like the flowers. Had it been that simple gesture that softened things between him and Jess? There were moments when it felt that way. “We all have our talents.”

“Very true.” Jess’s throaty chuckle left him prickly with the need to touch her.

Once he had everything in the oven, he turned to her. “Does the case getting dropped affect your work with Caldwell?”

“Not really. I’ll stay on as part of the special assignment until we’re done. After that near miss the other night, I’m sure the leadership is trying to figure out how to draw out the bigger fish.”

He studied her. “You’d rather draw out the contact on the island.”

“That too,” she admitted, her gaze dropping to her water glass. “Best if we can do both.”

And then what? She’d waltz away? He didn’t like the idea of her leaving again. Of her going back to her police department in Key West. None of that lined up with the hope beating in his chest. Every hour he had with her, he wanted more.

“You don’t look happy.” She walked over, but she didn’t touch him.

He needed the contact, the simple assurance that she was still here. He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. As long as she was here, he had a chance to keep her here, with him, for good. “Just my thinking face,” he fibbed with a careless shrug. He placed his next kiss on her mouth, keeping it light. For now. “I’m happy the charges were dropped. That’s a huge relief for you.”

“It is. Without that hanging over my head, all of the career options are open again.” Her brow furrowed into a pensive frown.

“That’s a good thing.”

“Right.” Her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

He should be happy. Elated. This was what she wanted. What she’d worked for since they were in school. Was one of her options here, with the Brookwell police? The question burned in the back of his throat. He couldn’t bring himself to ask. Not yet.

Shameful as it was to admit, he wasn’t sure he could deal with the risks she took on the job. His mind lurched back to the night of the nursery break-in. He was selfish, and yes, overprotective, to want her out of harm’s way. Knowing she was well-trained and fully capable didn’t seem to ease the pressure in his chest when she dressed for work, that gun he knew she didn’t want to carry strapped on her hip.

If something happened... Well, here if something happened, he’d be close enough to hear about it. To help. To support her through anything. If she headed back to the Keys, he’d be lost.

“Nash?”

He tipped up her chin and kissed her again. “I’m gonna give you a bold and blatant pitch for staying here.” His hands drifted to her hips and he pulled her in close.

Now her eyes sparkled with heat, her hands running along his forearms. “I’m listening.”

He loved to watch her touch him, to feel her hands on his skin. Her strength was balanced with a graceful beauty, a softness she only seemed to reveal when he got close enough. Would she let him stay close enough?

“Imagine,” he began, “after a tough day writing tickets to jaywalkers and speeding tourists on Central, you and I meet here over a plate of fried green tomatoes and watch the sunset from the hammock.”

“Hmm.” Her hands squeezed his biceps, stroked up to wind around his neck. “You paint quite a picture.”

“It’s only as good as the woman in it.”

“Are you asking me to stay?”

Tonight. Always. He forced himself to relax his grip. “I’m asking you to think about it. Surely, you’ve noticed the perks.” At her lifted eyebrow he chuckled. “Beyond the obvious.” He nipped at her lip. Breathed through the near-giddy rush of potential.

It was almost too much, thinking about her here, sharing a life with him day by day. A life that was everything he’d dreamed of, with the only woman he’d wanted this way. She could be here, with him, every day. He could fix her dinner, they could walk on the beach or dance down at the Pelican whenever it suited them.

“Your career is important, Jess.” To her and to him. Because it was a vital piece of her. “Only you can decide what’s best for you.”

His heart protested. Yes, he was holding back. Just a little. Enough to protect himself. It took all his willpower not to make a case that *he* was best for her, that being together was the best plan. For both of them. Though her lips curved, he felt the immediate distance.

She stepped out of his embrace and he knew he'd said the wrong thing. Had he gone too far or not said enough? Begging her for what he wanted most wouldn't serve either of them. She'd feel trapped—or worse obligated—and he'd just feel like a manipulator.

“What are you thinking?” His arms felt empty. It was a sensation he feared would become familiar.

She retrieved her water and took a long drink. “Those decisions feel easy one minute and a heartbeat later, I'm stressing about calling Key West and telling them I'm not coming back.”

“You miss your friends.”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “Logically, I know they'll visit. One of them will be working in Charleston soon. But it's more. It's the responsibility. The commitment I made.” She sighed, her eyes swimming when she looked up at him. “I liked my job.”

“Until you didn't.”

Groaning, she covered her face with her hands. “True. And I still dread telling my partner and the department that I'm out. I'm done.”

He had to fight the urge to celebrate. “Are you really?”

“I liked my job, but I can’t go back there.” She swallowed. “Can’t work as a cop without a weapon. I don’t want to carry anymore. That means the end of the job.”

“You have options.” He pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. “People grow and change. We’re proof right here, just the two of us. But that’s a universal truth.”

“What are you saying?”

“Key West was good for you.” She’d left him here, but found herself there. “Until things changed. You have options,” he repeated.

“You’re not the first person to tell me that.” Her fingertips dragged up and down through the condensation on the glass.

“Do tell?”

“My friend Gabby said the same thing last time we talked.” When she lifted her face, the lost expression in her eyes was like a sucker punch, stealing his breath. “I guess I should start exploring those options.”

“Sure.” His chest was tight. *Please let those options be close to the island.*

He should be wary of needing her this much. He definitely couldn’t reveal how clingy he felt when she was around. But having her back in his life was the best thing ever. She reminded him to laugh. To open up. And he did the same for her.

There was a lightness between them, an ease he only felt when she was close. And he suspected the same was true for her, though she probably wouldn't articulate it the same way.

"You don't need to rush any decisions," he managed. Jess rushing off was a recipe for disaster in his mind. He needed to come up with a plan that might inspire her to want to stay on the island. But tonight wasn't about him.

"I guess not."

But clearly, the uncertainty of her next step bothered her. "Right now?" He waited until she met his gaze and gave her his best smile. "We need a good meal so we can eventually raise a glass to celebrate your freedom!"

"Yes!" she agreed. "How can I help?"

"Sit back and relax," he directed. "I've got this."

Naturally, sitting back wasn't her style. While he finished putting the meal together, she set the table on the screened porch, complete with the flowers and candles, where they could eat and enjoy the island at night.

Instead of a more traditional dessert, Nash popped the champagne and served it with chilled strawberries as they snuggled on the glider.

When she turned to him, he welcomed her kiss, savored the feel of her hand sliding under his shirt. "Can you stay?"

Although they were adults and technically didn't need to answer to anyone, he knew she wouldn't want to worry her parents.

Her body tensed and he saw the questions swirling in her eyes. She was wondering if he was asking for tonight or something more. He wondered which question she'd answer.

“I can stay tonight.” The glider swayed as she straddled his lap, cradling his face in her hands. Her lips brushed over his with a delicious softness and the promise of heat. The flavor that was all her, spiked with the sweetness of strawberries and sparkling champagne.

He could stay right here, tasting her this way for hours. Days.

He wanted all her fire, longed to fulfill her every desire with the passion he held for her alone. Whatever worries she carried, he'd gladly share the burden. She was it for him. A fact better kept to himself until she was ready to hear it.

Sliding his hand up under her hair, he gently changed the angle of the kiss, so he could stroke his tongue over hers. Her throaty moan was more than he could handle. He surged to his feet and carried her into the house, straight back to his bedroom.

And there, the real celebration began.

As the sky lightened outside Nash's bedroom window, Jess stirred. She didn't dare count the hours of sleep. There had just been too few of them. But this was a situation of quality over quantity. Waking in Nash's arms energized her more than anything else she could think of.

She might need a little extra coffee to get through her day, but time with Nash was worth it in every way. She couldn't seem to get enough of him. Every minute they were together made her want one more.

She rolled over and stroked his warm shoulder. Too early for thoughts like that. If she faced her neediness head-on, she might get worried about being too attached. He seemed to enjoy being with her too, but she couldn't quite force herself to ask him directly.

She'd live in the moment, that was the important thing. There would be time to decide about next steps later.

He rolled to his side and touched his nose to hers. "Your brain is already awake."

"You know me too well." She kissed him, her fingers tracing the whiskers on his jaw. "I need to get going."

He glanced at the clock and groaned. "Breakfast?"

She pressed herself close and then scooted out of bed. "Have to pass on that. I'll make it up to you though," she promised, dressing in a hurry. Why she suddenly felt awkward was an unsolvable mystery.

He propped himself up, the sheet falling across his lap. "Come back tonight."

She turned. "It could be late. We have an all-hands meeting and then I don't know..."

"Come back," he said, firmly. "Doesn't matter what time."

Why argue when they wanted the same thing? “All right.”

His open invitation made something quiver deep in her belly and turned her knees weak. Nash didn't say things like that unless he meant them. He wanted her around. The man made too many parts of her fluttery.

She dashed out the door before she did something foolish, like crawl back into that bed and forget all of her responsibilities. And his. Knowing they both had a full schedule today, she headed back home to clean up and change, managing to dodge her parents and any speculation or questions about where she'd spent the night.

As if they didn't know.

Everyone on the island knew she and Nash were becoming an item again and frankly, Jess appreciated the lack of commentary from her parents. They treated her like the adult she was, but it still felt weird to be living with them again. If she was making this move permanent, she needed to start looking for her own place.

Was she staying?

Yes.

The certainty shook her and a pinch in her lungs left her breathless. She plopped down on the end of the bed, her clean uniform forgotten.

She was staying. Here in Brookwell. To be with Nash, if that worked. But also for herself, separate from her ties to him.

This was where she wanted to be. This was home.

Her alarm chimed, pulling her out of the reverie, and she finished dressing in a hurry. She'd spent too much time in her thoughts and would have to get coffee at the police station.

On the drive to the station, she couldn't quite make the shift to the all-hands meeting waiting for her there. Her mind was still on Nash.

Whatever was happening between them couldn't be dismissed as closure. Or just being too comfortable. This was different than anything she could have imagined back when they were kids. And she suddenly wished for a friend to share all these feelings with.

Gabby might be up. Nina was definitely at work already, but that felt awkward, discussing being in love with Nash with his sister.

Probably the wrong thing, especially when she hadn't yet told *him*.

She was in love with Nash. Again. Maybe for the first time. She wasn't sure loving him when they were kids counted for much. But they'd cleared the air these last two weeks and to her amazement, they'd clicked in a quiet, unexpected way that made her appreciate him even more. Although she was more confident about some things, being close to him, being in love with him, left her with more uncertainty than ever.

Her job made him nervous. And rightly so. Her resistance to carrying a gun didn't seem to be easing up at all.

No matter how awesome things were going, it had to be too soon for declarations of this magnitude. Or maybe she was finding new ways to be a coward. But they had time. Nash had said himself that she didn't need to rush anything.

Had he guessed how badly she wanted to stay? Did it matter?

She was staying.

It felt fantastic to have made the decision, despite the flood of details swamping her. She needed a place to live. She needed to go back to Key West and get the few possessions she didn't want to leave behind.

And she needed to accept that job offer from Gamble and Swann. Something she should've told Nash about. It had just seemed too fragile to share. Like her feelings for him. She hadn't been sure it was the right move, that she wanted it for herself rather than to be close to him.

Now she was sure.

She sighed as she pulled into the parking lot at the police station. That would be the big trick: finding the right way to tell him about her conclusions, mind and heart. Would he celebrate or would he resist the idea of sharing island life with her again?

She knew which way she hoped it would go, but she also couldn't just blurt it all out and expect him to be on the same page.

“No rush,” she muttered under her breath. “Just one step at a time.”

Chapter 13

Jess managed to gulp down half a cup of coffee and grab a slice of strudel someone had brought from the Bread Basket bakery before the meeting started. Frasier had gathered everyone in the conference room for the briefing. “Thanks for coming. We’re changing up a few things,” he began. “Chief Caldwell has been working closely with state authorities sifting through new intel. He’ll be here in a minute to give us the latest update.” He paused to look around the room. “That means we’re all on duty for the next forty-eight hours.” He held up a hand. “It’s inconvenient for me too. But in the interest of getting this job across the finish line, I think it’s the right move.”

Jess wasn’t thrilled with the round-the-clock order and she would text Nash as soon as possible so he wouldn’t worry that she’d ghosted him.

Caldwell walked in, trailed by his sergeants, Burrell and Kinney. He gave a brief overview of the intel gathered so far. Jess listened to his remarks, but it was the look on his face that

gave her real confidence. The chief had a plan he was excited about.

“Now I know y’all don’t want to be here indefinitely. To that end,” Caldwell continued. “We’re about to set our trap. With the help of our outside consultants, law enforcement at the state level, and the Coast Guard, we’ve circulated the rumor that we’re going to move this seizure to a Coast Guard vessel for transport to another facility for disposal.

“This crew has made two attempts to reclaim their product, including an attempt to park a spy in a local business.”

Jess kept her expression neutral rather than give in to the cringe. He was referring to that night at Billings Nursery. A close call she still fretted over. Maybe if she’d been more aggressive her first night on duty and pulled her gun, this would be over already. Too bad life didn’t have a rewind option.

“So we’re confident this rumor and the necessary activity around the warehouse will draw some action.” He paused, his gaze scanning the room. “This operation has been reviewed with the primary purpose of protecting the island. This community will not get labeled as a relay point for these smugglers. No way anyone will tolerate that. And I’m not about to start taking chances on intercepting trucks or shipments on a regular basis.”

A murmur of agreement rolled through the task force. Jess agreed with Caldwell one hundred percent. The last thing Brookwell needed was a problem on the bridge or the ferries

that linked them to Charleston proper. She'd seen enough of those instances and the problems they created back in Key West.

Frasier stepped up beside Caldwell. "The Coast Guard will be moving this way over the next few hours. Our marina can't support their cutter, but they have a launch to send in. Their focus will be on the waterways closest to the warehouse."

"Will that rickety dock be strong enough to tie off their launch?" Steve Powell, from the Guardian Agency, earned a few laughs with his query.

"It'll hold," Frasier said. Excitement softened his usually stern demeanor. "If not, they are experts at water rescue," he joked.

"We expect action by tomorrow night at the latest," Caldwell said. "I appreciate everyone's willingness and cooperation to stay on station until we're done. Frasier will coordinate assignments and shift changes. And after some debate," Caldwell glanced toward his sergeants, "we're parking someone in that boat as well. Not the most comfortable option."

Jess raised her hand. "I can take the boat."

Frasier's pointed look was loaded with skepticism. She arched an eyebrow in return. She was up to the challenge. She wouldn't hesitate to draw her weapon. Not knowing that the smugglers would be coming in determined and likely armed to the teeth. She'd proven her reliability to the team, even if she

and Burrell had failed to contain the smuggler hiding in the nursery.

“Hey now,” Sergeant Maggie Kinney piped up, “if Keller takes the boat, Scott and I can provide backup at the dock.”

Jess gave her a small nod. Maggie enjoyed island life, but having never overcome her tendency for motion sickness, she avoided being out on the water whenever she could.

Frasier was making notes and once he had everyone in their preferred locations, he lifted the paper. “I’ll get this formalized and emailed around.”

Caldwell stepped forward again. “Any questions?”

Jess raised her hand again. “Has there been any progress on a local connection to the smugglers?”

Caldwell’s face clouded over. “I continue to pass all our intel up the chain. The state officials have another team working on that.”

She started to ask a follow-up question when the chief cut her off. “We understand the potential problem, Keller. The investigation will continue, no matter the success of this particular focus.”

“Thank you, sir.” No one in this room wanted to doubt their neighbors, but they didn’t want anyone to get away with assisting the smuggling operation either. Jess reminded herself that good police work required patience. Whoever the local contact was, they’d eventually make a mistake and Caldwell or the state police would bring them in.

With luck, that local contact would get rolled up in this trap and no one would need to wonder or look over their shoulder anymore.

Time would tell.

Once the meeting broke up, Jess sent Nash a text. She let him know she was on duty until further notice and that she'd call him as soon as she was allowed. Then she sent another text to Gamble and Swann, accepting the job offer. After this, she was done being a cop. She wanted something less exciting, something more positive. Hopefully, being a regional coordinator would fit the bill.

Then she turned off her phone and prepared herself, mentally and physically, for the task ahead.

Chapter 14

Nash arrived at the nursery an hour earlier than usual. Why stay in bed when sleep wasn't happening? He'd tossed and turned all night, hoping Jess would show up. She hadn't. Of course she hadn't. Her text had been clear that she'd call as soon as the operation at the warehouse wrapped up.

Whenever that might be.

He glanced that way now and paused to listen for any commotion and only heard the typical pre-dawn quiet. A soft glow hovered at the horizon, not nearly enough light to sweep away the shadows in the trees. The air was cool and heavy with dew. Normally, he appreciated this time of day when the world was still. Today, not so much.

It was impossible not to be impatient. He wanted to see her, to know she was safe and well. He wanted to hold her and never let go.

He was addicted to her. Though there were probably better ways to phrase it. Love. He was in love with her. If he'd learned anything since she'd returned to the island it was that. She was it for him. Love was the cause of the chaos beating in his chest and the questions swirling through his mind on an endless loop.

Question one: when could he tell her he loved her?

Question two: how would she react?

The rest of the questions didn't matter nearly as much.

His boots crunched on the oyster shell path as he made his way to the back door. The lights popped on, as programmed, when the sensors picked up his movement. A detail he no longer took for granted.

He had the door halfway open when a gunshot shattered the peaceful morning. His first reaction was denial—trying to justify that sound with a more benign explanation. But that wasn't the crack of a tree limb, or a car backfiring. It was a gun.

The second gunshot yanked his sleep-deprived brain right up to speed. Gunfire wasn't the norm. Gunfire meant trouble. Shouts came from the direction of the warehouse. Nash had to assume that whatever the police had been waiting for was going down.

He pulled the door closed and locked it once more, his mind consumed with Jess. Where was she? His stomach knotted

with worry, cold and tight. Had she been forced to use her weapon to protect herself or others?

She would always do the right thing for others. She needed someone to do the right thing for her. He could be that man.

He started toward the road, to offer some kind of support, but a sharp whistle caught his attention. Had to be a signal. Someone was in the trees, coming from the coast. An excellent route if they planned to ambush the team at the warehouse. Not good.

Caldwell and his people knew what they were doing, but Nash's instincts lit up like a beacon. He inched along the fence, using the tall shrubs as cover. This was all wrong. Someone from the protection team should be watching, guarding this access.

Another whistle, sharp and short. And this time, Nash saw the flare of a flashlight. On and off again in quick succession, from exactly where someone on the perimeter team should be stationed. Jess had been assigned to that spot before.

Crap.

He crouched low and pulled out his phone to send a text message to Frasier. As a long-running lawn care client, Nash had his personal number. While he waited for a reply, he messaged Jess too, but neither of them responded.

The logical move was to stay out of it. He was a civilian. But he just couldn't sit here and wait it out. Jess was out there, and

clearly someone on her team was working against whatever plan they'd made.

He scrambled around the side of the building and ran down the street, toward the warehouse and the increasing noise. If anyone was watching, maybe they'd mistake him for a jogger. The flashing lights of state patrol cars weren't much comfort when Nash took in the whole scene. Officers had used their cars to block the street, but they were crouching behind open car doors, with guns trained on the warehouse. The shouting seemed to be inside and, thankfully, without the accompaniment of more gunfire.

Nash realized that the increased number of guards were creating a perimeter to keep this incident from spilling over the rest of the island. He also noticed that Jess wasn't in that line. Nash glanced toward the boat, thinking about her first night on duty. No one had noticed him, so he cut back from the street to get a closer look at the dock.

Suddenly the boat lurched, slamming into the dock as another spate of gunfire erupted. Everyone seemed to move at once as the dock drew more attention.

Jess was in the boat, he knew it in his gut even before she appeared right behind a man dressed in black and searching for an escape. Her gun was drawn and Nash was sure she was shouting orders for him to stop. He couldn't hear anything over the pounding of his pulse in his ears and the sawing of his ragged breath.

Sgt. Burrell and an officer Nash didn't recognize ran over, blocking access to the shore. It was surrender or escape into the water. The man slid to a stop, his head going back and forth as he debated his options. As he twisted, early light bounced off the knife in his hand.

To Nash's horror, the man turned and lunged for Jess.

She didn't pull the trigger. The officers were too close. Instead, she slammed her gun into her holster and ducked low, rushing toward the smuggler. She caught him at the knees and the move tipped him into the water before he could hurt her.

Relief surged through Nash and he gulped in deep breaths. She was fine. Safe. He might not like how her profession put her in harm's way, but he sure as hell respected that she was well trained and capable. Able to handle herself.

He heard voices over a radio and a boat motor kicked into action. To his surprise, Coast Guard personnel chased after the man attempting to swim away.

Nash braced against the trunk of a palmetto tree as he gathered himself. It had to be over.

Had to be.

Jess, Burrell, and the other man walked up the dock toward the warehouse, just in time to watch Caldwell march out two other people, also dressed in dark clothing, toward the waiting state patrol cars.

Nash started to head back to the nursery, telling himself Jess would bring him all the details later, when he remembered that

signal. Who had been behind that beam of light, inviting the smugglers to the warehouse? And why signal at all when the odds of success were so low?

He cut through the trees, to the place where he'd seen that signal exchange.

A few yards ahead, a burly man in dark green camouflage burst up out of the scrub and ran.

Nash hollered at him to stop, chasing him at an angle that would push him toward the warehouse crawling with law enforcement. "Give it up man! You're the last man standing."

The guy hesitated at the edge of the trees, then turned and fired his gun. Three quick blasts that chewed up the bark on the trees closest to Nash. "Get the hell outta here!"

Nash swore, diving for cover as the man fired again. Hearing the guy take off again, Nash jumped up and followed. The only escape was the boat still tied to the old dock.

At least the gunfire had drawn the attention of the protection team and other law enforcement. The team closed in, cinching a tight circle around the man who was shouting and bargaining to reach the boat.

Jess and a couple of other guards were back on the dock, near the boat. At the commotion she turned to check out the situation.

And then Burrell grabbed her. *What the hell?*

Nash's vision hazed red when he saw Burrell twist around, using her body as a shield to get on the boat. He pulled her

weapon from the holster, aiming at the other officers as he backed toward the boat.

Nash couldn't make sense of Burrell's actions. All he could do was watch, helpless, as Kinney and Frasier moved in, negotiating for Burrell to release her.

He didn't.

Where was the Coast Guard team? He ran forward, only to be held back by Caldwell.

"Don't you dare interfere," the chief warned him fiercely.

"What's he doing?"

"Making a serious mistake," Caldwell muttered. He radioed for law enforcement to search Burrell's house and car immediately and gather any evidence they could find. "Looks like we found the inside man," he growled.

Nash didn't care about the case right now. He cared about Jess. Easing away from the chief, he looked for a route to help her.

Frasier and Kinney were frozen, unable to act as Burrell dragged her onto the boat. The bastard kept the gun to her head as she released the mooring lines so he could escape.

The boat engine sputtered and caught. Burrell pushed at the throttle and the boat started to pull away. Jess twisted, using the boat's momentum to shove him back. When he fell, dropping the gun, she managed to leap off the boat. The engine roared, the boat lurched forward... and then it died, leaving Burrell stranded.

Nash darted down the length of the dock before anyone could stop him. Jess was there, shoving her hair back out of her eyes. He reached down and helped her up out of the water.

“You okay?”

“Great.” She coughed. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” He didn’t mean it. He could go the rest of his life without another scene like this morning.

Nash flopped back on the dock, closing his eyes against the bright sunrise. She was alive. She was fine. And this time he was confident she was safe. He could hear her breathing. Hearing that sweet sound for the rest of his life might be enough to assure him she’d survived this.

Could she hear his thundering heart? He was pretty sure his pulse was shaking the dock.

“Did you tamper with the engine?”

“I had some time on my hands while we were waiting,” she said.

“Why do you do that?” He’d blurted out the query when he should be exerting some self-control. But common sense was beyond him right now. He kept right on talking. “It hurts my heart when you leap into the fray like that.” Her breath hitched and he propped himself up on an elbow. “Literally, Jess. I think my heart stopped.” He rubbed his chest.

“Well, it started again,” she pointed out. “You’re still here.”

“You could sound happier about it,” he muttered.

“I’m happy.” She flexed and stretched her hands, over and over. “And I didn’t exactly run into the danger. I was hauled against my will.”

“This time. You ran toward the guy with the knife.”

“True,” she admitted grudgingly.

“So why? Why do you do that?”

The dock groaned as she moved closer to him. He felt her warm body, her damp clothes. Didn’t bother to open his eyes, he just breathed in the fragrance that was all her. This might be the last time he was this close to her. And he couldn’t keep himself from pushing for what he needed most.

“Can I ask you a question?” Her soft voice was a shock after she’d been barking orders minutes ago.

“After you answer mine.”

On a heavy sigh, her head dropped onto his chest.

If this was his last time to be close to her, he sure as hell wasn’t going to settle for this. He’d remember this day with all of his senses, and etch that memory into his head for life. He sat up, forcing himself to watch her every movement as she did the same. He soaked in the view of her right here with him. He refused to look back toward the marina. The rest of her law enforcement team and the special protection unit, were irrelevant to him. She was the only thing that mattered.

“Jess,” he pressed, bumping her shoulder. “Answer the question.”

“I do it *because* I love you.”

That was the last thing he expected to hear. “It feels wrong to use love as an excuse for your bravery.”

She sputtered. “I think you missed the point. *I love you.*” She gave him a little shove and he wrapped his arms around her.

“Come on. Loving me can’t be why you race into danger.”

She wriggled, but he held tight. “I disagree. Knowing you love me too is part of what makes it possible.”

“Hey. I didn’t even get to say the words,” he protested. “You’re jumping ahead.”

“Well, I’ve always been a good listener,” she said. “Maybe you should catch up.” Her eyes were sparkling with mischief. Or adrenaline. “Whenever you’re ready,” she added quietly. “To expand on my answer, I’m wired this way. Wired for protection. And there is nothing wrong with me.”

“Never said there was.” He kissed her temple. His pride stung a bit that she claimed his love before he could give her the words in some romantic setting. Somewhere that wasn’t a crime scene.

“Because I love you—and people in general—I do what others can’t. Who else was going to take down Burrell and protect our island?”

“Hmm. Maybe Frasier, Caldwell, or anyone else on the team?” Sarcasm aside, he got it. She was wired differently. Her commitment, dedication, and integrity were integral facets of what made her such an amazing person and excellent cop.

“I’m part of that team,” she grumbled, easing out of his embrace.

He was losing her. Or he would if he didn’t fight for all that they deserved. Together. If she was brave enough to tackle criminals, he could find the courage to share his deepest hopes and dreams. Specifically, the one dream that mattered the most.

“Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are when you’re taking down a drug smuggler?”

Her mouth opened. Closed again. Then she threw her head back and laughed. “No. No one has ever said anything like that to me.” She pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. “The sun must’ve gone to your head.”

“That’s not it.” He caught her hand, held it over his heart. “You, Jess Keller, are the strongest person I know. And I’m Roxy Billings’s son.”

She chuckled. “What a compliment. Your mom is a legend.”

Who else but Jess would understand what that meant to him? “I love you,” he said. “And I finally see what being a cop means to you.” He felt terrible for discouraging her, despite the crisis she was working through.

“Well. Wow.” She couldn’t seem to look at him, though she clutched his hand like a lifeline. “Not all days are like this,” she said.

“Thank God,” he said with feeling. He was playing a long game here.

These past couple of weeks had stressed him out, despite knowing she could handle herself. Mentioning it now wasn't fair to either of them. It would take time to adjust to being a cop's partner. Assuming she gave him that chance. "I didn't understand what all this meant to you... before."

"As if I knew what I was doing?" Her palm was cool on his cheek. "We were kids, Nash. Kids make mistakes."

But their mistakes had cost him his soulmate. Even if he hadn't recognized that until recently.

"Is life here so bad? So terribly boring?"

"No! Quiet days as a cop are good things."

They were in full agreement on that.

"But I didn't know that then," she continued. "I love this island. Caldwell and Frasier were my mentors as cops and citizens. Leaving wasn't all about me or all about you. I thought you were a criminal for all of two seconds of pure stupidity. Did Caldwell ever tell you what I said?"

Nash shook his head. "If he did, I sure wasn't listening. Too stunned to find myself in an interrogation room, courtesy of my girlfriend."

She had the grace to cringe. "I told the chief I couldn't give you an alibi for the time of the robbery. I told him I didn't believe you were really responsible, but it was the way I doubted myself that forced him to follow through. I was afraid that my certainty of your innocence was only because I loved

you. He questioned you pretty much as a favor to me. But I felt so guilty.”

“And I was furious.”

“With good reason.” She dropped her head to his shoulder. “You should have been able to count on me.”

They were silent, watching as Caldwell hauled away Burrell and his pals. With a blast of the horn, the Coast Guard vessel motored out to resume their regular patrol.

“Am I the only reason you went all the way to Key West?” The question had been bugging him for years now.

“I was running away from myself as much as any wacky situation I created when I accused you of that robbery. It was panic, Nash. Panic that everything I’d worked for would get ripped out from under me because I dated the wrong guy.”

“I get it.” He really did. “We were young. Too young to realize what we were throwing away.”

“True enough. My time in Key West gave me loads of experience and some amazing friends. I can’t regret that.” She looked up at him. “But there was something missing. One thing I couldn’t outrun.”

“What’s that?”

“My heart,” she murmured. “It’s always been here with you.”

His heart flopped in his chest. Was this really happening? It was definitely worth the wait. “Convenient,” he said. “Since

my heart's always been yours. I love you, Jess.”

“Obviously.” She walked into his arms and he held on as gently as he could manage. “You loved me enough to blackmail me into a date.”

“Pride might've pushed me to manipulate things a little,” he joked. He glanced down and caught her eye roll. Laughing, he asked, “Can I tell you what I really want?”

“I've told you I'm always willing to listen.”

She was the best listener. His throat went dry, but he powered through. “I want you to stay.” Maybe not the softest of requests, but he was done wasting time. He needed her and damn it all, he was sure he was good for her too. “I want you to stay and build a life with me.”

“You sound like my mom.” She shook her head, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Urging our generation to stick around as custodians for the future of Brookwell.”

That was exactly how he felt. This island, their home, mattered to him. “There are worse things, Jess.”

“I agree.”

But her smile faltered. Did her agreement mean they were on the same page at last? He thought keeping her in town would require a serious fight. “Hey.” He moved so he had her full attention, getting lost in the depths of her blue eyes. “If you're going to throw yourself into danger, I want to be close by. You know, in case you need first aid or something.”

“You are definitely the best at applying bandages.”

“I knew you appreciated my talents.” Her mouth curved once more and that smile was full of warmth, chasing away the chill. Even better, her eyes glowed with humor. “Move in with me. Marry me when you’re ready. And in between now and then, be the best cop this island has ever seen.”

She sucked in a breath and he was sure she’d jump into his arms, thrilled to accept his proposal. She didn’t. Her gaze moved past him to the water. To the horizon.

“Nash.”

The tenderness in her voice scared him. “Come on. We both know you want to make an honest man of me.”

“Nash.” She waited until he met her gaze. “Last week Chief Caldwell asked me to stay on. To train for a leadership role. When he retires next year folks will move up the ranks.”

“Seriously? That’s huge!” The sky seemed to brighten, he was so damn happy to hear that news. She’d be here and they could keep working on this relationship. Make it permanent. Eventually. He could be patient. For her, he’d try.

He might not like all the risks associated with police work—today was a fine example—but he knew she was good at it. That alone made it possible to be genuinely thrilled for her. “You must be over the moon.”

Her fingers brushed his jaw. “I told him no.”

All of that bright joy around his heart crashed in on itself. She turned down the perfect job? He stepped back. Shoved his hands into his pockets. He *could not* cope with any more ups

and downs today. The fear she might be killed, the relief when she was safe. Hearing her say she loved him and now that she was leaving. He couldn't take it.

And he was an ass for being jealous of a town, resentful of the place she felt at home because the place wasn't here. With him.

“Jess. I—I...” He didn't know how to say anything. The pain in his chest was sharp and deep. Jagged shards biting into that fragile dream. The only cure was her. He wouldn't be whole without her. And all of that sounded reactive and overdramatic in his head. Not her job to make him happy. He was responsible for that.

Though he didn't particularly *want* to follow her back to Key West, he would. *He would*. He could sell the business. Better yet, leave it in the hands of a manager. The details didn't matter right this second. Whatever she needed, he'd figure it out. Because living without her was worse than anything he might leave behind.

“When are you leaving?” he finally asked.

“I'm not.”

Okay, apparently this entire takedown thing just messed with his head. He wasn't sure if he could dare to celebrate anything more than surviving the moment. Was she staying or was he just reading way too much into every word she spoke?

“Spell it out for me Jess, what are you saying?”

“Nothing clearly.” She looked up at him, then away. Planted her hands on her hips and then let them fall. “You want to know where my head is?” He nodded. “All right. Brace yourself. Here’s my counter offer. Let’s live together. I’ll move in with you, since you have an actual house apart from your parents.”

“I kind of like closet phone calls.”

“Well, too bad. I’m over them.” Her grin flashed, sassy and confident. “I’ll marry you when our mothers can’t stand it anymore and we’ll build a life right here on the island. A life that suits us both.”

The hope on her face, radiating from her beautiful eyes, made him indescribably happy. Elated. The immediate rush was followed by a wave of soothing contentment. Jess as his wife? Hell yes. He couldn’t imagine anything more perfect.

“Nash?” She ran her hands lightly over his arms.

“Yes. Yes!” He hugged her close, pulling her off her feet and spinning her in a circle. “Yes to all of that, my love.” He set her gently on her feet. “You’re sure you can be happy here?” She was nodding, but he wouldn’t risk her suffering any regrets. “Your career is important, but we only have a small police force. I don’t want you to burn out.”

She was shaking her head. “No. I won’t be a cop here.”

What did that mean? Worry trickled through his system. She was a cop to her core.

“I got a better offer,” her eyes sparkled.

He couldn't think of another post that would interest her here on the island. "Don't tell me Nina offered you a job."

She laughed, the delighted sound going a long way to erase the lingering dread and stress of the earlier danger.

"Your sister would never do that. She's too smart." She cupped his face in her hands. "It's better. My lawyers who manage the Guardian Agency and sent me here—"

"To work off your lawyer fees after being arrested," he teased.

"You'll never let me live that down."

"I won't." He kissed her.

She nudged him back and rolled her eyes. "They're diversifying. Or expanding. Whatever they call it, they're creating special teams, remote research groups, training programs, and that kind of thing. They asked me to be the regional coordinator for the southeast."

"Seriously?" He pulled her into another fierce hug, absolutely thrilled for her. For them. "That's fantastic!"

"It's a big opportunity." She sat down on the edge of the dock and he joined her. "I can work right here. In Brookwell," she clarified. "I can work from home or if I find office space that suits me, they'll cover the rental and equipment and all that."

He took a breath, marveling at how perfect this would be for her. "Travel, danger, or any similar requirements?"

“There may be some travel, yes.” Her smile grew wider and brighter with every detail she shared. “Danger should be greatly minimized.”

He couldn't hide his relief on that score. “And what about your need to uphold law and order?”

“You know me too well.” She swung her feet back and forth off the edge of the dock, reminding him of those days when they were kids.

A lifetime ago. When things were simple and they shared more friendship than romance. And still... He'd been too young to appreciate how special she was, how special they were together. Wouldn't make that mistake again. He reached for her hand and held on. Loving her, growing with her, gave him a sense of purpose and fulfillment he'd been searching for. Amazing to think that now he had the rest of his life to share the ups and downs with her.

“Knowing Gamble and Swann, I think this will be a good fit. For me and for us.”

“Having you around—”

“Underfoot,” she warned.

“I'm going to love it,” he promised. “Almost as much as I love you. We can make an office for you at my place. Or we can share office space at the nursery.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That might be a little too much togetherness.”

He bent his head and kissed her. “Well if this romantic glow ever wears off, we’ll adjust.”

“That easy?”

He shook his head. “I don’t expect every day to be easy,” he admitted. “But as long as we’re together, Jess, we can handle anything. That’s all I want. All I’ve ever wanted.”

“Me too.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “You’re the best part of coming home, Nash.”

“I promise to be the best part of staying home.”

They sat there on the dock for a long time, just letting the weather move around them, letting the sounds of their own island settle back into its familiar rhythm and song.

“We’re bound to have more trouble,” she warned him as they finally walked away from the water. “It’s inevitable. Riding a desk or not, my job will be putting the right folks in place to solve those troubles.”

“And you’ll run right into the fight when needed,” Nash said. “I understand it. And I’ll be waiting for you when you come back.” He hugged her close to his side. “You’re my soulmate, sweetheart. No amount of trouble will ever change that.”

She lifted her face to his and drew his mouth down to hers. The kiss spun out, as warm as the sunshine. “You make me better. You make this home.”

He’d never heard sweeter words. “That’s only fair.” He grinned. “You make me better too.” He let himself get lost in

another kiss. Forcing himself to back off, he caught her hands. “Come on! Let’s go find some food. Then we can move your stuff into my place. Start making it our home.”

“Today?” Her eyes went wide.

“Is there a reason to wait?”

“No.” She shook her head, looking adorable and bewildered. “I need to call the Key West PD and let them know I’m not coming back. And deal with my apartment too.”

“I forgot about your place down there,” he said. “We should drive down and pack up whatever you want to bring.” He stretched. “I haven’t had a vacation in a while. The road trip could be fun.”

Her brow furrowed. “Or we could fly.”

He laughed, his heart soaring free. He felt lighter than he could ever remember. “Yeah, we can fly. I don’t want to risk getting caught up in some kind of Bonnie and Clyde situation.”

She shoved him, then came in close once more and they walked toward town, partners for life already. Sure, she would marry him soon—their mothers would see to that. And for the first time in years, Nash could see a future he was truly excited about.

Epilogue

*O*ne month later...

Jess stretched out on the bed, skimming through her email. It wasn't quite dawn, but she'd gotten up with Nash's alarm. Seeing an urgent tag on the overnight update from the agency, she opened the email. Thrilled with the news, she went flying out of the bedroom and down the stairs to catch Nash before he left for work. "Nash, wait!"

He was filling his travel mug with coffee, his jug of water already on the counter. "Don't panic." He caught her around the waist. "I won't leave without a kiss."

She sank into the kiss, let it spin out, let her heart do its happy dance over the wonder of being loved by him. She might never get used to it, but she kind of liked that notion. What a marvelous reality that day by day she could find more reasons to love him.

They'd had their disagreements and one serious fight about the upcoming wedding. Her mother called that learning to

argue productively. She considered it sound advice since her parents were still happily married. And even those less comfortable moments were interesting. Because they didn't give up on each other, they stuck together. No pressure to be perfect, only to keep loving.

And making up was definitely fun.

Pressing her hands against his chest, she broke the kiss. "The email came through last night. I just saw it."

He raised his eyebrows.

"The smuggling ring is falling apart. State police are rolling up the entire operation. Burrell caved. I don't know what they offered him, but he's finally talking. From the few details I have, the smugglers started paying him off months ago. Months!" she repeated. "Now he's making deals with the prosecutor, and one by one, they're catching the smugglers and working their way up the chain."

"Fantastic. Just what we all wanted." His hands glided up over her ribs and back down, sliding under the oversized tee she slept in, and curling around to cup her butt. "We should celebrate tonight."

Her skin warmed, always, at the sexy tone in his voice. "We celebrate every night."

"Is that a problem?" His gaze sparked with heat. Pure temptation.

Naturally, her body sizzled in response. "Never." She boosted herself onto the counter and Nash stood between her

knees, those rough hands moving over her bare thighs. “You have work.”

“Same goes, sweetheart.”

She laughed against his lips. “My commute is shorter.”

Thankfully, there hadn’t been any more drug issues on the island, but there had been plenty to keep her busy as she trained in her new role as the first regional coordinator for the Guardian Agency.

“Then we have time.”

She playfully batted away his hands. “We’ll have more time tonight. After dinner.”

He dropped his head to her shoulder. “With everyone.”

“You could sound happier.” She nipped at his earlobe, smiling when he groaned. “Wedding plans don’t have to be painful. I have the checklist from Ilsa. We only need to get through two pages this week.”

He rolled his eyes. “A checklist should never be more than a single page.”

“It’s not that many decisions. I promise you can handle it.”

He perked up. “We could elope.” He drew circles on her thighs, knowing full well how that distracted her.

“Mm-hm.” She stared into his gorgeous face, once more in awe that they were together. “If we elope, you have to explain it to Ilsa.”

“Ilsa is the queen of wedding romance. Your words,” Nash said. “She’ll understand.”

“Maybe so,” Jess hedged. “But you also signed an agreement that if we eloped, you’d be the one to tell our mothers.”

He groaned and she couldn’t stifle her smile of satisfaction.

They had that pseudo-contract in place because Ilsa was also the queen of managing grooms. Nash wasn’t the first man who’d rather elope than decide on wedding apparel. Or cake flavors, or anything else related to their big day.

“Just remember what Ilsa said,” she murmured at his ear.

“Which part?”

She chuckled at his feigned misery. “The part where we’re on our honeymoon in the Bahamas.”

“No mowers,” he said, kissing her neck.

She arched into his touch. “No cell phones or email.”

He sighed heavily and pressed his hands to the countertop. “All right. That should hold me.” He kissed her once more and then nibbled on her lip. “Until lunch.”

“If you text me the address, I’ll come over and make sure lunch holds you through dinner.”

“You’re the best.” Grabbing his coffee and water, he backed toward the door, his gaze locked with hers.

And when she was alone, in the house they shared, she hopped off the counter and indulged in a real happy dance for another perfect day in her hometown with the man she loved.

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About the Author

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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